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Cob Building: Movements and Moments of Survival

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Cob Building: Movements and Moments of Survival

by

Jeanine Marie Minge

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

To everyone who built these structures from the ground up, from the ground in.

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NOTE TO READER

The original of this document contains color that is necessary for understanding the data. The original dissertation is on file with the USF library in Tampa, Florida.

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**COB BUILDING: MOVEMENTS AND MOMENTS OF
SURVIVAL**

JEANINE MARIE MINGE

ABSTRACT

Cob, as an arts-based research process, creates movements and moments of survival. Survival is an ideological construction and an actual, local practice. Survival is also about desiring and fulfilling arts-based desires to work with the land through academic and material scavenging. Cob creates strategies for surviving, for working with our respective environments wisely. Cob building teaches people how to negotiate the natural economy and their relationships to labor and each other through an artistic and intimate practice. From a feminist poststructural lens, survival happens on the local level, between and with people. Cob building creates knowledge through creative, kinesthetic, and collaborative engagement.

As a feminist poststructuralist, arts-based research allows me to examine local action and interaction among people, positionalities, and competing differences. Rather than appeasing the modern impulse to objectify and rationalize an end-point or an object-oriented view of the production of art, feminist poststructural theory works to problematize the end-point. Through cob building, a rich, arts-based process, I call into question the modern impulse to find Truth and ask that we be aware of developing new

oppressions when working toward equity and justice. Cob building teaches people how to engage together within the form of artistic creation. Cob is an arts-based research process that includes the land as an integral part of its canvas.

In order to articulate, uncover, and engage the claim that, as an arts-based process, cob creates movements and moments of survival, I use the arts-based process, a/r/tography. This a/r/tographical text does not offer an end point but works to recreate moments and movements of cob building as an arts-based research project. A/r/tography helps to layer the movements of arts-based survival within cob building and this text. Throughout this work, the arts-based process of cob building is the overlying metaphor for the construction of the structure of this text. As the chapters move forward, the structure builds up.

PREFACE

With respect and concern for the future, we can live so that the world will be good for our descendants seven generations to come.

-Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith, and Linda Smiley, *The Hand-Sculpted House*



Fig. 1. Weathered cob house

As I scan this photograph, my hands feel the cool of the cob walls. I feel the process of building with cob in my bones. I was one, out of many, who helped to sculpt this cob building (see fig. 1). Cob is a one form of natural building. Cob is similar to adobe in that the main ingredients are clay, sand, water, and straw. However, where

adobe is sun-dried into bricks, which are then used as building material, cob is not.¹ Cob is picked up with our hands. Cob consists of big, wet, gobs of material that is sculpted together. Cob lends itself to organic shapes rather than straight forms or rectangular materials. Both cob and adobe are forms of natural building.

Natural builders use a whole systems environmental approach, which takes into consideration the interconnected, impermanent, and consequential relationship we have to our environment and to each other. “Natural building implies profoundly different attitudes to places, building sites, ecology, work, and how we live in buildings.”² Natural builders believe that in order to create environmental change in our society, we need to change our local building practices. “Above all is an overarching respect for Nature, respect for the place where your building stands, and respect for distant places where the cumulative effects of each of our activities will be felt.”³ Natural builders believe that we need to work with and within the land, not against it.

The building pictured above was built two years ago when two organizations came together. Earth Work, the organization a colleague and I started, was dedicated to teaching people about natural building practices. Teens Alive was a subset of the Tampa Children’s Museum, Mini-City. This youth program within Mini-City was dedicated to helping teenagers with financial hardship. Both of these organizations have since dissolved. The cob building still stands, though not for long. There are plans to tear down Mini-City and to rebuild a new children’s museum in downtown Tampa. Impermanence is one of the principles of nature. Everything gradually falls apart. All life feeds on death.

¹ For further discussion of cob as a building material, see Chapter One, Building: The Process and Pulse of Cob.

² Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith, and Linda Smiley, *A Hand Sculpted House: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to Building a Cob Cottage* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2002) 7.

³ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 8.

Life cycles also include decay.⁴ While a cob building survives the elements for some time, eventually, it will decay.

For the past two years, the cob building has survived the elements. It has survived Florida's torrential rain and wind. "Like any other kind of structure, cob buildings need good roofs and adequate foundations to protect them from water damage."⁵ The roof that was once green and alive with young plants is now brown. This roof—no longer living—protected the cob walls. I scan the wooden door. I see the remnants of its golden brown color. The screws that keep the door hinges in place are loose. Despite these perceived flaws and failures, this building has survived. Cob buildings that are constructed correctly and adequately maintained will survive for centuries. "In England there are tens of thousands of comfortable cob homes, many of which have been used for more than five centuries."⁶ Materially, this cob building has survived for the past two years. If there were no plans to tear down Mini-City, I am sure it could survive for many years to come.

Physically and ideologically, cob cultivates movements and moments of survival. As a form of survival, cob is a creative action as well as a discursive and ideological practice of survival. Cob is artistic, ecologically aware, communal, and a consciousness-raising practice. I map the localized practices of cob and write the story of cob building, as I understand it, to articulate survival strategies. Through cob, I argue that learning to survive is to be able to envision, articulate, and to materialize proposals for new consciousness and ways of living in terms of environmental, social, relational, and political change. Strategies for material change and the articulation of an environmental

⁴ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 9.

⁵ Ianto Evans, "Introduction," *A Hand-Sculpted House: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to Building a Cob Cottage*. ed. Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith and Linda Smiley, (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2002) xix.

⁶ Evans xix.

consciousness exist within a reciprocal relationship. I argue that to survive is to enact strategies that spur social change.

As a feminist poststructuralist, I call into question the modern impulse to find Truth. Rather than appeasing the modern impulse to objectify and rationalize an end-point, feminist poststructural theory works to problematize the end-point. If everything in nature is part of a cycle, then there is no end-point. There is decay that feeds other life. As a feminist poststructuralist, it is important for me to examine local action and interaction between people and positionalities.⁷ Addressing these local actions and interactions align with a natural builder's orientation to the environment. As part of the larger interconnected whole, our local actions impact our ecosystem. As part of the ecosystem, human actions impact both living and non-living entities.

From a feminist poststructuralist and natural builder's perspective, I believe if we work towards equity and justice at the local level, we will impact the larger whole. Cob offers a space to create this change. Cob creates a form of knowledge through creative, kinesthetic, and collaborative engagement. Cob building creates possibilities for engagement. Cob building, a rich arts-based process, teaches people how to engage together. These forms of engagement happen on the local level in order to create spaces of survival.

Feminist theorists have long been articulating powerful and innovative ideas about survival that have catalyzed social change.⁸ When I think about cob as a frame for survival, I am brought into the work of feminist theorists Rosi Braidotti and Chela

⁷ I follow Patricia Anne Lather in *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1991) in her assertion that the nature of the individual is a de-centered subject, culturally inscribed/constructed, contradictory, and relational. The individual is continuously recreated and recreating. For me, this de-centered subject is part of the larger, interconnected ecology.

⁸ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1998) 522 states, "Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context."

Sandoval. These theorists map out proposals for a new consciousness, which might create change in postmodern, postindustrial, and postcolonial societies. These proposals help me articulate how cob offers a new conceptual mapping of survival. Cob reweaves old technologies into our conceptual and material frames to rearticulate strategies for survival because cob creates spaces of ecological and relational change.

Rosi Braidotti, in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materiality of Becoming*,⁹ argues that there is a gap in how we live and how we represent this living to ourselves. She deploys a language that is more suitable than modern discourses for theorizing change and transformation. She states,

I believe that the processes of transformation are ongoing and that the equivalent process of transformative repossession of knowledge has just begun. With that comes also the quest for alternative figurations to express the kind of internally contradictory multi-faceted subjects that we have become.¹⁰

Braidotti believes our subjectivities are complex in an increasingly schizophrenic, technology driven, and cybernetic society. Braidotti desires “not to know who we are,” but “what, at last, we want to become.”¹¹ She argues, “Filling in this gap with adequate figurations is the great challenge of the present. And I cannot think of a bigger one for the future.”¹² Mapping these structural transformations demands a nomadic subjectivity, one that can shift and change with contexts and discourses. As multi-faceted subjects, we are also a part of an ecological whole. A natural builder’s approach includes these contradictory subjects that change shape, move, and scavenge through our society to learn how to survive.

⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materiality of Becoming* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002)

¹⁰ Braidotti 2.

¹¹ Braidotti 2.

¹² Braidotti 2.

Braidotti explores the figurations of the body, technology, and the post-human body in order to interrogate how our subjectivities have been too long grounded in anthropomorphic hegemony. She states, “The human organism is neither wholly human, nor just an organism. It is an abstract machine, which captures, transforms and produces interconnections. The power of such an organism is certainly neither contained by nor confined to consciousness.”¹³

Braidotti calls for a new set of alliances of a more transversal and transdisciplinary nature. She asks that scholars and activists connect with sustainability as a rallying point. Sustainability grounds the subject in material and environmental responsibility. She states, “What ‘sustainability’ stands for, therefore, is a re-grounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments s/he inhabits.”¹⁴ She argues that sustainability can alter our consciousness, subjectivities, and ultimately create new spaces for social change. The nomadic subject can actively resist the commodification of their diversity through becomings. She states,

Becomings are un-programmed as mutations, disruptions, and points of resistance. Their time frame is always the future anterior, that is to say a linkage across present and past in the act of constructing and actualizing possible futures.¹⁵

Cob as material, ideology, and process of building is one response to Braidotti’s call to create becomings that highlight and work towards sustainable shifts for the future. Sustainable shifts include a re-grounding into the environment we inhabit. Cob ties a whole systems approach to Braidotti’s nomadic subject and her claim for renegotiating

¹³ Rosi Braidotti, “Meta(l)Morphoses: The Becoming-Machine,” *The Body: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, ed. Andrew Blaikie. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 103.

¹⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Transposition: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) 29.

¹⁵ Braidotti *Transposition* 29.

sustainability. Cob also realigns this discussion with the pre-industrial argument that we are a part of the ecological whole. Our building practices should reflect the image of nature's basic rhythms, shapes, and process. Cob, as an embodied practice, reciprocally informs discursive practices to create spaces of social change. For example, cob informs our ideas of survival by shifting political and social consciousness in terms of modern building practices. Cob informs and materializes our understandings of each other through artistic and communal practices. Within each of the following chapters, I work to describe how cob creates localized and discursive spaces of social change. Cob is also a compromise. Indeed, cob is a becoming.

In a similar discussion and call for social and political change, Chela Sandoval asks us to work within local sites of political oppression. *A Methodology of the Oppressed*¹⁶ proposes the mobility of differential consciousness over the perceived stasis of cognitive mapping, which is forever trying to recover a vanished vantage point, a transcendent point of ideological certainty. Instead, Sandoval proposes that the site of political struggle, in what she calls the “neo-colonizing postmodern world,” should be the eminently unstable, constantly changing, and adaptable immanent territory. According to Sandoval, one creates social change by living in it and learning to navigate that terrain effectively. Political struggle needs to happen from within the system, through a process of assimilation, digestion, and re-appropriation. Cob works within localized, institutional, and political boundaries to create local and material change. I had to learn each specific terrain before I could articulate how cob works to create changes within the larger territory. Then, we physically changed the territory by building cob structures.

A methodology of the oppressed offers a network of resistance that shifts its tactics as demanded by the situation. Sandoval employs five strategies; semiotics, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, differential movement, and democratics, which

¹⁶ Chela Sandoval, *A Methodology of the Oppressed* (U of Minnesota P, 2000).

eschews feminist movements towards identity politics in favor of a mobility of ideology and political strategy to create strategies and tactics for survival. Sandoval uses semiotics to understand the codes of power relations and ideological constructs. Through deconstruction, she denaturalizes these power relations. Through meta-ideologizing, she reconstitutes the codes. Differential movement mobilizes these discursive and ideological movements according to each person's needs. She states,

The differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power, and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known by the oppressed peoples.¹⁷

In short, differential consciousness works from an 'instinct for survival.' Differential movement also allows for localized movement based on geographical, cultural, social, and political circumstances. Sandoval also proposes that through democratics these movements are always made in the interests of egalitarian values.

The technologies of this method of the oppressed are the skills necessary for accomplishing sign reading across cultures; identifying and consciously constructing ideology; decoding languages of resistance and/or domination; and for writing and speaking a neorhetoric of love in the Postmodern world.¹⁸

For Sandoval, the methodology of the oppressed "generates ever new meta-ideological formations for the purpose not only of survival but of bringing about new ethical and political standards in the name of egalitarian and democratic social change: the technology of democratics."¹⁹ Her work argues that new terminologies create different modes of agency, consciousness, and collective action. Cob is not a new technology. It is a recycled process and idea. Reintroducing the discursive and material

¹⁷ Sandoval 60.

¹⁸ Sandoval 2.

¹⁹ Sandoval 114.

functions of cob into our conversations and daily practices can transform our consciousness and our material building practices to create ecological survival.

Cob, while an old technology, allows me to follow Braidotti and Sandoval in their work to enact articulations of social change through developing new consciousness. Cob helps me to articulate how ecological survival reintroduces old technologies into our everyday ideological and material practices. Ecology is not only the land that we stand on. Ecology is the study of relationships between living things and their environments. Ecology is also a system of relationships within a particular environment.²⁰ Ecology is made up of living and non-living beings. Ecological survival functions not only in terms of our environment, but the people and organisms that live and exist within it. Ecology is based on balance, compromise, relational negotiations, and an intimate understanding of the land. Cob building cultivates movements and moments of ecological survival as a critical, emotional, activist, and material practice.

Survival strategies are contextual. Working on the local level frames the discursive elements that map each person's specific mode of survival. I do not believe that each reader will go out and begin to build with cob. I do believe that theorizing about cob can help to articulate a new ecological consciousness. I cannot argue that cob is the appropriate building material for everyone. I can, however, argue that cob is an ideological construct that helps to articulate and realize the importance of changing how we relate to and in our own environments. My argument throughout this text is based on localized moments of survival through cob building. These localized moments are also a juxtaposition of differing positionalities or colliding subject positions such as the artist, committee member, academic, reader, community member, and cobber. These subject positions speak with and within the larger institutional, discursive, and ideological concerns that frame and map our survival tactics. I also argue that these discussions of

²⁰ Each paraphrased definition of ecology originated from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

ecological survival can be translated into other contexts. Without a vision of ecological change, material changes cannot happen.

Throughout the chapters in this dissertation, the process of cob building, as a theoretical and material framework for survival, is the overlying metaphor and means for constructing this text. As the chapters move forward, a foundation is laid and a structure is built. As the structure builds up, my theoretical discussion of ecological survival becomes more complicated and layered.

In the most literal sense, building with cob is a tool that can be used for functional and ecological survival. Chapter One, *Building: The Process and Pulse of Cob*, is a how-to guide. It walks you, the reader, through the process and tactics for building a functional and sustainable building and structure out of cob. For example, cob captures and retains heat, as such, cob can be carved into ovens. Food can be baked in these ovens. Cob can also be sculpted into shelters. As a form of shelter, cob is sustainable, inexpensive, versatile, and practical.²¹ Because of its versatility, cob has the potential to transform and inform modern building tactics. This how-to chapter moves you through strategies for building with cob, thereby cultivating survival skills. Cob building is not only learning about these strategies to build with cob. Cob addresses the complexities of subject positions at the cob building site as well as within these pages.

Surviving the writing process involved crafting a story that recognizes that the characters, voices, and contexts of cob are acts of disappearance and reappearance. I argue throughout Chapter Two, *Sketching Voices*, that writing about cob, as a survival strategy, needs the voices of all the cobbers and characters that influenced the cobbing process but including every voice is impossible. Some elements of the story disappear because as soon as I craft the plotline, the narrative, the text, another element of the story

²¹ Cob building is practical for people located in certain geographic locations. For further details, other techniques, further investigations, and information for larger projects, please review the texts I reference throughout this document.

disappears. Then suddenly, as I move into another element of the story, they reappear. Throughout the text, I hear the voices of people who participated within the cob projects. Without each of these voices, I wouldn't be able to complicate my understanding of cob as a means of survival and agent for social change. These voices help the cob projects survive within this story. As acts of appearance and disappearance, these voices outline and complexify the story.

Survival depends upon the intersection of diverse elements. I argue in Chapter Three, *Desire: Engaging With/In Arts-Based Research*, that cob is a form of arts-based research in the present moments of cob building. *A/r/tography* is the method that helps me articulate how cob is an arts-based research process that includes the land as an integral part of its canvas. *A/r/tography* helps to layer the movements of survival within cob building and within this text. The intersection of linguistic, artistic, tactile, and visual texts creates a hybrid method, as well as a hybrid ontological position that represents an ecologically diverse range of discourses, ideologies, subject positions, and possibilities. I use charcoal, sketches, photographs, poetry, and narratives to uncover the possibilities of cob as a form of arts-based research. The possibilities for engaging cob as an arts-based research practice are strategies for surviving, of working with our respective environments wisely.

Chapter Four, *Land*, investigates how surveying the land is an important step when building with cob that cultivates an awareness of the intersection of land and home. Some cobbers argue surveying is the most important step for building a structure out of cob.²² I argue that surveying the land is also a complex metaphor for cob within a corporate and capitalist system that seems to create an unforgiving environment for cob. While I survey the land, I move back and forth between my personal and intimate

²² Evans, Smith, and Smiley state, "Selecting a building site is one of the most critical design decisions you will make and should precede the rest of the design process. *You can't have a good building on a bad site*. For the magic to flow, the building and site need to grow together, each improving the other, like an excellent marriage" (emphasis theirs, 60).

memories of home to create a juxtaposed definition of home and land. A home can mean many different things—a place where one lives, a dwelling place with a social or family unity that occupies it, a valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin.²³ In each of these definitions, the land as a space of home is not highlighted. A cobbler understands land in terms of all of the elements that make up the surrounding site as a system of relationships between the institutional discourses, political, cultural, and social elements that shape our ideas of the land and ultimately home. I argue that when we consider land to be our home, a space of survival is created.

Survival is also about making theoretical compromises. These compromises do not impede the arguments I make in this dissertation but rather make them stronger. Survival is about theoretical and material balance. I work in Chapter Five, Scavenge, to explore what it means to be an academic scavenger, sifting through ecofeminism, postmodern feminism, and ultimately, feminist poststructuralism for a theoretical stronghold and for a way to articulate what it means to use different forms of materials and theories to construct an argument that is based upon ecological balance and ultimately survival. While I am personally dedicated to my spiritual ecofeminist perspective, there are some elements of this branch of thought that are problematic when theorizing about cob as a movement and moment of survival. There are some elements of feminist postmodernism to which I am drawn, but again, other ideas within postmodern feminism aren't helpful when I theorize about cob. Feminist poststructural scavenging allows me to scavenge through these theories and contextualize these ideas. Scavengers help cob survive, theoretically and materially.

Working as the feminist poststructural scavenger, Chapter Six, Practical Realities, is dedicated to the material practice of scavenging for materials. Throughout this chapter, cob survives through material and practical compromise. Throughout this chapter, I argue

²³ Each paraphrased definition of home originated from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

that the term natural is not helpful when scavenging for materials. Scavengers try to use as many recycled, primary processed, and local materials as possible. Primary processed materials have not been manipulated through industrial processes. Finding and using local and primary processed materials isn't a simple task. It is almost as difficult to find local labor. The practical realities of cob building serve as a guide to help cob projects survive. Scavengers make these compromises carefully with an environmental ethic in mind. The practical realities aren't failures but prompts, reminders, and important components of survival.

Chapter Seven, *Commune*, works through the current definitions of community and argues that cob building can cultivate movements of contextual, relational survival. As a verb, to commune is the act of coming together. To commune is to create through aesthetic practice a state of intimate and heightened receptivity. To commune is to collaborate, to work together, in a joint intellectual effort. As a noun, commune is a material space, defined through and by spatial and geographical relations. The space of commune offers a heightened awareness of the features of each potential definitional space. Materially, the space of commune created through cob building heightens a person's artistic and creative sensibilities. I rest on relational aesthetics to create the argument that community is based on the intersection of subject positions and the cultivation of relationships. Commune is the bundle of relationships that create these spaces of negotiation.

Within Chapter Eight, *Embodied Blueprinting*, I articulate how cob building in its many social, institutional, personal, embodied, political layers, and stages of building creates movements and moments of survival. This chapter summarizes the movements and moments of survival through the documentation of an installation performance piece I created when I revisited Mini-City almost two years after the initial project had finished. The building still stands (see fig. 1). The performance is a revisiting, a remembrance, and an articulation of cob as a strategy, ideological, and material practice of survival.

The first step towards articulating movement and moments of survival is to learn how to build with cob. Building with cob takes practice. Survival is a learning process. Cob building is a material and theoretical practice. In the most literal sense, cob building cultivates moments of survival because it teaches us the necessary skills to provide shelter. It also allows us to learn how to scavenge for materials, to work within and outside the corporate, capitalist climate. Cob building teaches us how to compromise and to create spaces of community. Cob building teaches through the act of doing, of creating, and collaborating. I see each of these elements as movements of survival because we learn we can't do it alone. We survive with each other. But this discussion comes later. First, let's learn about the fundamental elements of cob. Welcome!

CHAPTER I

BUILDING: THE PROCESS AND PULSE OF COB

In this book we encourage you to go out and build something yourself that is highly relevant to the place and the space that you inhabit, to become tuned to the structure and the pulse of your particular place.

-Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce, *Building with Cob: A Step-by Step-Guide*²⁴

The only proven way to learn about cob building is to try it!

-Janto Evans, Michael G. Smith, and Linda Smiley, *The Hand-Sculpted House*²⁵

I have to admit that I am a natural building novice. I learned how to build with cob through practice and playing. I was guided by the hands-on instruction of my dear friend, Tim. Tim is a cob expert from Chicago who lives and builds communities with cob. His story comes later. For now, I thank him for all of his help, expertise, and enthusiasm. His knowledge helped this project survive. I also thank the authors of such texts as *Building with Cob: A Step-by-Step Guide* and *The Hand-Sculpted House*. Without these illustrated books, I wouldn't have made it this far. When I started my

²⁴ Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce, *Building with Cob: A Step-by-Step Guide* (UK, Green Books, 2006) 7.

²⁵ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 1.

natural building journey, I did not understand the scale, weight, or depth of a cob building project. I took on each project in stride with a bit of naïveté.

I offer you this how-to-cob guide to get down to the nitty-gritty of cob building. I want you to feel the dirt and grime of building with cob. As Ianto Evans so accurately says above, the only proven way to learn about cob is to try it. I want you to learn how to shape the earth beneath your feet responsibly, through cooperation with others, and with your environment in mind. Building with cob aligns people with the pulse of a space.²⁶ Knowing and feeling the pulse of a space is recognizing with the whole body that what surrounds us is alive. When cob builders enter a potential site, they listen to the pulse of the earth. Cob builders look to the past to inform their futures. They look to the practices of our pre-industrial ancestors for models of efficiency and resourcefulness. They listen to the natural rules of the environment. They build.

These first pages serve as a guide for you, the reader, to learn about the process of cob building. Through examples, sketches, and a step-by-step tour through the cob building process, I want to teach you how to cob. In order to do this, I want to teach you about the natural laws of the environment. As a new cobber, you should try and let yourself work through the process, to learn about cob building through brilliant attempts and teachable failures. I want you to kick your shoes off and step in the cob.

How to Make a Batch of Cob

While there are plenty of steps that come before and during the actual process of cobbing, I think it's important to first introduce you to the materials. What is cob? Where does it come from? Cob is a mixture of clay, sand, water, and straw. Each of these

²⁶ Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Steven Rendell, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 117 states, "A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it." The cob building environment is a space situated within a place. The environment pulses, moves, and intersects living and non-living beings.

elements has an important function in the cob mix. I address each element in turn below followed by the mixing process.



Fig. 2. Clay

You can find clay in the ground beneath you (see fig. 2). It is important to dig far enough into the ground to reach the subsoil (see fig. 4). The topsoil is filled with organic matter that decomposes so stay away from the topsoil! Also, take note that clay swells when it is wet and shrinks when it is dry.



Fig. 3. Sand aggregate

The purpose of the sand or aggregate is to stabilize the clay. Having a range of individual particle sizes makes the best cob. The more sharp and angular the particles are, the better the results (see fig. 3). This locks the particles together and creates a good bond, as opposed to rounded particles like beach sand, which will not aid in bonding.

The soil composition diagram shows how far down in the ground to dig for a nice mix of clay and aggregate (see fig. 4). Soil composition varies as you move geographically around the globe. In order to get the right ratio of sand and clay for a cob batch, it is important to do some tests on the soil's composition (see fig. 5).

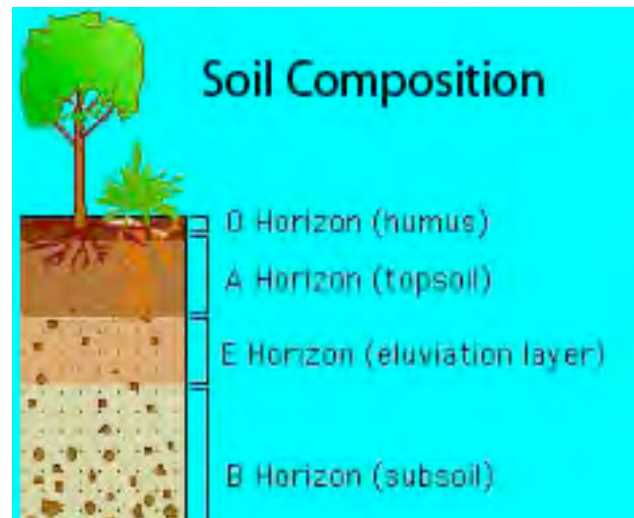


Fig. 4. Soil composition diagram

Clay-sand ratio

To make a great cob mix the raw material should consist of **15-25% clay and 75-85% sand aggregate**. All soils are made up of different proportions of gravel, silt, sand and clay. Here is a great soil test to use to discover the ratio of clay and sand in your soil.

Dig and jar test

Dig a hole in the ground at your building site. Measure the depth with a yard stick.

six inches

one foot

one and a half feet

At each depth, collect the dirt and place it in a jar. Label the jar with its depth. Add water. Close the jar with a lid and shake! Let it settle. After the water settles, you can see that the dirt is made up of sand, clay and silt. Clay floats, sand settles to the bottom, and silt is in the middle. You can physically see the ratio of clay and sand in your jar! Once you know the ratio of clay and sand you can compensate. You can add more sand if you need to. You can also add more clay.

Fig. 5. Determining sand and clay ratio



Fig. 6. Water

Nothing on earth is made possible without water. The addition of water to the clay and sand aggregate will transform the mix into the thick, sticky, homogenous material that you will use to build up your walls (see fig. 6). Too much water and the clay will become unmanageable. Too little and adequate bonding will not take place. After some time experimenting with the material, you can feel when your cob mix is too dry or too wet. Your feet begin to know.



Fig. 7. Straw

Straw (not hay) is an important element for making cob (see fig. 7). Do not use straw that is wet and has begun to mold. The straw must be dry. The purpose of the straw is to give strength to the wall, acting as a natural “rebar.” It also spreads out the cracks that appear as the structure dries, creating hairline fractures that prevent large structural cracks. Straw also soaks up the excess water in the cob mix. Finally, straw acts as insulation, by trapping air in its hollow stems.

Mixing Cob: The Tarp Method

Step One: Sift the Sand Aggregate

Use a mesh sifter to rid the pile of painful stones and save the chunks of clay (see fig. 8).

If a sifter is not available, pull out the larger stones by hand.



Fig. 8. Sifting

Shovel the material into the sifter (see fig. 9). Let the sifted material fall onto the tarp below. Once all of the material is sifted, pull the tarp over to your designated cobbing area.



Fig. 9. Shoveling into sifter

Step Two: Combine Clay, Sand, and Water

You can use the volcano method!
Create a crater in the dry cob mix.
Pour water in the crater.
Build up the sides of the mix
like a volcano (see fig. 10).
Jump in the middle of the pile and
the volcano erupts!



Fig. 10. Volcano

Step Three: Dance

All of these elements are mixed together
using your feet, a tarp, hands, and a
thing we like to call the “cob dance”
(see fig. 11).
Music is always a great device to get
people moving!
Have fun with this!
Have great conversations.
Enjoy one another’s company.



Fig. 11. The cob dance

While you dance in the cob, make sure your toes get to the edges of the cob pile (see fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Get to the edges

Use the tarp to turn and mix the cob (see fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Using the tarp

Your feet are your mixing tool.
Don't be afraid to step hard
and deep into the cob (see fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Mix with your feet

Step Four: Add Straw

Sprinkle a dense layer of straw onto the flattened cob. Be sure to cover the surface area
(see fig. 15).



Fig. 15. One layer of straw

Step Five: Keep Dancing and Burrito

Press the straw into the mix with your feet. Once it is pressed fully into the cob, then try the burrito technique. One partner grabs a corner of the tarp. You grab the other. Walk together. Keep the tarp low to the ground. Pull the tarp back to reveal the burrito (see fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Cob burrito

Step Six: Repeat Steps Four and Five
until cob is ready to apply (see fig. 17).



Fig. 17. The cob is ready

Step Seven: Cob Balls

You can form cob balls to transport the cob to the walls (see fig. 18).

Cob balls can be used to fill in the cracks and to smooth out the surfaces of the cob wall (see fig. 19).



Fig. 18. Sculpting cob



Fig. 19. Cob balls

In order to move onto the next step, how to build the cob walls, the site must be surveyed. Cobbers start by asking themselves; where do we want to build? Why do we want to build there? What does the site feel like and look like? What is the local soil composition? Cobbers should feel the pulse of the local building site in order to build efficiently with the land.

Surveying the Site: Feeling the Pulse

Natural builders consider the environment to be a part of them as much as they consider themselves to be a part of the environment. The local environment speaks to them in ways that seem quite unnatural in contemporary United States building practices. Natural builders believe in traditional or folk connections with our natural environments. “All documented and existing vernacular and folk building practices around the world demonstrate the evidence of an intimate relationship with the outside environment and a deep understanding of the available natural resources.”²⁷ Building with cob cultivates an awareness of local materials and the impact our processes have on the environment. The natural environment is our canvas, and cob building teaches us to sculpt softly with an ethic of sustainability in mind.

The following localized building techniques can be used in our contemporary society and can help the environment survive. Shelter should be intelligibly designed and located to minimize the negative elements of nature (such as extreme weather). Shelter should also maximize the positive elements of the environment. For example, the sun provides efficient solar energy. In order to find the proper place to build, cobbers argue that we have to commune with the earth, to let it speak to us through its rhythms. For example, when forming a structure out of cob, cobbers move with the material’s desire. Cob won’t listen to linear lines or perfect angles. Cobbers don’t dictate the process but adapt to context and to the gentle sculpting of the things around it. The bend of a tree

²⁷ Weismann and Bryce 25.

branch is not fixed. Trees move to find the sun. These are some examples of the natural rules of the environment. These rules include:

- Nothing is ever created or destroyed, it just changes form.
- Everything is unique.
- There are no monocultures in nature. This means living things exist in the company of other beings.
- Nature has a series of fundamental geometries. Nature rarely produces straight lines or right angles.²⁸
- Nature uses as many resources as necessary and no more.

The following suggested techniques are ways to get new cobbers feel the pulse of the environment that surrounds and sustains them. It also helps new cobbers realize how they can build with the local materials that surround them. Intention journals can help cobbers work through careful observation of the building site and the way the natural rules of the environment function within it.

Using an intention journal to create daily prompts and offer a space of reflection can help cobbers articulate their journey through the cob process. Intention journals can help cobbers catalog interesting moments of the cob project and to reflect upon the natural rules of the environment. Cobbers write, reflect, sketch, and jot notes down after each technique for surveying the land.²⁹ Intention journaling about the experience, experiment, and process helps cobbers to reflect and to articulate what they learned through the process. In the following techniques, I write as if the reader of this text is a

²⁸ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 10 state, “Biological forms tend to be irregularly curved. On the scale from humans to homes, natural objects never come in perfect squares, circles, triangles or cubes. Nature produces few straight lines, right angles, flat surfaces, or unbroken colors, and when they accidentally arise, she rapidly sets about diversifying them.”

²⁹ Sometimes cobbers do not want to reflect in written form. They may want to talk through their experiences or just be silent. Allow people to move through their own process of reflection.

new cobber. I offer prompts and techniques for surveying the site. I also offer ways for the cobber to learn about the natural rules of the environment.

Natural Rule One: Nothing is Ever Created or Destroyed

Here is a small block of ice. Can you identify the object? Touch, smell, play with, and break it. What is this made of? Where does it come from? Let the ice melt slowly. Watch the way the ice changes from ice to water.

The ice melting and changing form is just one simple example of how nothing in nature is ever created or destroyed, but rather takes another form. Similar to the ice melting, when you are building with cob, you change the sand clay and straw into cob. You facilitate the elemental interaction. As a new cobber you should be conscious and aware of what elements you are using. Take out your intention journal. Here is some intentional journal prompts: Does the ice melting help you understand what you will be doing with the elements of cob? What will you be doing with sand, clay, water, and straw?

Natural Rule Two: Everything is Unique

In cob building, natural resources are used in the same manner as the natural rules of nature. The photographs I took a few years back of the landscape in Georgia may help you see how nature is unique (see fig. 20). As I search through and look closely at the images, I am personally reminded of the second natural law, that everything in nature is unique.



Fig. 20. Unique nature in Georgia

Cob buildings and structures are unique because they are built from local materials that come from our natural environment. Cob structures take the shape of nature. Bring your intention journals and observe the local environment for twenty minutes. Pick a certain natural element, like a tree, leaf, or stone. Find two different examples of this element and compare them. What makes them the same? What makes them different?

If you are with a group of cobbers, show each other what you have observed. For example, if you are really interested in leaves, physically revisit them. Can you identify the uniqueness of each individual leaf? While the leaves have a similar pattern, they are not exactly alike. Sketch the unique elements of the leaves and write about them in your intention journals. Share with each other what you have learned about the uniqueness of nature. Intention journal prompts: If everything in nature is unique, how will your cob structure follow this example? What do you want your cob structure to look like? Will each cob structure have its own unique characteristics?

Natural Rule Three: There are No Monocultures in Nature

Everything in nature is interconnected. Taking apart the soil is an interesting technique to help you understand the complexity of nature. For example, soil is made up of living and nonliving elements. Dig a hole in the ground. Sift through your collected soil. You will discover living creatures in the soil. Depending on your geographical location, you might discover bugs, worms, or frogs. There are also microorganisms living in the soil. The soil thrives off of these organisms. The relationship between the living and nonliving elements in the soil is a symbiotic relationship that speaks to the third natural law; there are no monocultures in nature. Living things exist only in the company of other living and nonliving beings. Intentional journal prompts: How does interacting with the worms and frogs that live in the ground teach us about the living and nonliving elements of nature? How do nonliving and living beings interact with each other?

Natural Rule Four: Nature's Fundamental Geometries

The fourth natural rule is important for cob building because new cobbers often want to build boxes. Most people living in the United States are used to straight angles

because of their exposure to mass manufactured homes. They want to build something that fits what they have seen before. In our contemporary western culture, most modern builders use processed materials to erect structures that are not entirely unique. Modern building practices produce homes in shapes that are rarely seen in nature. Cob doesn't easily form into linear or sharp lines. Cob follows the natural geometries of leaves, grasses, trees, and stones. While we are building with cob, we encounter the fourth natural rule quite frequently. There are fundamental geometries in nature that aren't perfectly angular or reproduced.

Walk outside. Take time to look for geometries in nature. Write down what you see, feel, and hear. What shapes appeal to you? What colors do you see? Can you identify texture? Can you identify patterns? Sketch in your intention journals the geometries you find in different natural elements. Take time to study the shapes. Intention journal prompts: What geometries did you encounter in nature? Would you describe them as round, curvy, triangles, rectangles, or circles? How do you think building with cob might reflect these natural geometries?

Natural Rule Five: Nature's Conservation of Resources

Think about what you buy and throw away. Write in your intention journals something you or your family bought in the past week. What did you buy? What is the item's function in your household? Why did you buy the item? Find a trashcan in the surrounding area. Sift through these the items that have been thrown away. Can we reuse any of these elements?

Now, think about non-human living beings. Think about specific examples. For instance, think about a plant. If the plant is over watered, it will most likely wilt. If the plant isn't watered enough, it will most likely die. Nature doesn't over indulge. Comparing the way humans consume certain items with the way non-human living beings use elements can help you conceptualize the fifth natural rule: Nature uses as many resources as necessary and no more. Intention journal prompts: What is necessary to live, for survival? Do you need to scale down your consumption? In terms of building

a cob structure, how do you build for survival? How can you think about building a structure that doesn't use too much space or so many disposable elements?

The intention journals and the interactive work with these techniques will hopefully get you thinking about the natural rules of the environment in different ways and get you excited about the building tasks ahead. As a new cobber, I encourage you to reengage with nature. Through this process, you learn how to build a building that does not dominate the environment but grows out of and with the environment. After learning about the natural rules of the environment, it should be clear that humans are part of the environment, not above it. Everything in nature is unique. Each person is unique. Intention journaling can also get you to think about how cobbers will relate to each other, within a cob building community.

Intention Journals: Reflections and Motivations

Each one of you will arrive at the cob building with your own challenges, problems, personal situations, and contexts that make the act of dependence and cooperation quite difficult. In order to make sense of these complicated relationships, I suggest you use your intention journals to uncover the ways you respond to the day's energy, each other, and their reactions to the cobbing process. On the tarp, you may start to see and understand the interrelations of people's actions and emotions. The cobbing process can create a positive and embodied rhythm. As you move through the process, you may realize that the body responds, knows, and feels. You may start to lean on each other and work with each other the process of creating cob becomes smooth. You may become frustrated because you want to finish three more cob piles before the end of the day. Conflict arises because your group may be dependant upon someone who doesn't want to work. In all of these moments, of productivity and conflict, you depend on each other. Intention journaling helps to make sense of these complicated relationships and positionalities.

At the beginning of each day, gather together and think about where you are in the building process and how you are feeling that day. Think about the work you have to accomplish. Write in your intention journal the goals you have set for that particular day.

After the five-minute³⁰ writing session, share the intentions of that day. Some words that may come up throughout the cob process are motivation, magnificence, and strength. Throughout the day, remind each other of these words. The words become a theme, a reminder, and motivation for cob building work.

Throughout the weeks of cob building, mixing the cob, and gathering the materials there will be an interesting array of emotional fluxes that occur. Each one of these movements is productive in the sense that it is part of the cycle. The aim is not to create static emotion but recognize the rivers of emotion in flux. It is important to realize and reflect upon these movements of energy.

At the end of the building session, gather together and reflect on the day's events. Pay close attention to your body and the muscles you have worked that day. Reflecting on the day's events is important for community spirit. The intention journals offer stability, repetition, and reflection. As a new cobber, you begin to see and intimately understand the relationships that develop through cob building. Intention journaling is a helpful technique to keep you connected to your own thought processes as well as your connection to the larger group. Before you can begin to build a structure out of cob, you need to learn how to survey the site for environmental, material, and practical concerns and components that impact cob building.

Surveying the Building Site: Practical Ideas³¹

It is time to survey the site. As a new cobber, there are some important circumstances to think about before you begin to build and work with your site. When building an inhabitable structure out of cob, your building site is of utmost importance. A

³⁰ Writing time period depends on age group, time frame, and attention span.

³¹ For further discussion of each of these elements see Weismann and Bryce. Many of the following sections and ideas are paraphrased from their site surveying suggestions.

cob dwelling should work with the land. You want to minimize ecological disruption.³² Here are a few tips for surveying the site that will lessen ecological destruction. These tips will also help you to situate your building so it works within the space and not against it. These important components are location, building codes, access, local materials, and peaceful observation.

Location

There are many elements to consider when choosing a building location. First, consider your local bioregion. Consider the bioregion's geography, ecology, and climate. Think about the native vegetation. Pay respect to existing occupants on the land. For instance, you don't want to drain a pond or a wetland in order to build a cob structure. The wetland is home to many important species. You also want to avoid building on flood plains or in gullies. Cob needs to be protected from water. Build on the most solid subsoil you can find because cob is heavy. Avoid building on an exposed hill or cliff. The wind will impact the structure. To help pinpoint potential building sites, you might want to make maps or models of the site characteristics.

Building Codes

Most states in the U.S. do not have building codes for cob structures. Each state, town, and city in the U.S. has their own building codes and processes to obtain building permits. If this structure will be inhabited, I suggest you learn which codes will affect you and your construction project. Contact your local building inspection department, the office of planning and zoning, and the department of permits. Start by calling the government body that has jurisdiction over the your building site. They will provide you with specific information about building codes and appropriate building permits.

³² Evans, Smith, and Smiley 64 state, "Any kind of construction (including roads, leach fields, yards, fences, and even gardening) creates havoc for the plants and animals that are already there. Such damage is often obvious and dramatic but the damage caused by the ongoing existence and use of the building after it is finished may cumulatively be even worse (or may be healing if done right)."

Access

You are transporting the materials from the dig site to the building site. Consider the difficulties in transporting materials or tools to the building site. Will you be able to transport your materials and tools easily? Is your building site close enough to your dig site? You want to be kind to yourself and the other cobbers. Make the distance between these two points relatively close and easily accessible. You also want to minimize ecological destruction. Each road that is built causes ecological disruption. Carefully plan access to your site.

Local Materials

Local materials are the most useful and efficient for the climate of the local area. The materials are part of the local environment. The materials have survived and adapted to the local climate. Using local materials ensures that the structure will be able to withstand and endure the elements. Local materials will also provide the most comfortable space within which to live for that particular place.

Peaceful Observation and Intuition

After thinking about the elements of surveying the site, it is still up to you, the cob builder, to discover where the building would best fit with the land. Sit quietly with the site during different times of the day. Watch the patterns of the sun, trees, and slope of the ground. Once you are drawn to a space, sit there for a longer period of time. You were drawn to this space for a reason. Natural building implies building in harmony with the environment. As a new cobber, convening with your building site will help you respectfully create a cob building that works with/in the land.

These are components that natural builders take into consideration before they build on a site. These practical components can help your cob structure find its proper place to be with and within the natural environment. A cob structure should work with nature, not against it. Selecting a building site is one of the most critical design decisions you will make. Your site should empower your home's potential and your home should empower the lands potential, not destroy it.

Using Simple Technologies: Hand Tools and Labor

Each cob project requires that you gather particular tools and materials. Simple technologies can help us complete a cob project. I do not recommend building with large industrial machines.³³ Natural building wants to leave as little environmental impact as possible. Large industrial machines expend and waste large amounts of energy. Industrial machines disconnect cobbers from their work. “Cob invites involvement in a very direct way—dirty hands, dirty feet. Choose tools that don’t steal that involvement.”³⁴ I recommend using simple hand tools to complete cob projects. “Handwork is sensual; that is, revealing to the senses.”³⁵ Using hand tools can remind us of our own power to propel the tool with our physical energies.

List of Tools and Materials³⁶

- Sand
- Clay
- Straw
- Water
- Shovels (three to four, depending on the size of your group)
- Wheelbarrow
- Pitchfork

³³ Jan Sturmann, “Hand Tool Reflections,” *The Hand Sculpted House*, eds. Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith and Linda Smiley (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green P, 2002) 137-140 states, “Building by hand encourages us to build more deliberately, ponderously, aware of our actions that ripple beyond us.” He also admits that he is no purist. “My power tools, well used, cared for, will continue to be used, although with less frequency as I discover again the joy of using just my body to propel tools to do their magic” (140).

³⁴ Evans, Smith, and Smiley, 135.

³⁵ Evans, Smith, and Smiley, 135.

³⁶ This list was compiled through my own experience and with the guidance of two different texts, *The Hand-Sculpted House* and *Cob Building: A Step-by-Step Guide*. This list is subject to change depending on what type of project you undertake. For instance, if you are working on building a cob oven, you will need firebricks and extra sand to help you form the dome shape of the oven.

- Tarps for making cob mixes
- Five-gallon plastic or metal buckets
- Sculpting tools (spoons, knives, plaster's trowels)
- Mesh screens for sifting
- Tape measure
- Spray bottle for dampening sand form
- Spirit level
- Rubber mallet
- Carpentry tools (hammer, saw, crowbar)
- Recycled concrete for the foundation plinth (amount depends on each project)
- Stone or concrete rubble as filler for the foundation plinth
- Wood and screws
- Lime for outer plaster (NHL 3.5 lime)

Some of these materials are not readily available. While clay, sand, and water are right under your feet, it takes a good amount of time to scavenge for them. There are other materials that are harder to find. Lime, for instance, is an unprocessed version of concrete. Lime is difficult to obtain. I recommend you start early. Ask for help when you need it. Ask your friends to keep an eye out for certain materials such as recycled chunks of concrete. Rather than buying these tools, ask to borrow them. You will be surprised at the amount of support you have around you.

Scavenging for Materials

Scavenging for local materials and recycled components is an important part of the cob building process. Scavenging takes time, energy, and a source of transportation. Transporting the materials takes a truck or a car with a nice size trunk. Wheelbarrows, buckets, and shovels are tools cobbers use to move found materials to the cobbing site. You want to have enough time to scour the streets for your materials. Look for sidewalks being uprooted or construction sites. Take the broken pieces of concrete from these construction sites once you have gained permission. It also takes time to unload the concrete pieces before your cobbing sessions begin. Scavenging for concrete is an

excellent lesson that everything in nature changes form and everything can be used for something else.

To find straw, I recommend calling local horse stables. Remember you are asking for straw, not hay. If you can purchase the material, there are feed supply stores that carry bales of hay. Depending on the size of your project you may need anywhere from one to four bales of straw. Cob is a process-based project. I cannot predict the exact amount of straw you will need for any given project. I can tell you that you do not want to over run the cob mix with straw. This project is about balance. In my experience, for one batch of cob, we used two layers of straw, which approximately is equivalent to five handfuls of straw (see fig. 7).

To scavenge for clay and aggregate, you must dig into the ground (see fig. 12). Transporting the found source of clay and soil requires shoveling the material out of the ground and then moving it from the digging site to the building site.

Building the Foundation

The foundation of a building carries the weight of the roof, walls, furniture, and floor. It is the element that evenly distributes this weight so that the building doesn't sink into the ground, so its floors do not crack, and so the walls do not crumble. There are two foundation elements in a cob structure. There is the footing or plinth wall and the stem wall. The plinth wall, or below-ground footing, supports the load of the structure and distributes the weight evenly over the surface area (see fig. 22). The stem wall, or the wall above ground, should be one and a half feet above ground (see fig. 23). This protects the cob walls from water damage and allows for drainage away from the structure. Here are some tips and steps to laying a solid foundation.

- Clear the top soil of all vegetation and organic matter.
- Mark out the perimeter of your building with pegs and string.
- Dig a trench wider than the stem wall. The trench is where you place your footing or plinth wall (see fig 22).
- Familiarize yourself with the stones so that over time you will know which stones will make the best fit.

- Lay the concrete stones. The largest stones should be on the bottom. This distributes the weight more evenly.
- Marrying the stones is like putting a puzzle together. The puzzle piece process can be enjoyable and an excellent lesson in working together to solve a problem.
- The stones should fit together so they are stable (see fig. 21). Test the stones. Stand on them. If there are any wobbling stones, they should be stabilized by chipping away protruding stones or adding smaller pieces of stone to offer balance. The stones should feel solid and stable beneath your feet as you walk on them. The footing stones should come up to ground level
- Build your stem wall (see fig. 23). As you build higher, the stem wall should become increasingly narrower. The stem wall's width is same width of the cob wall. Remember, this stem wall should be one and a half feet above ground. This height depends on what and where you are building. This height almost always ensures that flooding water cannot impact the cob wall.



Fig. 21. Puzzle pieces fitting together



Fig. 22. Plinth wall: In the ground



Fig. 23. Stem wall: Above ground

The Cobbing Process

After the materials, sand, clay, straw, and concrete are collected, move the materials through a large sifter (see fig. 8). Break up the large pieces and get rid of the larger rocks. This makes the cob pile softer for those who step on it. Emphasize how your sifting efforts help, rather than hinder, the process. Divide into groups. One group can sift the material and then pull the tarp of sifted material to the designated cobbing spot (see fig. 9). The designated cobbing group can add water to the mix of sand and clay. This group steps on the tarp together and mixes the elements with their feet (see fig. 14). Music helps to spark and continue the energy of the cob dance. Each group can rotate tasks. The cobbing process, building the walls of your cob structure, may take some time. Rotating tasks and using your intention journals can regenerate your energy level and reorient you to the tasks you have completed and the tasks you may have ahead. Intention journal prompts: How did it feel doing the cob dance? What did your body do to get the task accomplished? Did you feel strange being so close to people? Did it impact the way we worked together?

Use your hands to move the cob from the tarp to the wall (see fig. 24).



Fig. 24. Applying cob

When building your cob walls, avoid splooping, mushrooming, and shouldering. Splooping happens when you build up too high too fast. The freshly laid cob will bulge and slump down. Large chunks may even fall off the wall. Slow down. Let the cob tell you how fast to apply it. Let a layer of cob dry and harden a little before you apply the next layer. Mushrooming is when you build the wall wider as you go higher. Keep measuring the wall to make sure you are consistent with the wall's width. Shouldering is when the width of the wall gets smaller as we build up. Again, measure as you go to stay as consistent as possible.

You can also make cob balls to transport the cob onto the wall. The cob balls can help us shape the walls in spaces where they need more support or if they are beginning to crack. Adding cob balls to certain sections can help correct the wall before larger structural problems occur. Forming cob balls is also a relaxing time to gather together (see fig. 25).



Fig. 25. Making cob balls

Protecting the Structure

After the walls are built, add a coat of lime to protect your work. The role of lime, on the outside of the cob structure, is to protect it from the rain and wind. On the inside of

the cob structure, add plaster to lighten the room and protect the cob walls from dust or everyday scratches and scuffs. A natural plaster also serves as a background for other natural dyes or pigments. Here are some tips on how to make lime. There are four coats of lime that protect your cob walls.

Lime Ingredients

Natural Hydraulic Lime NHL 3.5.

Sand: Reduces shrinkage or cracking.

Fibers: Act as rebar giving the plaster strength to control shrinkage and/or cracking.

To Mix Lime

Add three shovels of sand for each shovel of lime. Add water and mix. Tease fibers into the mix. Do not add the fiber all at once or the lime may clump (see fig. 26).



Fig. 26. Lime putty



Fig. 27. Applying lime



Fig. 28. Scratch coat: Final coat

Lime Coats

The Dub Coat: This coat fills in any excess cracks or recesses in the cob. Use your gloved hands to apply this coat (see fig. 27).

Scratch Coat: This coat is applied to the cob wall after the dub coat. It is scratched up to provide a key for the next coat. When you are finished applying the lime, score it with a trowel so the next coat can grab on.

Final Coat: This lime finish is smoothed onto the scratch coat. Do not score this coat. Use your gloved hands to apply this lime layer (see fig. 28).

Lime Wash: Final protective lime paint finish. It can be colored with natural pigments. To make lime wash, use the same ingredients as lime putty but do not add fiber to the mix.

Once you have limed the structure, mist the structure with the lime wash a few times a day for at least three days. The longer it takes for lime to set, the stronger the final

product will be. You can also use natural paints in the final coat of lime. Add a layer of lime wash to add color to the structure. To make natural paint, combine Natural Hydraulic Lime (NHL 2 in powder form), water, and the natural pigment. When applying the wash, the pigment will be much lighter than you might expect it to be. A cob wall needs at least three coats of lime wash to achieve a deep color. I have been writing mostly about larger cob projects. There are some smaller cob projects that can help move you into cob building. For example, creating a cob oven is a fun way to begin your cob adventure.

Cob Ovens

One of the most rewarding cob building practices is building a cob oven. Cob ovens are not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional. Building a cob oven can bring people together through the building process and gather people to delight in the food you bake in the oven. The following is a how-to for building a cob oven.

The Materials

(Amounts dependent on oven size)

Sand, Clay, Straw, Water

Play sand (to form inner dome)

Firebricks

Gravel fill

Concrete block

Preparing the Dome

Mark the circumference of the oven on the bricks. The circle should reach to the farthest edges of the bricks. Start with a pile of damp sand in the center of the circle. Use sand to build up and out (see fig. 29). With the sand dome still wet, apply a layer of wet newspaper or a plastic bag, so when you are digging out the sand, you know when to stop.



Fig. 29. Sand dome

Cobbing

You'll need three layers of cob.

1st Layer: sand and clay only.

2nd Layer: sand, clay, and straw.

3rd Layer: sand with a little clay only.

When adding the cob layers, the cob should be pressed down towards the firebrick. Do not press the cob into the sand dome (see fig. 30). Don't alter the shape of the sand dome because it creates the shape of your oven.



Fig. 30. Cob layers

Scraping the Sand

When you have finished applying the layers of cob, wait until it is hard to the touch before you cut out the door. I recommend waiting at least twenty-four hours. Measure the door height and width. The height should be 63% of the total dome height. If you cut a hole into the cob that is greater than 63% you



Fig. 31. Sand scrape

risk the oven falling apart. If you cut the hole too small, you won't be able to fit your food into the opening. The width should be wide enough to be able to fit tin loaf pans and pizzas but not so wide that the oven loses heat. Take a deep breath and start to scrape out the sand (see fig. 31). If formed properly, the cob dome should be able to hold its shape.



Fig. 32. The finished oven

Now that the oven is finished, you can build your first fire in the oven (see fig. 32). Cob ovens retain heat. Once you heat the oven, it remains hot enough to cook inside for three to four hours. To build a fire in the oven, use dry, thick, wood. Stack loosely to allow air to fuel the flames. Without a chimney, there will be smoke coming out the front mouth. Allow the fire to burn for thirty minutes to heat the oven to 700°F. Spread the coals and embers across the whole floor of the oven to heat the firebricks evenly. Rake out the remains. Let the oven heat for another thirty minutes. Then you are ready to place your pizza or bread in the oven.

As I write, I can hear our laughter as we piled on strange pizza toppings. I remember feeling so proud when that first pizza came out of our first cob oven. I can taste the pizza. It wasn't perfect, but it tasted fabulous. It was the taste of cob success. I was a novice at cob building just like you. Cob building has been a rewarding experience for me. I think the best way to learn about cob is to try it. Experiment with different techniques and see which method works best for you in your environment. Remember, each space has a different pulse. Don't forget to listen to yourself and to the environment around you. After some time playing, practicing, and experimenting with cob, I am no

longer a novice. I am moving into a different kind of cob project. I am cultivating knowledges and passing on all that I have learned about cob building.

Moving into Now, Later, After: Movements of Survival

Cob has transformed my conceptualization of the environment, arts-based research, home, land, natural material, community art, and building processes in the United States. It has taught me about myself as a collaborator, artist, scholar, and friend. I write to understand cob as a tool for cultivating moments and movements of survival. Cob opens up spaces of critical engagement. It also offers critical and feminist theorists a practical, material, and embodied way to think about and create spaces of survival. Survival, in cob building, is about preparation for the future, learning within the present, and investigating the contextual past.

Our building practices should reflect the image of nature's basic rhythms, shapes, and process. Cob, as an embodied practice, creates spaces of social change. For example, cob informs our ideas of survival by shifting political and social consciousness in terms of modern building practices. Cob informs and materializes our understandings of each other through artistic and communal practices. Within each of the following chapters, I work to describe how cob creates localized and discursive spaces of social change.

Creating this text is also a form of cob's survival. As I pass these knowledges along, I am sketching a past project into our discursive and material present and future. Throughout each chapter, I use storied examples fused with an arts-based research. In order to articulate how cob materializes our understandings of each other, in each localized moment, I want to bring you into the scene. I write and recreate movements and moments of cob so we can see how survival happens in material practice. In order to articulate how cob is a form of survival, I sketch out how cob works in context, in shifting perspectives. Cob is a form of communal survival. I was not alone in the cob building process and although writing and sketching can be a solitary art, I am not alone in this endeavor. I hear voices.

CHAPTER II

SKETCHING VOICES: DIS(RE)APPEARANCE

If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don't worry about being sentimental. Worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you are a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive.

-Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*³⁷

I am aware of the things that might be left out: I want to touch it all. Each exchange seems to have its own liminality, a welling space of ideas, feelings, and touch, seemingly ready to erupt in any direction, according to where fissures might be or where potential flows might offer passages to interpretation or discovery.

-Ken Gale and Jonathon Wyatt, *Inquiring into Writing*³⁸

I am taking a risk. Writers/artists/scholars/teachers take this risk. I have to pull the story out from inside of me. I have been with this story for two years. I am still trying to

³⁷ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) 266.

³⁸ Ken Gale and Jonathon Wyatt, "Inquiring into Writing," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13 (2007): 796-797.

put it all together. I am still trying to write down the bones.³⁹ I have to be honest. I will unintentionally leave things out. My memory might fail me. Intentionally, I protect the identities of each person involved in the cob process. Intentionally, I use the proper names of corporations while surveying Mini-City as a cob building site. It is important to be as honest as I can about the cob process, even if this honesty illuminates personal, material, and communicative failings. This story is my own to write and I would prefer to disappoint you now, rather than later. I consider writing this story to be prickly and quite dangerous (see fig. 33). I might disappoint you with the openings, fissures, and the cracks within the story. The words, sketches, photographs, and poems I move throughout this text are not perfect. While I do my best to incorporate the complications and the voices of those involved in cob building, it is my perception.



Fig. 33. Dangerous voices

³⁹ Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986).

The voices that follow are dangerous. I understand that each person comes to this text from different positions and personal attachments. I have to own this authorship honestly, introspectively, reflexively, and without fear.⁴⁰ In this way, this story can be considered autoethnographic.⁴¹ Autoethnographic work creates the story of the self in culture.⁴² If I start with my vision, I may leave other visions out. I know this. But I have to begin this story where I think it begins, almost two years ago.

⁴⁰ Knowledge is subjective and deeply connected to the knower. Norman K. Denzin in *Interpretive Ethnography: Interpretive Practices for the 21st Century* (New York: Sage, 1997) 217 states that autoethnography turns the “ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self experiences occur.” As the gaze turns inward and outward, the ethnographer questions the nature of ethnographic texts. How should they be written and what should they say? During this crisis of representation, the focus shifts to the way we should be writing—to bring the reader into the texts, into the experiences. Autoethnography emerged with texts that experimented with form and style. Carolyn Ellis in *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: AltaMira, 2004) 30 states that this blending of forms and style highlights “the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art.” One of the goals of autoethnography in communication is to “practice an artful, poetic, and empathetic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience” (30).

⁴¹ Laurel Richardson in “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ed. Norman K. Denzin, and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000) 923-948 and Carolyn Ellis in “The Other Side of the Fence: Seeing Black and White in a Small Southern Town” *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (1995): 147-167, argue and demonstrate in their own works that autoethnography relates the personal to the cultural through intimate and embodied writing. It gains access to the personal corners of interaction. I cannot tell this story from someone else’s perspective. I was part of each cob project, only a part, one person out of many. But I cannot separate my self from the research project. From the feminist autoethnographic points of view, realities become and are known through language. Knowledge is produced and reconstituted in and as language.

⁴² According to Harry Wolcott in “The Ethnographic Autobiography,” *Auto/Biography* 12 (2004): 93–106, the term autoethnography was first used to describe a method of ethnographically studying a group of which you are a part. The researcher was considered a complete member. Today, autoethnography encompasses a multitude of terms and writing forms such as Crawford’s personal ethnography, Ellis and Bochner’s reflexive ethnography, Ellis’ emotional sociology, Wolcott’s ethnographic autobiography, Ronai’s layered account, Denzin’s experiential texts, and Reed-Danahay’s autobiographical ethnography. Each of these methods may not characterize themselves as autoethnographic but they carry elements of autoethnography. The authors have their own position on the story of self in culture but they are a part of the theoretical development of autoethnography. The autoethnographic method focuses on the self-narrative, or autobiographical voice, within social context.

The Beginning: Discovering the Possibility of Cob

I talk to Sarah, the new girl in my graduate class. She is an M.F.A. student in the Fine Arts Department. Her building is across campus so I haven't seen her around before. She is holding her sculpture made out of banana peels. It is a body cast of sorts. She takes old banana peels and dries them in the sun. Once dry, she sews the peels together. She's made shoes out of this stuff before. After a short discussion about my environmental politics, sparked by Sarah's wearable banana peel devices, we dive into a deep discussion about sustainable practices and our mutual love for art and activism.

"I just don't see it in Tampa," I say disconcertedly.

"There are artistic practices out there that address all of our concerns, Jeanine," she assures me. I puff my contradictory cigarette and look at her. She continues, "I just learned about cob from Tim, a friend in Chicago. He works with this non profit called Growing Community. It is a sustainable community project and cob building is part of this sustainability."

She goes into detail about what she learned about cob during her stay in Chicago and offers that she is really a novice. Tim works with a group of teenagers with financial hardships. Growing Community is based on creating communities that are self-sustaining. They teach people how to build food systems that are ecologically sound. Empowering people to grow their own food offers them an alternative to purchasing food. Another component of Growing Community is teaching people how to build sustainable and environmentally sound dwellings and structures out of the natural building material, cob.

"I went to Chicago for a week last summer to help him with the cob building. Cob is an artistic practice that develops community building and activist work," Sarah says. "It comes straight from the earth. Think about it. We don't need anything but what we stand on and our own hands to build a home. We can work with the community to build something together. While he works with the teens on building cob structures, he talks about non-violence, conflict resolution, and sustainable practices. I think you'd really like him."

“We should really talk about this some more. I would love to start cobbing here in Florida. I think it would be amazing to try it out,” I say eagerly.

I go home that night and begin to research cob. Websites pop up on the computer screen. I am catapulted into digital representations of this earth-based, sustainable, and artful practice. People hold workshops that teach people how to build homes, shelters, cob ovens, and sculptures. Sand, clay, and straw are all around us. In each of these natural building organizations, there is an understanding that cob brings people together in a collaborative building effort. The photographs show me smiling faces and people stomping in the mud. I haven’t felt part of something so creative and collaborative in such a long time. I understand the strangers in the photographs as creators, community artists, and activists. I shut my computer down for the evening and smile. I want to cob. If cob is really a device to create communities and help our environment, then I am hooked. Each day, I excitedly further my research and try to situate what cob is, how it was (and is) used, and how we can make it happen in Florida.

This story is not only autoethnographic. It is arts-based research. I have to be able to distinguish and then fuse the two methods. These categories trouble me, as all categories do. Writing is an art form. In arts-based research, writing is fused with other kinesthetic and artistic texts. Arts-based research is a hybrid methodology that layers visual, sensory, and kinesthetic details to create knowledge. Arts-based research does not search for truth but rather explores the spaces of not knowing, creation, possibility, and change. Arts-based research will be explored in Chapter Three, *Desire: Engaging with/in Arts-Based Research*. I move through my own personal journal and find moments of personal and emotional reflection about the cob process. I find myself in front of a canvas, or in my journal. I let my mind wander in and out of present experiences and memories, and I sketch. These sketches layer the narrative.



Fig. 34. I give myself over with open hands

I move the pencil against the paper to create charcoal and outlines of ideas that come to me in dreams.⁴³ I give myself over with open hands to the process (see fig. 34). I layer photographs, narratives, and sketches within this dissertation. I also layer voices. I survive through these writings, these creations. I personally survive because I can use my art within this text. The sketches, the intertextuality of this document is what fuels my desire and sustains me.

Voices

The voices in my head won't shut up. They scream. They whisper. They make me and my words feel inadequate because they each want something out of this story. They want to be heard. They all have something to say. They are the voices of the cob story. I feel indebted to them. Their questioning, contributions, emotional outbursts, or causal asides make my arguments stronger, clearer, and more complicated. I am trying to make sense of the voices within this text. They are both imagined voices and the renderings of other's and mine experience.⁴⁴ The writer, cobber, artist, academic, committee, documentarian, and community member speak to each other. They speak to me. I am *all* of them. I am *none* of them, at least not completely.

⁴³ Speaking of imagination and art, James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941) 232 states, "I am indeed ready to say, because with fair consistency I believe, that works of the imagination (chiefly because in a certain degree they create something which has never existed before, they add to and somewhat clarify the sum total state of being, whereas the rest of the mind's activity is merely deductive, descriptive, acquisitive or contemplative), advance and assist the human race, and make an opening in the darkness around it, as nothing else can."

⁴⁴ Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Sylvia Kind, "A/r/tography as Living Inquiry through Art and Text," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11 (2005): 899 state, "Renderings offer possibilities of engagement. To render, to give, to present, to perform, to become—offers for action, the opportunity for living inquiry. Research that breathes. Research that listens. Renderings are not methods. They are not lists of verbs initiated to create an arts-based or a/r/tographical study. Renderings are theoretical spaces through which to explore artistic ways of knowing and being research. They may inform the doing of research, the final representation, and/or the ways in which viewers/readers understand and access an a/r/tographical text. For renderings also return and/or give back."

I am the complicated intersection of these positionalities throughout this text. I am the bricoleur,⁴⁵ the artist mixing and piecing these voices together. As the writer of this text, the voices of the cob project are not enacted until I put them here on paper.⁴⁶ I hope you, as the reader, get to know each of them intimately, as I do, as part of you and still not *you*. I begin these character introductions with the writer as all of the voices become actualized when I inscribe them on the page.

The Writer: At the intersection of all of these voices is the voice of the writer. I write this story of cob building. This position scares me. I am located within each voice. I know them intimately and I don't know them at all. Their voices confuse me. I hear them as I write. I have the power to allow these voices to speak.⁴⁷ I have existed, just as they have, within these projects. I am not all knowing. I place the voices of the characters in bracketed block quotations. These bracketed sections interrupt the text and place emphasis on these voices. I hope it works to interrupt the seemingly smooth story and my

⁴⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago IL: U of Chicago P, 1966) describes the bricoleur as someone who speaks not only with things but also through the medium of things. The use of the medium can be expressive in the context of mythical thought, but that bricolage can be involved in the use of any medium.

⁴⁶ Enacting certain voices within this text highlights viewpoints and can silence other subject positions. Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity," *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996) 1-18 finds that identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects. The construction of this story will ultimately leave cracks, openings, and fissures. When I listen intently to one subject position, the others seem to quiet, to disappear.

⁴⁷ Ruth Arber, "Defining Positioning within Politics of Difference: Negotiating Spaces 'In Between'," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3 (2000): 45 argues that scholarly writing, specifically ethnographic writing, creates a power dynamic between the scholars who write about other people and their communities. She states, "These writings remind us that we, as researchers, have the last word. Even as we allow others to speak, we have chosen to whom we wish to listen, the questions which we want them to answer, how much time we will allow them to speak. We as researchers orchestrate the research. We have control." This control frightens me. "Entangled within, in fact underpinning, the fragmentation of discourse, the contradictoriness of desire, the doubling and play of text are mechanizations of power and practice, of formulating otherness, of repositioning us" (55). I recognize that the play of this text is a mechanization of power and practice. I will try and use this power carefully.

privilege in writing it. I want to introduce you, the reader, to the subject positions of each of these characters. For all of the voices, I am grateful.

The Reader: You are the reader. I don't want to, nor will I, speak for you within this text. You have your own interruptions. I hope at some point you will tell me what they are. You are one of the reasons why I write these stories.

The Cobber: The cobber is an idealist and a purist in terms of building with natural materials. The cobber has a hard time letting go of the ideals of natural building. She only sees the positive moments and spins failure into success. The cobber lives meagerly. She lives literally and materially the ideals of natural building. Imagine tattered pants mended again and again. Imagine enthusiasm that engulfs you. The cobber is passionate, really passionate, about building with cob. She is only concerned with the process of cobbing, the way the mud feels against her feet, and the project at hand. The cobber doesn't want to stop cobbing. She wants to focus on the in the moment process of building. The cobber is a free spirit and hard to physically, and at times, mentally locate. She is a wanderer and a free spirit. She wants to change the world but rarely stays long enough in one space to create these changes.

The Artist: The artist is attached to the artistic elements of cob building. Cob, for the artist, is an arts-based process. Cob is the sculpting material. Cob, as the arts-based process, creates local and systematic change. She believes in cob as an art material. The artist is constantly bringing the discussion back to cob as an arts-based process. She does not want the arts-based component of cob building to go without intense consideration. She won't ever deny that aspect of cob. Sometimes too she worries that her artist's reputation is on the line. She has to defend her own work within the institutions that sustain and help create her work.

The Academic: The academic, as a feminist poststructuralist,⁴⁸ is aware of the contextual, subjective, and discursive elements that drive each localized cob experience.⁴⁹ The academic's voice is the anchor, the footnoted discussion that forms the foundation of this project, and the metanarrative of feminist poststructural thought.⁵⁰ She tries to make sense of the experiences in order to articulate how cob is an ecological survival tactic.⁵¹ The academic listens to the committee as she works through the larger implications of cob.

The Committee: The committee is dedicated to the larger project of cob as a both a theoretical and material practice. They ask the academic to define, reexamine, and question the assumptions of the text. They are constantly problematizing the work to make it stronger. They remind the academic to dig deeper into the theoretical

⁴⁸Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997) 100 argues that feminist poststructuralism allows researchers to investigate the multiplicity of interactions and contradictions among subjectivity, power, language, what we come to know as common sense and how these are used to examine our potential for change. In addition, this body of theory challenges conceptions of "fixed meaning, unified subjectivity, and centered theories of power."

⁴⁹Nikki C. Townsley and Patricia Geist Martin, "The Discursive Enactment of Hegemony: Sexual Harassment and Academic Organizing," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 190-217 state that feminist poststructuralism examines how discourse, subjectivity, social structure and experience produce and reproduce structures of power.

⁵⁰Laurel Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000) 923-948 argues that feminist poststructuralist theory can help to make sense of cob building through the intersecting swirl of identities, historical positioning, discourses, desire for change, institutionalized boundaries and of differences at each contextually based site. While modernists would like to rationalize, categorize, and order realities and identities, from my feminist poststructuralist point of view, there is no singular view of the world, no single truth to be discovered. Realities are messy, complex, and multiple. We come to know these realities from a particular point of view. Subjectivities are also as fluid as our realities. Some realities and knowledges are more privileged than others. The voices in this text constantly remind me of these fluid subjectivities and realities.

⁵¹Chris Weedon, "Post-Structuralist Feminist Practice," *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics: Texts for Change*, eds. Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (Urbana: U of Oyster Bay P, 1991) 47-63 states that understanding the plurality of meaning opens a doorway to understand experience as a complicated process of negotiation, which has the potential to challenge or reaffirm systems of power and oppression. Ecological survival is being able to negotiate these systems in order to create social change.

assumptions she is making and to interrogate and uncover the larger discourses at play within this text.

The Community Member: The community member asks how cob as an aesthetic process, connects members of a community. Who is the community? What about the community member's role in this process? The community member shapeshifts throughout the storylines in order to find a place in the different spaces of cob building. When we build with cob, we create community through the development of our relationships. The definitions of community are developed from place, identity, spaces of building relationships and developing a space of commune. The community member is all of us. The community member is none of us.

The Documentarian: The documentarian tries to capture the truth of the experience through still photographs. The documentarian loves to argue that the story being told isn't true, real, or right without inclusion of the visual elements. The images say so much more than the narrative alone. At the very least, the documentarian wants the visual elements to interact with the narrative. She wants the reader to examine the juxtaposition of the visual elements with the text. She believes the image will tell the story.⁵² The images are, after all, her art form.

As the writer of this text, I accept that there may be cracks in the story. But even with this level of acceptance, I am so frightened of my own failures.

[The committee: Failure is not necessarily a bad thing. Find the moments of failure and work from them. Use failure as a source of knowledge. Think of failures as moments you should reconsider within your work. Cob doesn't

⁵² When the documentarian focuses her camera in a certain frame, she offers us her vision. In *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1977) 3, Susan Sontag articulates the power of photography. The photographic visual creates a unique sense of seeing for the audience. She states, "In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing." This grammar of seeing highlights certain moments of the cob building process and leaves others out. Each time I pick out a photograph from the piles and piles of other photographs, I choose the photograph that complexifies, textualizes, and aesthetically enhances the narrative.

always work as you had planned or hoped it would. In this sense, it speaks to the larger contextual issues at play.]

[The academic: The committee is right. Failure is not a bad thing. I will use failures as inspiration for larger discussions. I will not understand complications as either bad or good. Binaries won't help me here. I need to connect all of this to what other critics have said before me because intertextuality and intellectual inspiration is what creates these ideas. I can't create an argument out of nothing. I want to be heard in the footnotes where I have my own space to deeply explore these meta-discussions. Maybe then this project will make more sense for all of us.]

[The cobbler: Cob doesn't fail. We have to work with the process and use those moments to deeply reflect. I mean, really look around you. It is so beautiful. It is so perfect. Take some time to look closely at your intentions and the sources of your own inner and interpersonal conflicts. We can always make cob work. I would even eat it if I could. I have. You want to see? Why all of this extra talk about the story? Why aren't you cobbing? If you just put your feet back in the cob, this story about cob will make more sense to you.]

[The artist: The final product of our artistic creation won't last long. Take a long look at our cob structure (see fig. 1). Can't we revel in the beauty of the artistic process? Look at it, remember, and then move forward. If you are an artist, then you find and work with other spaces of creation.]

[The documentarian: You have all that you need right beside you. I took all of those photographs so you could show the reader the process of cob. I created the pictures so you could have something to show for all of your work. The movements are already there in the documentation. Just go back to them. Why are you so worried?]

[The community: Do you even know who we are?]

I am scraping together my memories, documents, sketches, and the voices in the text to find the plotline that might create a form of knowledge for the reader. I want you, the reader, to understand the complications of attempting to create community through an arts-based process. I want you feel the creation of this text as an artistic process, as a rendering of the past, and a creation of the present and future. I know you want me to say more. I will keep you in mind. I do not know what you will take from this text. I can only

write, create, and hope that you will interact with this document. I suppose the worst thing would be if you found it stale, without content, without reason, without artistic qualities, without, without, without. I hope that I can find the larger significance within these pages.

The voices compel me to write the story of cob building. They scream. They whisper. They speak to me in chaos. They speak to me in their silences. They come to me in the shower when all I want to do is feel the water on my back. They won't let me sleep when I so desperately need to. And sometimes I don't have an answer for them. Still, their questions and interruptions fuel my desire to keep writing and to keep creating. These voices are the components of cob. They are the pieces of the story and the means through which I tell it. They ask me to keep writing to find the story that might compel you to find your voice inside these pages. I need you.

The voices are the foundations of cob. A cob building won't stand without its foundations. A cob building can't stand without a beginning to the story. I started this story when I first met Sarah. Sarah and I met and we began learning about cob. We began to organize our ideas, passionately, and naïvely.

Organizing our Organization: Cobbing by Institutional Rules

After that first conversation on the steps of the CIS building, Sarah and I set out on a journey to build with cob. Our passion for arts-based activism fueled this journey. We idealistically believed that building with cob could have an affect on those around us. Frustrated by mass industrialized labor practices, use of local materials, and the depletion of our natural economies, we wanted to teach people about the natural builder's orientation to the world. We wanted to offer people an alternative to the capitalist and consumer culture that keeps class structures in place through modern building practices. We believed cob building could empower people, make them feel good, and encourage transformation through collaborative engagement. We believed we could teach people how to create environmental change locally. We wanted other people to consider and replenish our natural economies through sustainable building practices. We had faith in the idea that we could start a natural building movement in Florida. Sarah and I believed

that we were the ones to facilitate these processes because of our passion, collective knowledge, and gumption. But before we could begin to facilitate the cob building process, we had to learn how to do it ourselves.

We practiced building with cob in my backyard. We tested the clay and soil to try to understand Florida's local soil compositions. We compared the soil composition in my backyard to store-bought clay and bags of sand. We tested the amount of water we had to pour on the pile and the time we needed to stomp on the mixture. We dug huge holes in my backyard and tried to build a small cob shed on the side of my house. But I was asked to move out of my house and this experimental project had to stop. On top of working in the backyard, we spent a great deal of time together, eagerly discussing the possibilities of different projects. We created an organizational structure based on cooperation. We set out to share tasks with one another and keep our leadership activities equal.

In order to make cob visible and viable where we lived in the Tampa Bay area, we had to maneuver through different institutional and bureaucratic systems. After researching the materials and time needed to build a structure out of cob, we needed funding. We needed institutional backing. We needed to find an organization willing to work with us. We had to organize the ideas and overall goals. We knew we were working within the corporate, capitalist system. While we wanted to teach people strategies on how to get out of these institutions, we had to navigate these institutions effectively to create change.

Sarah found, through the Fine Arts Department, grant money funded by the Bank for community arts projects associated with the University. She assured me that we could apply for this grant and obtain the money. She was right. But before we approached the non-profit organizations and the University for the community arts grant, we had to prove our worth. In order to obtain this grant, we had to construct an argument for cob building as a viable community arts project. We had to propose a reasonable plan and construct a workable budget. Sarah spoke with the chair of the Fine Arts Department and pitched our ideas. He was interested in our ideas. After their conversation, we became more excited about the community arts project. We worked even harder to construct our budget and

proposal. We submitted the final draft and then waited for a response. While we waited, we searched for non-profit organizations that might be interested in working with cob.

We crafted a mission statement that focused on our overall goals to create change in our local communities. We wrote, “Earth Work is a collective dedicated to empowering and educating communities. We work collectively with cob, a natural building process, to create sacred spaces for the community.” We tried to delineate how cob building might help to create social change within institutional boundaries. Along with our mission statement, we articulated cob building goals for individuals, communities, environments, education, and empowerment:

Individual: To foster in both adults and children self empowerment, constructive habits, a sense of accomplishment and ownership by giving each person a part in design-planning and project implementation. To naturally allow ideas, talents, and energies to emerge in the spirit of active commitment and participation.

Community: To use cooperation, specifically caring for and supporting each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual well being, as the fundamental model to accomplish a goal set forth by the group. To strengthen communication skills for interdependent working relationships that can be carried over into each person's life outside of the project.

Environment: To use an environmentally responsible process that will aesthetically enrich an outdoor space and serve as a lively, functional space for the community.

Education: To teach an alternative building technique, cob. To provide tactile and communicative skills that promotes environmental, personal, and societal integrity.

Creativity: To cultivate each individual's creative process by honoring her/his artistic voice and to materialize it in the overall design of the sacred space.

We spent hours deliberating the impact of each word in each sentence. We believed that our mission statement could make or break our entrance into a non-profit. We wrote letters and made cold calls to various organizations around Tampa. For example, we contacted the local domestic violence shelter, a nonprofit dedicated to

helping people living with HIV and AIDS and a local orphanage. We believed teaching natural building could help people in disadvantaged situations realize their own agency, and empower them individually through cooperation.

In just a few months, we set up several different cob projects for the coming year. We were awarded the grant money we requested from the University.

**EARTH WORK
PROJECTED BUDGET AND TIMELINE
3 Cob Projects in One Year**

MATERIALS

MATERIALS	UNITS	PRICE PER UNIT	ESTIMATED COST
Sand (Cubic Feet)	92	\$ 3.00	\$276.00
Clay (Cubic Feet)	92	\$ 3.00	\$276.00
Limestone/Clay (Cubic Feet)	40	\$ 5.00	\$200.00
Straw (In Bale)	4	\$ 6.00	\$24.00
Tarp	12	\$10.00	\$20.00
Shovel	4	\$15.00	<u>\$60.00</u>
			\$956.00

WORK FORCE

PERSONS	HOURS/WEEK	RATE (hourly)	WEEKS	ESTIMATED COST
2 Adults	9	15	40	\$10,800.00
3 Youth Stipends				<u>\$900.00</u>
				\$11,700.00

VISITING EXPERT

	PERSONS	RATE	ESTIMATED COST
Personnel	1	\$500	\$500.00
Airfare/Accommodations/Food	1	\$250	<u>\$250.00</u>
			\$750.00

EDUCATION WORKSHOP

July 22-29th Comprehensive Cottage Construction

	PERSONS	RATE	ESTIMATED COST
Registration	2	\$580	\$1,160.00
Airfare	2	\$300	<u>\$600.00</u>
			\$1,760.00

TOTAL MATERIALS:	\$ 956.00
TOTAL LABOR:	\$ 11,700.00
TOTAL VISITING EXPERT:	\$ 750.00
TOTAL WORKSHOP:	<u>\$ 1,760.00</u>

Fig. 35. Original Earth Work budget

Our budget suggested we were going to work on three cob projects in one year, although we weren't sure how many projects we would take on (see fig. 35). Ultimately, we did five cob projects as part of Earth Work. We also weren't sure how long each project would take. We approximated the cost of each content area. We guessed.

When we factored in our labor, time, and the stipends for the participants, we found that labor was the most expensive commodity. According to our budget, Sarah and I would receive the most amount of money for our labor and time because we would be working for the longest periods of time. Our enthusiasm may have gotten the better of us. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. I was overwhelmed, enthralled, exhausted, and excited to begin our cob projects.

Contextualizing the Projects: Shifting Disciplines and Discourses

For our first cob project, which was not sponsored by the Fine Arts Department, we were invited to cob at a one-week happening of the arts in Tampa. This art show interactively explored themes including cultural commodification, globalization, global economies, and displacement. Natural building is a post/pre-industrial project. It uses an older technology and reinstates it in our modern day building practices and consciousness. It uses natural and renewable resources. It encourages people to step outside of cultural commodification and move closer to their labor practices. Inside the gallery space, there were interactive media installations, paintings, photographs, and live performances that critiqued and spoke to the themes of the art show in various ways. We were given a space outside of the gallery walls because cob can get messy. We set up our tarps and asked gallery goers to take off their shoes and stomp in the cob with us. Our goal was to construct a mobile cob oven in one night. Most of the gallery goers we encountered at the art opening were interested in and shocked to learn that people can build their own ovens out of natural and accessible materials. At the closing reception, one week later, we baked pizza in the oven, which demonstrated the functional nature of this aesthetic and tactile process.

After working with cob in a gallery space, Sarah and I talked about bringing cob into my academic discipline, communication. We wanted to make cob an

interdisciplinary practice. Cob building is a device for bringing people together, to forge relationships and promote and enhance the idea of community. As a communication scholar, I have always been interested in building tangible bridges between the academic sector and the community. Cob building seemed like the perfect device to address the borders that can keep the academy separated from the community in which it is situated.

[The academic: But how does the community actually fit within the academic realm? How do you define community?]

I wanted to connect the academy to the local community. I always have. I always will. Because of this desire, for our second project, I suggested bringing cob to the Qualitative Research Conference in Oyster Bay. We worked on a panel proposal and were accepted. I worried about how a tactile process that requires a lot of materials, space, and time constraints could fit within an academic conference. The conference organizer graciously worked with us to find a space for this interactive installation.

Within the context of the Qualitative Research Conference, we were given a daylong time slot to build a mobile cob oven with conference goers and members of the Oyster Bay community. We hoped that this oven would eventually find a home in a communal space off-campus and that the local community would use it. In our attempt to connect the academic community with the local Oyster Bay community, we were able to connect to several people willing to offer art studio space, homes, and time to help us build this mobile cob oven. We were able to use ‘found’ materials in the Oyster Bay area as well as use University studio spaces to construct the mobile component of the cob oven. The cob oven found a home with Ron, a member of the Oyster Bay community. Ron works with solar energy, organic farming, and sustainable living. He was given the cob oven to experiment with several types of natural ovens and organic breads. His organic breads are baked and sold locally in the Oyster Bay area.

We also encountered several setbacks. The cob building installation wasn’t located near the buildings where the traditional conference panels are held. Because of the location, some conference attendees didn’t have time to make it to the other side of campus to participate in the cob building project. Sarah and I had a falling out because of

a guerilla cob bench that was built on the University's property without permission. We did not see eye to eye concerning the goals and impact of this action.

Our third project was our largest and most time-consuming project. Sarah found the Children's Museum, Mini-City. Mini-City is a scaled down, kid-sized version of the local urban spaces where kids can come and play. Mini-City includes Publix, which is a regional grocery store, J. P. Morgan and Chase Bank, the United States Post Office, a music room, an art gallery, PediaCare, which is doctor's office, McDonalds, and city hall. It is set up so the children can interact with the buildings and play with the toys within it.

We proposed the cob project to Ellie, the director of the museum's Teen Leadership Development program, Teens Alive. The program is specifically targeted to youth ages 14-16 with limited resources and support needed to make the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. This program is basically the teens' first job in a corporate setting. They learn through hard work and diligence how to run Mini-City. They clean the buildings, run the front desk, supervise the children enrolled in the summer camp, and answer to their boss and project manager, Ellie. Through Teens Alive, the teenagers learn how to write resumes and practices interviewing skills. Teens Alive and Mini-City teach children and the teenagers how to navigate and succeed in a corporate, capitalist world. Sarah and I believed that working with cob could fit into the Teens Alive's desire to empower the teen leaders but also show the teenagers that there are options to the corporate, capitalist climate. Cob building is this alternative. Earth Work partnered with the leader of Teens Alive to build a building at Mini-City.

After two meetings and a power point presentation on our cob oven projects, Ellie agreed to set up an intensive cob building project. Ellie believed that the teens could develop their interpersonal and communication skills through participating in this project. She also believed that they would feel a sense of agency and ownership over the cob structure. During the summer of 2006, for three days a week, eight hours a day, the Teen Leaders and Earth Work constructed a cob building within Mini-City. After setting up this huge project with Mini-City, Sarah was offered a highly regarded position with a traveling performance art group. She hired Tim to cob in her place. Originally, Tim was

going to come help and guide us for one week. But because Sarah had committed to the traveling performance troupe, we needed him to stay on longer. I was left navigating and organizing the bureaucratic side of things, and finding the materials. I was also responsible for the intensive practice of cobbing with the kids. Her absence created a lot of tension between us. Sarah returned to Tampa after the cob building process with Mini-City was finished. She worked with Sam, the person we hired to design and construct the roof. With Sam, Sarah built the roof and the door. She was also in charge of putting the finishing touches on the house. She worked closely with a different group of leaders from Teens Alive to construct the interior teaching materials.

Because of outside circumstance, Sarah and I worked alone on two cob projects. Sarah worked with the Kids Home to build a cob bench with the children that live there. I worked with the Girls Harmony Home to build a cob bench in their courtyard. This youth program is set up to help the girls in their transition from adolescence to adulthood. Their programs are designed to improve self-esteem and promote healthy lifestyles. I believe that in both youth oriented projects, the Girls Harmony Home and Teens Alive, their work with cob added to their understanding of what it means to be an adult working creatively and diligently within a community arts program.

As the writer of this text, I have to be honest that the previous claim is speculation. I am not sure how cob impacted them. I can only hope it did. There are also important moments of success and failure that need to be addressed and problematized in context to understand how cob building functions locally within the metanarratives of modern progress.

Sketching Voices: Disappearance and Reappearance

Throughout all of these contexts and cob projects, I was not alone in this endeavor. Volunteers, cob experts, friends, colleagues, advisors, and family surrounded me. I am and was part of a collaborative process. Now, I am surrounded by the voices of characters that have become a part of me. I find that as I write a story, I listen to the echo of the voices. With each movement of the keys, voices disappear. For example, the documentarian's voice and the committee's voice are subdued when I write the voices of

the community member, the artist, and the cobber. As I write the process of cob building, the movements become solidified in a version of the story that makes the most sense to me. As these movements become solidified as text, picture, and sketch, other possible stories fade. This does not mean that those stories are lost. The stories are in the bodies, the hearts, and the desires of the people involved in the cob building projects.

I sketch these voices with both hesitance and great joy. I find these voices to be of the utmost importance to the survival of this arts-based process. Physically, I am now alone in this endeavor, scraping my memory, my notes, and the documentation of projects past for a semblance of the story. But in my mind, in my memories, as I materialize the story for you in this text, I am with the voices of the projects. I am urged to find the plot, purpose, layers of contextualized cob projects, and the moments I might have forgotten. While I am aware of the possibility of losing moments of the cob project, I have to accept that a complete text isn't possible. There will be memories that have lost their way. Losing memories does not compromise the survival of this text. If it is evocative, if you feel anything, gain anything from this document then it has survived, both in the text and in your interpretations.

I continue to hear voices, sketch the process, and build the cob structure in Chapter Three, *The Desire: Engaging With/In Arts-Based Research*. This document is an act of rendering⁵³ and reappearance. Rendering is personally and socially constructed. These movements are reverberations. Reverberations activate openings to let others' work and words resonate throughout in a tangled co-laboring. Elements such as narrative, theory, photographs, and sketches collide in a fusion of aesthetic practice, mixed and stirred, mixing colors, and contrasting movements. Within this text, I follow these

⁵³ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 908 argue, "To render research is to commit to living inquiry through text and visual images. So too, the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher must become active processes and practices of living a life deeply. Deep inquiry into our lives requires a/r/tographers to make meaning through their senses, bodies, minds, and emotions. It is a research process that is fluid, uncertain, and temporal."

elements in a collision that is bumping, ever moving, and always changing. I want you, the reader, to feel something in this exploration into the memory of the process cob building. This is one act of rendering about the process of creation, through the process of creation. This work, however dedicated to the process, is also an artifact, an object, and a representation of the process. It produces meanings and positions from which those meanings are consumed. Moreover, representation articulates. These articulations are also acts of disappearance. The following chapter complicates my desires to define cob building as arts-based research. I work through current definitions of arts-based research to argue a/r/tography is the best guide to fuse the creation of this text with the possibilities of cob building. This text, an arts-based research project, stands as a fusion of my memory of cob building, through narratives, sketches, and photographs. I use a/r/tography to talk about cob building as a form of arts-based research.

CHAPTER III

DESIRE: WITH/IN ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

If I could do it, I'd do no writing here at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrements. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as a parlor game. A piece of body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

-James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*⁵⁴

Building with cob is about getting your hands dirty, touching the stuff, feeling its stickiness, its grittiness, its pliability and plasticity. We encourage people to wake up to their senses, to learn to recognize the earth—to understand its sustainability for cob building.

-Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce, *Building with Cob: A Step-by Step Guide*⁵⁵

The cob window muddles our view (see fig. 36). The cob window is one lens to view the process of arts-based research. I want to give you the sounds, scents, voices, noises and kinesthetic moments of building with cob. I want to give you cob to feel.

⁵⁴ Agee 13.

⁵⁵ Weismann and Bryce 7.



Fig. 36. The cob window

The question becomes: how do I *engage* you?

Flowers

I was always told to start my work, my writing, where I am.⁵⁶ I am here in my yellow vinyl 1950s kitchen chair with my dog, Rhyn. She whines at my feet until I lift her up and cradle her. I have to keep my arms up so her head doesn't weigh on my wrist. She loves to rest on my wrist, which keeps my fingers from these keys. I pet Rhyn's soft head and stare at the stargazers on my kitchen table. They are opening. The petals are beginning to peel back, exposing a sensuous purple center. The deep brown of the stamen contrasts the white petals and offers a subtle explosion of color. Each day I gauge their

⁵⁶ Laurel Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin & Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000) 97 states, "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it." I write these pages to find the storyline. Starting where I am implies that I am not sure where I am going, at least not completely. Eventually, I will uncover this narrative and craft it accordingly. For me, writing sits alongside creating tactile and kinesthetic elements. Starting where you are implies an awareness of your own subjectivities. This is not to say that there is a sense of clarity to these positionalities, but rather that there is a jumble of knowing wrapped inside these texts. In order to sort through the intersections of thought, experience, and embodied memories, I use writing as one tool for discovery.

movement and delight in their growth. I bought the flowers at Trader Joes for \$4.99. I didn't pick them in a meadow or grow them in my own garden. They were perfectly packaged and convenient. Sometimes I regret making these purchases. Why can't I grow my own? Why haven't I already? The stargazers excite my interest in liveness, animation, color, and decay.⁵⁷ By the time I finish this document, these flowers will be long dead. Survival is not only about life but also about the cycle of life and death.

[The documentarian: Why are you starting here? Get to the cob story. Don't you remember Terri's flower? It's in the box of photographs.]

I am starting here to introduce my desire to use arts-based research. I want you to feel, know, and experience through sensory engagement. The goal in this text is not only to create a separate art object but to also offer you a collage of texts so you can experience the artistic creation of cob.⁵⁸ I can feel the documentarian staring me down. I will tell the story of the cob flower.

I rummage through the box of photographs next to the kitchen table. I find the photo the documentarian is talking about. I trace the image with one finger. The soft yellow petals flow into the orange texture of the cob wall. I know this place. I remember

⁵⁷ James. H. Olthuis, "Otherwise than Violence: Toward a Hermeneutics of Connection," *The Arts, Community and Cultural Democracy*, ed. Lambert Zuidervaart and Henry Luttifkhuizen (New York: St. Martin's P, 2000) 140 states, "Indeed, language or discourse is only one form of intercourse, only one the great array of acoustic, olfactory, tactile, symbolic, and graphic ways of signification that we need to interpret in meeting the other. Whether we are dealing with the phonemes of oral conversation, the script of written texts, sculptures, paintings, musical scores, rituals, dance, body language, traffic signs, emblems or floral arrangements, encoding and decoding are always present. Colors, sounds, odors, textures, and gestures present as many complicated dilemmas of interpretation as do words and texts." These are the elements of cob building as an art-based research practice that I wish to uncover throughout this text. We cannot forget these important signifying practices in arts-based research.

⁵⁸ Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004) 42 state, "What matters aesthetically is thus not the work of art or cultural product as objects, which, once reified, become commodified and fetishised. What matters is how artistic creativity and cultural production relate to experience, what an art product does with and in experience, how experience becomes aesthetically founded and so resonant with expressive meaning."

this moment. Holding this memory close, I get up from the chair. I stretch my arms to the ceiling and feel a little dizzy. I should stop writing and eat something.

[The academic: No. Keep going. Don't stop yourself. Go back there.]

I continue stretching into the corners of my memory. I remember Terri. She is one of the Teens Alive members. I see her smiling face and the freckles that lightly cover her nose. I begin writing.

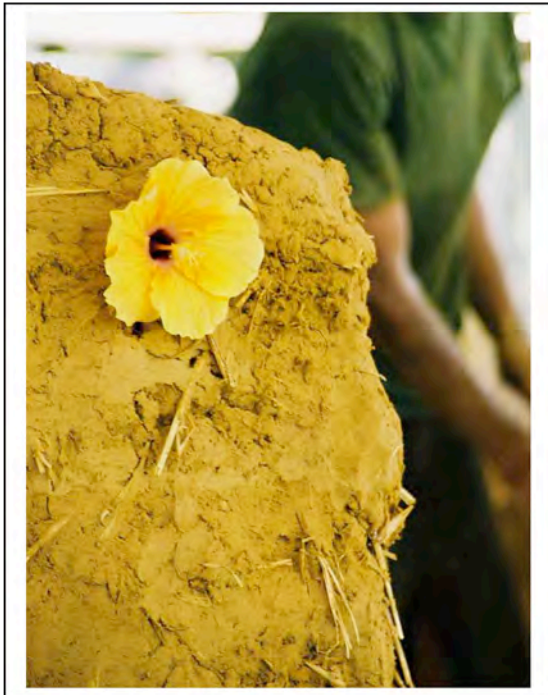


Fig. 37. Terri's flower

Terri takes a break from cobbing. Her bright red ribbon stands out in her long brown hair. She wanders over to the vines that line the metal fence around Mini-City. She finds a bright yellow hibiscus with a maroon center. I turn to bring another batch of cob over to the waist-high walls of our building. I find her flower pressed into the sides of the front wall. It looks so perfect there, like a welcome mat into our collaborative home. Terri is proud of her creation. I find her gesture striking. I take a picture (see fig. 37).

A few days later, I plucked the wilting flower from the wall. I felt a sense of loss, nostalgia, and appreciation for her gesture.

[The documentarian: See? We needed that. It connects the reader to the visual process. Language cannot capture these movements alone, at least not for me.

I know that these photographs can help you tell the story.⁵⁹ If it were up to me, I would rely more heavily on them. They are important.]

The visual offers the reader a layer of knowing within the text.⁶⁰ The visual and textual elements fuse to create embodied knowledge. Choreographers and scholars Mary Beth Cancienne and Celeste Snowber combine dancing and writing to argue that the body is a site of knowledge. They state, “Combining dance, a kinesthetic form, and writing, a cognitive form, can forge relationships between body and mind, cognitive and affective knowing, and the intellect with physical vigor.”⁶¹ Like Cancienne and Snowber, I do not see the body and mind as separate entities. They play with each other.

[The artist: It is an amazing and challenging process to try and create between and with writing, visual, and kinesthetic elements.]

⁵⁹ Julie Taylor, author of *Paper Tangos* (Durham, Duke UP: 1998), struggled with the use of photographs in the telling of the story of Argentinean Tango. For Taylor, “The text had sought to find words that would transmit the bodily knowledge of a dance form, knowledge that includes the reflections associations with other experiences that the tango demands...if there was a way to introduce movement onto a page of written words and to keep its presence there in such a way that readers were reminded that the words were intended to interact constantly with the image of movement to which they referred” (xv-xvi). Taylor created a flipbook of photographs so that when the reader flipped through the pages, they could see the dance happening. This is one dilemma I face as I write/create this account of cob building. Cob building is a tactile, movement-based, and kinesthetic practice that relies on process. The photographs in this text do not create movement, but allude to its presence. I attempt to draw in sketches, photos, and notes in an attempt to remind the reader that the arts-based process is central to cob building.

⁶⁰ Knowing through the intersection of textual and visual elements does not claim to be more truthful or encompassing than any other form of knowing. I argue here that it is another layer or approach to an account. Referring to the photograph in ethnographic research, Sarah Pink in *Doing Visual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2001) 18 states, “It does not claim to produce an objective or ‘truthful’ account of reality but should offer versions of the ethnographer’s experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which knowledge is produced.” The photographs here are not meant to substitute for written experience but should enhance the lens we use to view the culture. Using a reflexive approach to photography within arts-based research, I am aware of the constraints and possibilities with my own photographic practice and choices. The photographs are records of both Ani’s personal experiences and mine. They identify to the viewer what grabbed our attention in that moment, from our particular viewpoints.

⁶¹ Mary Beth Cancienne and Celeste N. Snowber, “Writing Rhythm: Movement as Method,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 237.

I could paint or sketch the flowers on my table as a recreation of the color, shape, shade and line.⁶² The colors could intermingle with the words on the page.

[The documentarian: Perhaps you could create a photographic series and include it within this text?]

I am including the photographs in the text. I love and appreciate the photographic arts. Stargazers are my favorite flowers because of their scent. How do I offer you the scent? The following desires fuel my work with arts-based research within the larger discussions of embodiment and engaged knowledge.⁶³ I work with my hands. I want your hands to feel the way my hands feel when I build with cob. My entire body pulses when I sculpt and mix cob. I love the feel of my fingertips after a long day of building with cob. I want you to be able to smell the flowers on my kitchen table, to watch the deterioration of Terri's flower. I want you to feel the cob. All of these desires to create and use visual and processually based practices have all led me here to this introduction, which may incite the reader to think about the complexity of using arts-based research within an

⁶² Rita L. Irwin, "A/r/t/ography as Metonymic Metissage," *A/r/t/ography as Living Inquiry: An Introduction to Arts-Based Research in Education*, ed. Rita L. Irwin and Alex de Cossen (Vancouver: Pacific Educational P, 2004) 27 describes the integration of text and image as an "act of borderland pedagogy, a way of sharing a third space between knowing and ignorance." Borderland pedagogy is analogous to the concept of bricolage that was explored in Chapter 2, *Sketching Voices*. Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford UP, 1990) 26 explains, bricolage is a term for improvisation that is "sometimes applied to artistic works in a sense similar to collage: an assemblage improvised from materials ready to hand, or the practice of transforming 'found' materials by incorporating them in a new work."

⁶³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffery Smith (New York: International, 1971) 418, calls for engaged knowledge: "The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned [...] that is without felling the elementary passions of the people." Knowledge is situated, located within what Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *The Drama Review* 46 (2002) 149 calls proximity. He finds that within engaged knowledge "proximity, not objectivity becomes an epistemological point of departure and return."

academy that thrives upon the hegemony of textualism.⁶⁴ I am referring here to the hegemony of textualism as discussed by Dwight Conquergood in “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.” Conquergood argues that only “middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to their everyday lives and occupational security.” This hegemony of textualism “underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered.”⁶⁵

[The artist: How do you balance your life as a researcher and an artist?]

I am an arts-based researcher. I understand that writing is an art form. I am aware of texture, line, the aesthetic features and tones of cultural and social environments.⁶⁶ I listen to and am part of the interactions that happen at the cob building site. I believe cob building offers a unique and action-based understanding of feminist poststructuralist practice through art making. I cannot separate my research from my art.

[The committee: Can you please define arts-based research for us and then connect it to cob building?]

Yes, that is important. I was wrapped up for a little bit.

⁶⁴ Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *The Drama Review* 46 (2002): 147. Within his discussion of the hegemony of textualism, Conquergood calls upon Michel Foucault’s subjugated knowledges to articulate how knowledges come to be privileged and others are subsumed or erased. Subjugated knowledges have been erased because they are illegible. They are outside of books and elude language. They are active bodies of meaning. They are local, native, and bodily knowledges that cannot be consolidated into texts and therefore at the bottom of the epistemological hierarchy. Performance scholars and arts-based researchers have long been trying to find ways to resurrect the connections between text and embodied knowing in order to create spaces of engagement. I play within these liminal spaces.

⁶⁵ Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” 147.

⁶⁶ Karen Scott-Hoy, “Form Carries Experience: A Story of the Art and Form of Knowledge,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 269 argues that being a researcher is not dissimilar from being an artist. She states, “I don’t have to use a forensic scientist’s analytical scalpel to generate knowledge, in an expressive interpretive approach I can use an artist’s pen, palette and painting knife, and I can use the same senses I had in the field.”

Cob as Arts-Based Research: Movement Towards A/r/tography

Arts-based research has carved a space in interpretive, qualitative methods in several disciplines.⁶⁷ For example, arts-based research is a methodology used in Education, Sociology, Communication, and Anthropology. Like poststructural feminists, arts-based researchers believe that realities are multiple and complex. Arts-based researchers argue that there are many ways to know and represent the world. Within arts-based research, knowledge about this world is constructed into an artistic form of experience. Art is not a *representation* of the world or language but *is* itself world and language.⁶⁸ The intersection of linguistic, artistic, tactile, and visual elements creates what arts-based researchers call a hybrid method. Carol A. Mullen⁶⁹ asks researchers to explore arts-based research as “an art gallery of conversational (and-ever-changing)

⁶⁷ This list of scholars is not exhaustive but is helpful for those of you who wish to uncover more about arts-based research:

Elliot Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002).

Elliot Eisner and Thomas Barone, “Arts-Based Educational Research,” *Complementary Methods for Research in Education*, ed. Richard M. Jaeger, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1997) 73-94.

Susan Finley, “Painting Life Histories,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 17.2 (2001): 13-26.

Susan Finley and J. Gary Knowles, “Researcher as Artist/Artist as Researcher,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (1995): 110-142.

Carol A. Mullen, “A Self-Fashioned Gallery of Aesthetic Practice,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 165-181.

Maria Piantanida, Patricia L. McMahon, and Noreen B. Garman, “Sculpting the Contours of Arts-Based Educational Research within a Discourse Community,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 182-191.

Rita L. Irwin and Alex de Cosson, eds., *A/r/tography: Rendering Self through Arts-Based Living Inquiry* (Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational P, 2004).

Kathleen Vaughan, “Pieced Together: Collage as an Artist’s Method for Interdisciplinary Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4 (2005): 1-21.

Rhonda Watrin, “Art as Research,” *Canadian Review of Art Education* 26 (1999): 92-100.

⁶⁸ Scott-Hoy 268-280.

⁶⁹ Carol A. Mullen, “A Self-Fashioned Gallery of Aesthetic Practice,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 165-181.

montages, hybrid paradigms, mirrors of practice, doors to constructive change, spaces for open scripts, and synergistic circles.”⁷⁰ Arts-based research is an interdisciplinary hybrid approach to inquiry.

Because it is a hybrid approach to research, arts-based researchers argue it is important to ground the study within a theoretical framework. One way to ground this study is to create a logic of justification. A logic of justification explains the purpose of the study and defines the role art plays in accomplishing this purpose. Maria Piantanida, Patricia McMahon, and Noreen Garman⁷¹ argue that providing a logic of justification makes philosophical reasoning more visible. The logic of justification broadens the research community’s understanding of what it takes to fashion such arts-based research projects. They argue that arts-based researchers need to articulate their own criteria so they may fall into a culture of art. The judgment and the norms for conducting arts-based research are very open. Piantanida, McMahon, and Garman state,

On one hand, this openness creates a fertile context for creativity and innovation. On the other hand, it places both inexperienced and experienced arts-based researchers in a position of vulnerability. Without a map of the discourses related to arts-based educational research, we run the risk of having our work dismissed before it is understood.⁷²

These researchers ask other arts-based researchers to provide a logic of justification for their work. This logic of justification strengthens and highlights the philosophical assumptions that guide a researcher’s thinking.⁷³

[The committee: Can you provide your logic of justification for this project?]

⁷⁰ Mullen 178.

⁷¹ Maria Piantanida, Patricia L. McMahon, and Noreen B. Garman, “Sculpting the Contours of Arts-Based Educational Research Within a Discourse Community,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003): 182-191.

⁷² Piantanida, McMahon, and Garman 184.

⁷³ Piantanida, McMahon, and Garman 185.

The purpose of this study is to uncover how, as an arts-based research process, cob, creates movements and moments of survival. Survival happens on the local level, between and with people. Cob building creates knowledge through creative, kinesthetic, and collaborative engagement. Cob building creates possibilities of engagement that cultivate movements and moments of survival Arts-based research allows me, as an feminist poststructuralist, to examine local action and interaction between people, positionalities, and competing differences. Rather than appeasing the modern impulse to objectify and rationalize an end-point or an object oriented view to the production of art, feminist poststructural theory works to problematize the end-point. Through cob building, a rich, arts-based process, I call into question the modern impulse to find Truth and ask that we be aware of developing new oppressions when working toward equity and justice. Cob building teaches people how to engage in this arts-based process that allows us to examine local interactions. Cob building creates a space of engagement.

Cob is an arts-based research process that includes the land as an integral part of its canvas. The possibilities for engaging cob, as an arts-based research practice, are strategies for surviving, of working with our respective environments wisely. Cob building artistically addresses the way humans interact with the natural economy. Cob building teaches people how to negotiate the natural economy, their relationship to labor, each other, through an artistic and intimate practice.

In order to articulate, uncover, and engage the claim that, as an arts-based process, cob creates movements and moments of survival, I use a/r/tography as the methodological framework within this text. This a/r/tographical text does not offer an end point but works to recreate moments and movements of cob building as an arts-based research project. A/r/tography helps to layer the movements of arts-based survival within cob building and this text.

[The artist: A/r/tography will frame your argument nicely. I will help you highlight when a/r/tographical moments are happening.]

The intersection of linguistic, artistic, tactile, and visual texts creates a hybrid method, as well as a hybrid ontological position that represents an ecologically diverse

range of discourses, ideologies, subject positions, and possibilities. I use charcoal, sketches, photographs, poetry, and narratives to uncover the possibilities of cob as a form of arts-based research.

A/r/tography: Guiding Elements

A/r/tography is a “living practice of art, research and teaching: a living metissage; a life writing, life creating experience.”⁷⁴ A/r/tography as living inquiry recognizes that the layers of art, teaching and research are lived experiences and the form of our scholarship should reflect this living.⁷⁵ In a/r/tography, visual, performative, and written processes are enacted as a living practice of art making, researching, teaching, and learning as living inquiry, through an act of rendering.⁷⁶

Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind write,

To render research is to commit to living inquiry through text and visual images. So too, the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher must become active processes and practices of living a life deeply. Deep inquiry into our lives requires a/r/tographers to make meaning through their senses, bodies, minds, and emotions. It is a research process that is fluid, uncertain, and temporal.⁷⁷

Sites of living inquiry may interface, intersect, and interrogate assumptions in order to inspire thoughtful action. A/r/tography is a form of inquiry that creates its rigor through continuous reflexivity and analysis. A/r/tography interweaves theory and practice in contiguous ways that allow for understandings to emerge over time. A/r/tographers also offers art-based researchers open-ended elements such as *contiguity*, *metonymy* and

⁷⁴ Rita L. Irwin, “A/r/tography as Metonymic Metissage.” *A/r/tography as Living Inquiry: An Introduction to Arts-Based Research in Education*, eds. Rita L. Irwin and Alex de Cossen (Vancouver: Pacific Educational P, 2004) 28.

⁷⁵ Irwin 8.

⁷⁶ Daniel G. Darts, *Visual Culture Jam: Creative Art, Pedagogy and Creative Resistance*. diss. (The University of British Columbia, 2004) 118.

⁷⁷ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 908.

metaphor, openings, reverberations, and excess to consider and engage with/in their work.

A/r/tography emphasizes the divergent and convergent natures of words and images within a/r/tographical inquiry. *Contiguity* is the doubling of images and texts. Contiguity is “not a static rendering of two elements positioned as separate and distinct, but it is the contiguous interaction and the movement between art and graphy that research becomes a lived endeavor.”⁷⁸ Contiguity is the constant negotiation, the movement between images and texts. Feminist poststructuralists are interested in the negotiation of meaning between practice and discourses, the negotiation of arts-based research as a lived and felt endeavor.

Metonymy plays an important role within a/r/tographical inquiry. Metonymy is referencing something or someone through one or more of their characteristics. “Metonymical meaning is not intended to close spaces with singular interpretations but instead allows for the ambiguity of meaning to shift in space and time.”⁷⁹ A/r/tographers use the slash to both divide and double words, thereby providing possibilities for multiple, relational, and shifting meanings. In this way, the slash helps to reveal and conceal metonymical meanings. For feminist poststructuralist scholars, metonymy allows the space to articulate how interpretations and meanings shift through the process of cob building. *Metaphors* are also important in understanding a/r/tography.⁸⁰ Metaphors are ways of re/imagining the world. Metaphors and Metonymy shift together to disrupt and recreate ways of articulating the world. From a feminist poststructuralist lens metaphors and metonymy have the potential to create shifts in discursive and material spaces.

⁷⁸ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 900.

⁷⁹ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 904

⁸⁰ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” *The End(s) of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane. (New York: New York UP, 1998) 80 explains that metaphors can render absence present and can evoke worlds that are “other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect and insight.”

For a/r/tographers, *openings* allow for encounters between artist/researcher/teachers and reader/viewers producing texts where meaning is co-constructed rather than inherent in the arts-based text. “Metaphorically, openings are not passive holes through which one passes easily but are cracks, tears or passages refusing comfort, predictability and safety. As living inquiry, a/r/tography is a process of opening texts to seek understanding by continuing to move through ideas before flowing back in response.”⁸¹ Openings are spaces of engagement, moments where the reader can breathe and speak back to and within the text. Openings, as a feminist poststructuralist practice, create moments of clarity through storied and artistically created fragments the lived experiences of cob building.

As I sketch the voices within this text I am reminded, prompted, and fueled by *reverberations*. “Reverberations within a/r/tography call attention to the echoes between—within—amongst—around—inside—beneath the spaces of knowing and not knowing, between the acts of art making, researching, writing, and teaching.”⁸² Reverberations draw attention to conversations that resonate within our understandings.

[All characters: Aren’t we reverberations? Our voices are here. They resonate inside you and throughout this text, don’t they?]

Your voices are the reverberations of this text. My pauses and silences are reverberations. Reverberations echo as our voices play off of each other.

Mundane moments in cob uncover deeper meanings. I re-imagine these local moments as points of excess. *Excess* is as “a point of rupture between absolute knowledge and sheer loss.”⁸³ Excess asks us to uncover the complexity and deeper understanding and is exposed, flexible, and in constant change. Excess is an “ongoing

⁸¹ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 908.

⁸² Darts 107.

⁸³ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 908.

practice concerned not with inserting facts and figures, images and representations into language, but with creating an opening where control and regulation disappears. Excess is a way to re-image ourselves into being; re-assembling the mundane of our experiences.”⁸⁴ As a feminist poststructuralist, local and contingent excess offers me the space to open up to the localized and ever changing shifts of creating art, within this text and in cob building creations.

Each of these elements of a/r/tography is important for articulating my work with cob building. Arts-based scholars are shifting the discussion from product to process. Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind state,

“But how do I *engage* in arts-based research? This displacement from *what does it look like*, which emphasizes a product driven representation of research, to an *active participation of doing and meaning making* within research texts, is a rupture that opens up new ways of conceiving of research as enactive space of living inquiry.”⁸⁵

This act of rendering⁸⁶ is a call back and forth between visual discourse and text. This document is not neat, but splattered with cob. Rather than telling you why, let me show you how. Cob building offers possibilities to help guide us in working within this arts-based process. I walk through several moments of cob building in an attempt to draw out possibilities, perhaps suggestions in response to the question; how is cob arts-based research.

⁸⁴ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 908.

⁸⁵ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 898-899.

⁸⁶ Rita L. Irwin, and Alex. F. de Cosson, eds. *A/r/tography: Rendering Self through Arts-Based Living Inquiry* (Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational, 2004).

I move back to the tarp, the studio⁸⁷ (see fig. 38) to uncover these possibilities.



Fig. 38. On the tarp/studio: Mixing cob

⁸⁷ I consider the tarp a studio space because it creates the convergence of bodies in cob building. It is a space that has been constructed temporarily to mark collaborative artistic movements. A space where people, actors, performers, creators converge to create a moment of creativity. I am drawn to Phillip B. Zarrilli's explication of studio space in "The Metaphysical Studio," *The Drama Review*, 46 (2002): 160-161, "A location where words count less...but where ideas, intellect and the imagination are forged through an embodied practice where the words must "speak" unseen. Or be purposefully shown and displayed, to have an edge where they can cut with precision." Zarrilli considers the studio a liminal space that offers, if only for a short amount of time, a space to create. It is also "A place that can never be definitively mapped because the marks of its mapping disappear as they appear" (161). Arts-based research and cob building are processual.



Fig. 39. On the tarp

I start to explore the possibilities
the openings

that let me dance
on the page
like we did on the tarp (see fig. 39).
I twirl
mix elements with my feet, my hands.

The layering and complex intertextuality⁸⁸ of cob building as a form of arts-based research through a/r/tography is engaging. To create poesis⁸⁹ through this kinesthetic text, I turn to the photographs and the past documents to help re-articulate the process of cob building in a collage of meaning.

A/r/tographical Possibilities: Engaging in Arts-Based Research

I write the a/r/tographical stories of cob building in hopes that the story/art/process/praxis will offer a space to explore the possibilities of cob as a form of arts-based research. Cob, as arts-based research, depends upon several different a/r/tographical possibilities: *desire, invitations, sketches, risk, dependence, and release*. They are renderings of how to engage with cob as arts-based research. Renderings aren't

⁸⁸According to Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, (New York: Wand and Hill,) 39, "Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks." Writing is always a rewriting. When I write and create I am creating intertexts of writings past, of theories, ideas, and structures of language that have influenced and contextualized my work. I am sketching these pages within a general field of formulae, even as I try to break out of it. The texts are only constituted once they are read, only in that moment of reading. You bring to these pages your previous readings, your positionalities, which also form intertexts.

⁸⁹ Following Dwight Conquergood in "Ethnography, Rhetoric and Performance," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78.1 (1992): 80-97, I understand poesis as creation, meaning making, through the act of doing.

final or static. They are sketches. They are possibilities. These possibilities move in stages that overlap, intersect, and sometimes blend into each other.

[The artist: I am so excited to see how cob works within this a/r/tographical frame. I have been waiting for you to use your art to help show how cob is also a form of arts-based research.]

I use cob building narratives, photographs, and sketches from the Girls Harmony Home and Mini-City to understand these possibilities as a/r/tographical renderings of living inquiry. My entry into the Girls Harmony Home began with my desire to create with a community.⁹⁰ Through the form of *invitation*, I move from my personal desire to use art as inquiry to actively learning and ingesting the desires of the communities with which I work. Invitations are moments of a/r/tographical openings. The community holds the *sketches* of creativity. Engaging with arts-based research asks the primary researcher to transform perceived authority into co-creation of these sketches. Sketches create a/r/tographical contiguity. From these sketches, I move into another layer of possibility, *risk*. I risk my past knowledges to come to understand embodied knowledges. Through metonymy and metaphor, I play with the meanings of risk. In cob building this type of risk happens through active, embodied, arts-based engagement. *Dependence* is relying on others. Resourceful cobbers are reflexive. As a cobber, I listen to myself to understand intentions, actions, and the repercussions of these movements. Through reverberations of dependence, I make changes and adapt. As a cobber, I am also dependent upon the material, cob. I have to listen to the material as an extension of my creative desires. Once the project is complete, it is important to *release*. Releasing includes letting go of the project's process, initial intentions, and personal attachments. I allow the work to be its own opening for others to engage. I let the work so it won't hold me too tightly. Before I can release a work, I have to be invited to create one.

⁹⁰ The complications of working with community art is further examined in Chapter 7, *Commune*.

Invitations: Entering the Girls Harmony Home

I enjoy that word, invited. It is a warm term. It is not as hard as such phrases as point of entry or gaining access. Invitations denote a welcomed entry, a wanted movement, and the possible intersection of lives. Invitations are reciprocal. They include introductions, explanations, and connecting our desires and program goals. Invitations create a/r/tographical openings. When Sarah and I first started our organization, Earth Work, we went to speak with the Girls Harmony Home. The Girls Harmony Home works with adolescent girls and empowers them through after school and summer programs. We thought that cob building could teach them about the environment through an arts-based process. We emailed the program coordinator, Jackie, to see if she was interested. She invited us to come and see the site.

When we arrive, the home is closed for the day but Jackie is there catching up on some work. We ring the front door bell. I hear the click of the lock and she swings the door open. “Hi. I’m Jackie.” She extends her hand to the both of us.

“I’m Jeanine.” I smile and shake her hand. Sarah extends hers.

“Sarah. Thank you so much for inviting us here today. We are so excited to show you this work.” Sarah points to the laptop case where we have our presentation ready for Jackie’s viewing.

“I am excited to hear all about it. I have a few friends in Colorado that work with cob or maybe it’s adobe. I’m not sure.” She gestures for us to enter the space. We step inside the front door and look around.

This first room is colorful and full of books. Posters, charts, and saying, like “Smile! It makes the day brighter” and “Stay positive!” are on the walls.

“Let me show you around,” Jackie says and begins her tour. “This is the front room. When the girls don’t feel like participating in an activity that may be going on in the back room, with permission, they are allowed to come up here and read or play with the toys.”

“Wow. You really have a lot of interesting books,” I say. “I could stay here for hours.”

She smiles and looks at us through her small-framed glasses. “The girls are really lucky to have these resources. We get most of the items donated to us. We can always use more. Here, let me show you the other spaces. There is more to see.” We follow her. My laptop case bounces against my leg as we walk slowly down the hallway.

“Here is our sharing room. The girls helped design it. They wanted comfortable chairs and couches in here so they could sit and talk. They painted the walls and chose to put their handprints here.” I look inside the room and imagine the space filled with girls talking to each other. The girls were able to use their creativity to design the space. I can see how cob will fit with the home’s use of creative expression. We move further down the hall. She leads us into a room on the left.

“Here is the kitchen. The Girls Harmony Home promotes healthy living and offers the girls classes on how to make positive life choices. We teach them how to cook healthy food,” she says.

“Wow. This is pretty amazing,” Sarah says. The kitchen is fully stocked. There are appliances and recipes pasted on the walls.

We look in quickly and move into the arts and crafts room. Long white tables are set up in the center of the room. A dry erase board is tacked on the wall and there are three shelves full of art supplies.

“We spend most of our time in this room. We have lots of time for the girls to explore their creative sides. Just last week, we had a local artist come in and teach them about painting,” Jackie says proudly. She leads us to the doors that open to an outside yard. “We also spend time outside playing games. This center is dedicated to making these girls feel loved and teaches them how to love themselves.”

Sarah says, “I can certainly see our two organizations working together. We are dedicated to empowerment and creative expression. If invited, we would work outside. I can imagine a cob oven on the side of the building or maybe a bench against this fence.”

“I would love to see what you have for me. Let’s sit in my office and you can show me your ideas,” she says.

She settles into her desk chair. I open the laptop and say, “We think you might find that cob building fits with what you do here at the Girls Harmony Home. You teach the girls how to survive, grow, and be empowered. I think cob can help with all of these elements as well as teach them about the environment.” The slideshow of cob pictures taken from the art show pops up on the screen.



Fig. 40. Hands

Sarah says, “We are mixing the cob. Cob is clay, sand, and straw. We mix it with our feet and hands” (see fig. 40).

“Here we are building a cob oven for an art show that addressed post-industrial society. We are building up the sand dome. Then, after that is built up, we cover it with plastic and then cob on top of it. We love our cob tree (see fig. 41). It is basically a stick we found that we stuck in the bucket with sand so it would stand up,” I laugh and look to Sarah. She smiles proudly.



Fig. 41. The cob tree

Sarah continues, “It was our way of inviting people into the process. It says, ‘Come cob with us.’ ‘Cob likes community.’ ‘Cob needs you.’ We wanted people to feel invited to help us build,” Sarah says pointing at the picture.

“That’s sweet. Did they?” Jackie asks.

“Yeah, actually, we had a lot of participation.” I switch to another slide (see fig. 42). “Here is a group of kids who helped us form the oven.”

“It was really important to us that children wanted to get involved. I mean, we didn’t expect children to be at the art show but there were a few. They were all drawn to the cob process,” Sarah says.



Fig. 42. Molding the oven

“Even if the kids didn’t want to touch it, they were still fascinated by the cob. Cob is like playing in the mud with a purpose. We had so much help forming the oven. It was really delightful,” Sarah continues.

“I think you have convinced me. I am sure the girls, well most of them, will love it. Some of them might resist it at first because they don’t like to get dirty. I am sure they will change their minds once you get here. So what are we going to build” Jackie asks.

“What do you think the girls need or want the most,” I ask excitedly.

“I don’t think we should build an oven because there is an insurance liability there. What else can you build out of cob?”

Sarah says, “We can build benches, tables, sculptures, houses. Cob is a load bearing material so we can sculpt with it as long as it has the foundational support.”

“How about a bench? The girls love being outside but they don’t have a place to sit or rest when they are done playing or need a break,” Jackie suggests.

“Perfect, a bench it is.”

We set up a tentative summer building schedule with her. Sarah recaps the information. “We will be here for a few days a week in June and take it from there. The amount of time this project takes depends on how many girls are building and, of course, it depends on the weather. We are also working on a large-scale project with Mini-City. The schedule might depend on that project as well.”

“That’s fine. I understand. Just contact me a month before we start to confirm these dates and I can put it in our schedule.”

We leave the Girls Harmony Home feeling great.

[The artist: This invitation created an a/r/tographical opening.]

Invitations are the first entry point into engaging cob as a form of arts-based research. Invitations develop a reciprocal relationship with the organizations. An opening is not a passive space. It is not easy to pass through an opening. Invitations don’t always create working relationships. As an a/r/tographical opening, invitations are a developing reciprocal relationship where meanings are co-constructed. An invitation into arts-based research connects the organizations and introduces cob as the arts-based material. There is always room for shifting, adapting, and changing as we move along the arts-based cob process. Without a welcomed and reciprocal invitation, the energy of a project may shift or a project may not get off the ground at all. Earth Work was invited to come back to the Girls Harmony Home. When I went back to the Girls Harmony Home, I moved into the next possibility of engaging with cob as arts-based research, sketches.

Sketches: My First Day with the Girls

When we begin the cob building process, sketches help us to explore our ideas in a creative and kinesthetic way. Sketches are ideas manifested through pencil and paper or another sketching material like oil pastels or charcoal. Moving the pencil against paper helps some people to manifest their thoughts and then work from these sketches. The

sketches outline and expand our imaginations. Sketching at the Girls Harmony Home helped the girls begin to see their own creative vision.

[The artist: Sketches are a form of a/r/tographical contiguity. Contiguity emphasizes the convergent and divergent nature of words and images. Contiguity highlights how words and images play with each other. I would love to see some sketches.]

[The committee: I think we all would like to see some sketches.]

I pull open the door and almost collide into three girls huddled around the receptionist's desk. One of them smiles and the other two look at me with confused looks on their faces. I try and make eye contact with them and they turn their heads away from me. They turn back to the receptionist at the front desk.

"Sandy took my shoe and broke it," one girl whines as she peels back the sole of her shoe in front of the receptionist.

A staff member comes out to greet me. "Hi Jeanine. I am Jessica." She shakes my hand firmly. She says, "I have been telling the girls about their project for quite some time." She squints and turns towards the door. "They are really ready to begin," she continues.

"Well, I am also very excited about this project. The girls are sure to love it," I say confidently while inside my insecurity creeps in my skin. This is my first time teaching a group how to build with cob alone. Tim is gone for the summer and Lynn won't arrive to help me for a few weeks. I am the sole leader.

"I will be right back. I am going to get the girls ready to meet with you," she says and leaves me at the front desk.

A girl about age seven comes running up to me from the back room. "Hi!" she says warmly. "Are you the one that is going to make a bench with us?" I smile and look down at her eager eyes.

"Why, yes. My name is Jeanine. What is yours?"

"Allison," she says and runs back to the others. "Jane is here. Jane is here." I giggle to myself. My brother calls me that sometimes. Other girls start to surround me. I

get a barrage of names thrown at me at once. I move my eyes to follow their loud and excited voices. I try and connect their names with their faces. I also see the faces of those girls who are more reserved. Their silence seems to size me up. I am the new girl. All eyes are on me (see fig. 43).

The girl with the broken shoe slowly makes her way down the long hallway towards the back room. I can hear and see the rest of the group from here. I am nervous. This is my first day and most of my fears feel written on my face. I feel alone (see fig. 44). What if I can't do this alone? What if they aren't happy with cob building?

The receptionist shuffles a few papers and I turn to take the piece of paper she has moved towards me. "Hi there," she says nicely. "I see you have met some of the girls."

"Yes. I have. And they seem very nice!" I say a little too eagerly.

"If you don't mind, can you fill this out? This is a confidentiality form that says you won't take pictures of the girls. You see, some of them come from difficult family situations where one member of the family doesn't know where they are. Publishing pictures disrupts this confidentiality. Ok?"

"I understand," I say and scribble my signature on the bottom line.

"You ready to go in there?" I hear the girls being quieted down by another staff member. Then I hear my introduction. "Girls? Girls! What did I tell you about what happens when I raise my hand?"

In unison they say, "Be quiet and listen."



Fig. 43. Realization: They are watching



Fig. 44. Alone under watchful eyes

[The artist: These sketches are your form of a/r/tographical contiguity. I can feel the stories and the sketches intersecting and intermingling.]

The staff member continues, “Good. Now, I want to introduce you to Jeanine. She is going to teach you about cob building. Remember what I told you about it last week?”

“Yes.” I hear the chorus of voices respond.

“Let’s welcome Jeanine.”

I stretch into a large smile and enter the classroom. “Hello! My name is Jeanine.”

They answer, “Hi Jeanine.”

“Does anyone know why I am here?” Several small hands fly into the air. One petite girl with glasses is reaching so far in the air that she almost falls out of her seat.

“Ok. And what is your name?”

Her stutter distracts me as she answers. “And...and...and. You are here to teach us how to build a bench. And...anddd. Um, you are here to show us in the backyard, right?” She wiggles around in her chair as she talks and her eyes dart around the room.

One of the teachers jumps in. “You didn’t introduce yourself. Tell Jeanine your name.”

The girl shrinks down in her chair. “Umm. Umm. My name is Laura.”

“Nice to meet you, Laura. You are exactly right. I am here to help all of you build a bench in the backyard. Can anyone tell me what this bench is going to be made of?”

Laura’s hand shoots back up into the air and she struggles to get my attention. A few other hands go up too. I look around at the other faces and pick one out. “Ok.” I point to an older girl and ask, “What is your name?”

“My name is Latisha. And I think you are going to teach us how to build it out of mud.”

“Ewww.” A few girls start to giggle and talk to each other about mud and how messy it is. “I don’t like to get dirty. What does she mean?”

I laugh out loud and focus their attention. I write words on the board.

sand + clay + straw + water

=

COB

Next to each word I draw a little sketch of what each element looks like. I want them to get involved with these ideas so I continue to ask the girls questions. “Can you tell me where we would find sand?”

All of them scream out loud, “The beach!” A few girls giggle. I hear, “I love the beach.” I also hear, “I’ve never been.”

They hold side conversations each time I ask them a question. It seems as though their energy is moving around the room quickly. I continue with a louder voice.

“Great! Did you also know that for the most part Florida is one big beach? All of the ground we walk on in Florida is composed of sand. Have you ever dug in the ground here?” A couple of girls nod their heads. “Well, guess what?”

“What?” a couple of girls prompt me to continue.

“We are going to dig in the courtyard and gather as much sand as we can to help make this bench.”

“Cool.” A few girls chime in.

“Can anyone tell me the difference between clay and sand?”

One girl raises her hand. “Well, sand isn’t sticky. Clay is sticky and you can build statues out of it. We have been working with clay here at the home. We have an art teacher that comes in and teaches us how to build art out of clay.”

“Good answer. Clay is sticky and it will eventually harden so when we combine clay and sand we get a really great mix that will harden. We are going to build a bench out of sand, clay and straw!”

I continue, “What about straw? Does anyone know the difference between straw and hay?”

The same girl that articulated the answer to sand and clay raises her hand. “I have a horse. So I know that horses eat hay.”

“Yes, that is true. Horses eat hay because it is full of nutrients. Straw, on the other hand, does not have the same minerals and good vitamins for the horses to eat. The nutrients in hay make it decompose more quickly. We put straw into the mix because it

won't break down as time goes by." I look around the room hoping I am not boring these girls too much. Most of the girls are watching and listening intently. I am pleased.

"Ok. So we have clay, which is sticky. We have sand, which will hold together with the clay and form a really great mix for sculpting. What do you think the straw does?"

Silence.

"Straw is the fiber that keeps it all together. It is like a rebar. Have you ever seen a building in the first stages of construction? When they pour the concrete? Well, all of the metal inside the concrete is called rebar. The concrete attaches to the metal and it gives the concrete extra strength. Straw is just like that metal. It holds all of the clay and sand together." They look very confused. I start to sketch on the board how this mix looks. But I decide that it is more important to show them the cob process. So I move the subject elsewhere.

"Guess what?" I ask as I turn around to face them. I smile and say, "You get to mix the sand and clay and straw together with your feet!" Their responses are mixed. I hear statements like, "Gross. I don't like to get dirty. Yuck." I also hear, "Yeah! I love playing in the mud! This is gonna be great!"

"Why do you think we are going to mix this stuff with our feet?" There is another round of silence. So I ask, "Did you also know that you could build your own house out of cob?"

"Wow! Cool! Really?"

I had planned to speak to the girls about the project. I thought that a brief conversation and a small introduction to natural building would get them excited about the upcoming project and get their minds churning.

[The artist: talking about cob isn't the only way to get them to connect to the arts-based process. I thought you were going to use sketches.]

[The documentarian: Since you can't take pictures at the Girls Harmony Home, you should definitely use sketches. We need some form of documentation.]

I want to let them create the possibilities through sketches.

“We are going to go outside and talk about your bench. Building a bench here at the Girls Harmony Home is going to be so much fun. But we have to come to a group decision about what we want the bench to look like. Let’s all get up and walk outside.” The staff members jump in to ensure this process of walking outside doesn’t become too hectic.

One member of the staff says, “Let’s go in groups of ten and once everyone has seen the space we can come back in.” Once everyone gets back inside, I bring out recycled paper.

“Start to think about the shape of the bench. Cob really likes curvy shapes. So when you think about your bench, think about round shapes,” I say as I hand out the pencils.

[The cobber: You are teaching them about the natural rules of the environment. Good job.]

“Try and draw up the bench. Let your imagination go. As a group, we are going to decide on the bench shape and location. You have fifteen minutes to think about the bench and where you want it to go outside. What will it look like? Think about using recycled materials, like glass bottles. We can push them into the bench to give them color,” I say as they begin to sketch.

The girls get excited. Lawanda concentrates on the lines of her sketch. Tina is peeking over Cheryl’s shoulder. I hear giggles. I walk around the room.

“That looks great, Sheri. What is that line right there?”

“It’s where we are going to put the bottles. I think they should line the back of the bench and stick out of the top,” she says and looks up at me.

“That’s a nice idea.”

Their bench sketches start to take form (see fig. 45).



Fig. 45. Bench sketches 1



BIG COMFY
PILLOW COUCH
BENCH



Fig. 46. Bench sketches 2

After fifteen minutes of sketching time, I get their attention and ask, “Does anyone want to share their ideas with the group?”

Several of the thirty girls raise their hands. I say, “We’ll start on this side of the room and make our way over here. What did you come up with?”

One stands and shows her picture to the rest of the group (see fig. 46). “I think we should have an armrest like this. Because when I get tired I like to rest.”

“That’s a nice idea. An armrest could be a really great way of keeping the cob structure together as well. Great drawing.”

“Who is next?”

“Me!” Emily jumps to her feet. “This is a really long bench that goes from tree to tree. I think we need a lot of room because there are so many of us.”

“Great idea, Emily. So you want to be able to share the space with everyone?”

“Yep.”

“Great idea. There are so many of you. We have to think about the bench’s size. We should also think about how much time it might take to build such a large bench.”

[The artist: I can feel the palpable energy of a/r/tographical contiguity. The girls are creating their visions. Their sketches materialize their ideas about a cob bench. I am sure they are pretty proud of their work.]

I am proud of them. The girls used their artistic imaginations to create the sketches of the cob bench. Sketching sparks their creative energies. It gets the girls thinking in terms of both functional and artistic possibility. The girls seem excited with the pencil in their hands. They keep asking me to look at their ideas. They are excited to show each other what they were thinking about. Sketches are an interesting way to unpack what they know and what they are interested in building. These sketches also give arts-based researchers a chance to praise artistic potential and possibility. Sketches, as form of a/r/tographical contiguity, are not separate or distinct from the explanations I was giving to them. The sketches interact with the narrative, explanations, and their artistic talent and materialize their imaginations onto the paper and into their consciousness. After I left, I couldn’t help but think about how talking or sketching cob isn’t actually

working with it as an art material. We move from our sketches into the risk of building with cob.

Risk

[The artist: How is risk part of a/r/tography?]

Cob building, as an arts-based process, has helped me to play with the idea of bodily risk. I use metaphor and metonymy to unpack the layered and complex definitions of risk. For instance, one possible interpretation of risk is body vulnerability, while another form of risk is personal compromise. We also risk using our bodies as the instruments of artistic creation (see fig. 47). I enter Mini-City because I wasn't allowed to take pictures of the cob building process at the Girls Harmony Home.

[The documentarian: We need the photographs in order to show bodily risk.]



Fig. 47. Risk



Fig. 48. Bodies create

Most of the teens or volunteers involved in our cob building projects have not used their bodies to create this way before (see fig. 48). Most of the teens from Teens Alive have never used a shovel to dig for their art material. The teens haven't used a wheelbarrow to move material from one space to another. They haven't used cob as a material before. The teens haven't used their feet to mix cob or hands to sculpt with it.

[The committee: I want to see this in your writing. Can you show me?]

Yes. Let's enter a moment in Mini-City.

"Ewww. This feels squishy. I don't like this feeling against my feet," Izabelle puts one toe in the batch of cob. I giggle at her honest reaction.

"I like it. It feels like a mud bath," Jasmine says as she jumps right in.

"Watch this!" Darnell runs from one side of the space to the other. He flings his body up into the air and lands smack down in the middle of the cob pile. Laughter erupts from the group and Tim moves closer to the cob pile.

"You wanna see something cool? I bet you that I can become Cob Man. You wanna see?" he asks as he moves closer to the batch of cob we have been mixing.

"Yeah! I dare you. Become Cob Man!" Mario jests and pokes Tim's side in a daring fashion.

"Do it! Do it!" The group chants in unison.

"Okay! Here goes!" Tim says and drops to his knees. He shakes his head back and forth and then after a dramatic pause, he presses his whole face in the batch of cob. He stays there for a good thirty seconds.

"EWWW!" They all yell. Charles jumps up and down. Mario erupts into laughter. Tonya grabs Lisa's shirt and hides her face in it. The space is filled with laughter and whispers.

I say, "Oh my god! Tim, come back up!" When he finally lifts his face, he grins and opens his arms and says, "Ta Da!" I can't believe it.

Tim's face is imprinted in the cob. And cob is all over Tim's face.

"You really are Cob Man!" Mario says and pats Tim on the shoulder.

Through this body risk, Tim transformed into Cob Man. Risk, in this a/r/tographical metonymy, is pushing body limits. Tim's risk reframed how I and some of the teens understand what it means to get dirt/y. Using the slash in between the noun dirt and the adjective dirty reframes how cobbers understand the relationship between the two terms. Dirt is often understood as something that makes humans unclean. Most people are afraid to get dirt/y. Tim took this bodily risk and played with our perceived limits about getting dirt/y. He stayed as long as he could in the cob. He wasn't scared of the cob. Tim did not see cob as dirt that can make humans unclean. Tim tried to show everyone at the site that cob wasn't dirt/y. He shifted the metonymical association with dirty and dirt/y. He pushed his body limits and made me reconsider how close I could become to cob.



Fig. 49. Fingers in cob

The teens of Teens Alive took their own risks as well. Their risks point to another layer of cob as a form of arts-based research. The teens helped me to reconceptualize the body as a tool of artistic creation.

I am trying to finish a batch of cob when I realize I am the only one mixing underneath the tent. I look for the girls who are helping me today. I find them sitting on a bench. Sondra and Terri are laughing. Sondra has a tee-shirt on her forehead. She has dipped it in water to keep her cool. I walk over to talk to them.

“How are you feeling? I know it is hot out,” I say and wipe my hands on my shirt.

Terri shows me her hand. “I ripped off my nails.” She grins.

Five acrylic fingernails are gone.

“Wow. Why are you doing that?” I ask and then signal for Ani to bring over the video camera. “Will you tell the camera why you ripped off your nails?”

“Well, the cob gets under them anyway and I would rather be able to pick up the cob.” Terri laughs at Ani holding the camera to her face.

“She got the nails to go to a dance,” Sondra jumps into the conversation.

Terri ripped off her nails so she could use her hands more efficiently (see fig. 49). She wanted to get further into the process. She took a risk to have cob underneath her fingernails. She took an even greater risk in removing her nails. She went to the dance without her nails, which as an adolescent female who was very attached to her acrylic nails, seemed to be an accomplishment and challenge for her. She realized that her fingers were important cob sculpting tools. Before building with cob I didn’t know that I could build an entire structure with my body as primary tool of creation.

[The artist: So is using the body as the primary tool of creation another layer of risk?]

I believe it is a risk to try and create with body parts that we didn’t know could create. It is a risk to try and push your hands against the cob and to sculpt it into a piece of art. I did not know that I could use my feet to mix a batch of cob or my hands to sculpt a cob bench. I risked my body so I could be an agent of creation. I believe that each teen involved took her or his own calculated risk and engaged in arts-based research. Engagement is the interaction, a movement between and of bodies. It seems as though this embodied risk helps to reconstruct our ideas of self and the self as artist. These risks redefined our bodies as tools of artistic creation.

Risk, whatever level we engage in during the cob process, is an important component in creating cob. Risk is what creates growth and movements. First, risk in cob as arts-based research, helps us to adapt and to learn about the shifting positionalities we hold. New cobbers learn how to create a metonymical slash within the term dirt/y. Most new cobbers are taught to see dirt as dirt/y. We aren't supposed to touch it, let alone let it linger on our skin. Risks, as a form of a/r/tographical metaphor and metonymy, let us play with our preconceived understandings of the land. Risk redefines our relationship to the land and re/sculpts cob as a material for creation and not just a dirt/y pile of mud.

[The committee: Can you articulate how the body and the risks involved speaks to performance scholarship?]⁹¹

Second, risk, as an a/r/tographical metonymy, moves cobbers into spaces of awareness and resistance.⁹² Following Augusto Boal's belief in the human capability to reflect on emotions, intentions, and themselves in action, it is important to find and use exercises that remind cobbers of this capability.⁹³ Cobbers believe, like Boal, that "Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine

⁹¹ On the cob tarp, we can begin to take part in these embodied risks. Similar to social theatre, cob building is performance because it creates and is live action. It is a ritual and a movement of bodies in a localized space and time. What unifies all parties involved in the cob process is the body. Guglielmo Schininà, "Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Questions About Its Developments," *The Drama Review* 48.3 (2004): 17-31 states, "It is a theatre based upon the body and relationships." Our bodies in cob building necessitate a risk most new cobbers have not tried before. These risks allow us to reflect on our actions. Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (New York: Routledge, 1992) states, "But in its most essential sense, theatre is the capacity possessed by human beings—and not by animals—to observe in themselves action. Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there. They can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow" (12).

⁹² Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, The Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1995) 135.

⁹³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto, 1979).

themselves there. They can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow.”⁹⁴ Boal’s inspired exercises and methods create “a multi-disciplinary educational organization dedicated to community dialogue, social justice and personal transformation.”⁹⁵ This personal transformation through risk is quite astounding. These personal transformations redefine our associations to our bodies. Our bodies on the tarp are capable of taking risks. These arts-based possibilities also shift our understandings of each other as cob collaborators. On the tarp, we depend on each other.

Dependence

Another important possibility of cob, as arts-based research, is dependence. Dependence requires trust in each other and reliance on one another. Learning to depend on each other takes time, effort, and reciprocal action.

[The artist: How does dependence fit with a/r/tography?]



Fig. 50. Working together

⁹⁴ Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* 12.

⁹⁵ Sharon Green, “Boal and Beyond: Strategies for Creating Community Dialogue,” *Theater*, 31.3 (2001): 53.

Through dependence, we redefine what it means to be a student/teacher/cobber/artist (see fig. 50). Through a/r/tographical metonymy, we play with these distinctions. Metonymy is word or phrase that is substituted for another with which it is closely associated. Rather than dividing the student/teacher/cobber/artist into a hierarchical structure, each of these terms layers into the other. In cob building, we depend on one another. Working from the slashes in between typically relationships of power, students/teachers/cobbers/artists reconfigure dependence. Within cob building, dependence is not necessarily a negative idea nor is it about being mentally, socially, or physically subordinated. Cobbers use the slash between student/teacher to provide possibilities for multiple, relational, and shifting meanings, responsibilities, and subject positions. Feminist poststructural arts-based researchers realize that education is also a discourse of power. Within cob as a form of arts-based research, we reconfigure our understanding of the student/teacher/cobber/artist relationship. For example, I learned from Jamal and the other teens in Mini-City about my own use of power through the music that was allowed at Mini-City. In cob building, we learn to depend on one another and learn from each other by recognizing and redistributing power differentials.

Tim and Mario have not gotten along since Tim first arrived. For some reason this young football player does not take to this scrawny man telling him what to do. Mario is the star of his team. He is a teenager who has grown up without a father. His mother was slowly deteriorating because of cancer. Now, as I look back, I understand Mario's hesitation to risk depending on Tim, or me. In the beginning of this cob project, we were strangers. But our lives intersect on the tarp. We begin to depend on one another in the cob process.

I can hear Tim trying to motivate Mario from the green plastic bench. Mario gets up and walks confidently over to a pile of stones and sits down. He looks at Tim.

"Man, I do NOT want to go get that wheelbarrow. I don't know why you think you can tell me what to do here," Mario says in a snappy tone. Tim looks at me.

"Mario, we really need that wheelbarrow. If we don't go and get it, how can we get this batch of cob started?" I ask. I am trying to communicate that we need his help.

Tim waves me off and turns to him. “What if I went with you? I can help you get it. Would that work?”

“Naw, man. I’ll just go get it myself.” Mario gets up and grabs a shovel. He begins to walk towards the pile of sand and clay. Tim walks over to me.

“I just don’t understand why he is resisting my help. I’m gonna go talk to him.” He grabs a shovel and jogs to catch up.

After twenty minutes, they walk back together and are actually talking. They unload the wheelbarrow. One body sifts the sand, and the other shovels the mix into the sifter. I watch their bodies depend on one another.

I am not sure what Tim said to Mario as they were gathering the clay and sand. Both Tim and Mario changed their behavior towards each other. They began having longer conversations. Tim would leave Mario alone when he wanted some time to himself. They built trust. Tim and Mario learned how to depend on one another (see fig. 51).



Fig. 51. Dependence

When we depend on each other, we also make compromises that develop our trust and care for one another, which restructures the relationships between student/teacher/cobber/artist.

Tim and I are setting up the site and waiting for the arrival of the teens. I look up and see Sondra walking down the street.

“Hey Sondra!” I call out. Tim waves and puts the tarp underneath the sifter. Tim, Sondra, and I sit on the green bench and wait for everyone else to arrive.

“Do you think anyone else is coming?” I ask and open up my journal.

“I don’t know. I can go ask Miss Ellie,” she says and stands up.

“Good idea,” I say and look at Tim. I am a little worried. Behind us sits the half-built house and the completion date is rapidly approaching.

Sondra runs back to us and says, “There is no one else coming today.”

“We still need to keep building,” I say.

“Let’s go get the materials,” Tim says enthusiastically.

Sondra sighs and Tim claps to get excited. After two batches of cob, I can tell Sondra is tired. Her shovel lifts are shaky. She isn’t her usual laughing self.

“Can we take a break?” she asks and rests her body on the shovel. I know that Tim and I want to keep building.

Tim looks at me with a serious face. I am dismayed because we need to keep building today. We don’t have a lot of time. We depend on the Teens Alive Leaders to be there to help us. Tim and I cannot and do not want to do this alone. I also feel really bad for Sondra. She is the only teen here at Mini-City. I wonder if she feels alienated or lonely. Maybe she likes this alone time with Tim and me. I am not sure. I do know I want to make the most of this time with Sondra and Tim.

Tim says, “Well, let’s compromise. Let’s fix the cracks and fill in the holes. We can sit together and talk. So it’s like resting but still being productive. We can make cob balls!”

We sit together and sculpt cob balls (see fig. 52). Rather than pushing Sondra to keep building, we compromise and slow the pace down a bit but we push to keep

working. Sondra depends on Tim and me to be aware of her needs. We depend on her to be aware of our need to keep the cob process going.



Fig. 52. Making cob balls

This form of dependence takes sensitivity, reflection, awareness, and introspection. To depend on each other within arts-based research means we have to make compromises and to work through our personal and bodily struggles. Dependence is a reciprocal process within cob building that restructures how we understand the student/teacher/cobber/artist relationships.

[The cobber: I've always thought that cob is a great arts-based teaching tool.]

Paulo Freire's model of education challenges a class system where resources are shared unequally.⁹⁶ Following Freire's model,⁹⁷ dependence in cob building, as an arts-based possibility, and an a/r/tographical metonymy, can help students and teachers work collectively to redefine the hierarchical nature of education. The slash between these perceived roles as student/teacher/cobber/artist are renegotiated. There is space between these relationships that can be explored through our dependence on one another. Cob is arts-based research that depends on collaborative and reciprocal relationships. Through cob, we also restructure our relationship to the artwork and to the material. Cob as an arts-based process creates spaces of negotiation. Following the a/r/tographical understanding that arts-based research is living inquiry, a final cob product isn't the most important component in cob.

[The artist: I agree completely. Releasing our connection to the final product restructures our relationship to the artwork itself and creates moment of a/r/tographical openings.]

Release

Another possibility within arts-based research is learning to release. Release is about impermanence and process. Each cob product, the house, bench, and ovens has the potential to dissolve. This isn't solely because of the material, but because of differing circumstances like its relationship to the land, institution, weather, and the people who created it. Personal attachments to an artwork can be painful.

[The artist: Don't forget about the beauty in an a/r/tographical opening.]

⁹⁶ Maralee Mayberry, "Reproductive and Resistant Pedagogies: The Comparative Roles of Collaborative Learning and Feminist Pedagogy in Science Education," *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action*, eds. Maralee Mayberry and Ellen Cronan Rose (New York: Routledge, 1999) 1-22.

⁹⁷ Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

A/r/tographical openings are tears. They are not passive holes or openings. Moving through an a/r/tographical opening can be painful. Release, as a possibility within cob, is not an easy endeavor. The process of releasing a cob artwork hurts. Yet, openings create spaces of engagement. Openings create moments of clarity within our lived experience.

I revisited Florida in January 2008 to construct an installation about the cob building projects. This installation is described in Chapter Eight, Movements and Moments of Survival: Embodied Blueprinting. When I returned to the sites, I was quickly reminded that the product of cob building would not last for all time.

On our way to Mini-City, Ani and I pass by the Girls Harmony Home. “Wait. I want to see if the bench is still there. Can you turn around?”

Ani turns the clunky Oldsmobile around. The Girls Harmony Home is closed. The parking lot is empty. I jump out of the car and check the side gate. It isn’t locked. I walk onto the grounds. I inhale deeply and look past the bushes. The bench is gone. The foundation has been torn out of the ground. There is grass growing where the bench was created. I take a minute and breathe in the emptiness.

I walk back to the car and shake my head. I gesture to Ani that the bench is gone. I wonder when, how, and why this happened.

“It’s not there?” she asks.

“Nope. I think the rain got to it. There wasn’t a roof or enough lime protecting it. I just hope it didn’t cause them too much grief,” I say and look out the window. I feel a bit disappointed. I should have followed up with them. I could have helped them save the bench with strategies offered over the telephone.

As we drive away, I realize that I am moving towards another project. I have a few hours until the installation begins as another frame and layer of this text. I realize that the moments in the Girls Harmony Home will never be the same. I have to release this work. My memories guide me into the future.

We turn into Mini-City. I feel the imprint of past invitations, sketches, risks, and dependence in my body. I can hear the sound of disappointment at the Girls Harmony

Home. I can see the staff members laboring to extract the bench from its location. I feel guilty. I wasn't there to help them fix the bench or help them remove it. I was across the country. When Sarah and I first started our work at Mini-City, we knew the house created with the Teens Alive members would be torn down a few years later. Prepared for this loss and fueled by the moments of process, we still continued with our work in Mini-City.



Fig. 53. Release and center

I have to shift and change with the moment. I have to release and center (see fig. 53). I have to inspect my attachments. Then, I let them go in order to create openings within this a/r/tographical text. This opening creates a space for impermanence as an important component of the cob process. As a form of arts-based research, cob is about possibility, the co-creation of meaning, and the desire to create together and to learn from one another. Cob is active participation of doing and meaning making. Cob is not a stable site. Cob is a form of living inquiry. Cob also dissolves. I have to let the failure of the

work go or it will hold me too tightly. I have to breathe, to inhale a process of art creation and exhale the impermanence of the product. Through the act of release, Cob creates a significant opening. Releasing the artwork allows me to shift my focus from the product to the process of creation and destruction.

[The artist: Brava! You found the strength to let go of the final product. I know how hard that process can be.]

Revisioning Possibilities of Cob Building: Engaging With/In

Cob is arts-based research that teaches about creativity and artistic desire. A/r/tography uncovers the complexity and possibilities of cob building as a form of arts-based research. Through cob building, we engage in creating possibility. Arts-based research is possibility rather than concrete Truth. Cob building and arts-based research do not concretize into a final product that you can hold. I look to a/r/tography to help articulate how cob building is a space to create knowledge through arts-based research. I also use arts-based research to create renderings of the process. Throughout the text, look for a/r/tography's ideas of contiguity, metonymy and metaphor, openings, and excess to understand that working with cob as arts-based research, is living inquiry.

Within this chapter, I offered the a/r/tographical renderings of experiences at the Girls Harmony Home and Mini-City to articulate possibilities on how to engage in cob as an arts-based research process. I wrote a/r/tographical stories of cob building in hopes that the story/art/process/praxis offered a space to explore the possibilities of cob: *desire, invitations, sketches, risk, dependence, and release*. They are renderings of how to engage with cob as arts-based research. Renderings aren't final or static. They are sketches. They are possibility. These possibilities move in stages that overlap, intersect, and sometimes blend into each other.

With/in this arts-based process, these possibilities involve invitations, sketches, risk, dependence, and release. Through the form of invitation, my personal desire to use arts-based research rests on actively learning and ingesting the desires of the communities with which I work. Invitations are reciprocal and collaborative. They create

a/r/tographical openings in which to engage within arts-based research. Without these invitations, the projects would not begin nor would they survive. Sketches allow each member of the cob community a space to open their imaginations and to collaborate ideas. Sketches create a/r/tographical contiguity where words and images connect and disconnect in movements of imaginative possibility. From these sketches, we move into another layer of possibility, risk. We risk our past knowledges to come understand embodied knowledge through a different lens. Through metonymy, we begin to see the possibility in our bodily presence and the land as a material for creating art. We use our bodies, hands, feet, fingers and our critical and creative minds to create a structure together. Dependence is relying on others. Resourceful cobbers are reflexive and able to compromise. When we collaboratively create art, we have to listen to each other and restructure the student/teacher/cobber/artist structure that separates us. This metonymical movement allows for a shifting relationship between and with these identities. Through the possibility of dependence, we make changes and adapt. We are also dependent upon the material, cob. We have to listen to the material as an extension of our creative desires. Releasing a work creates the a/r/tographical opening. It is through release that I realize that cob, as arts-based research, is impermanent. Cob is living inquiry.

Each of these possibilities connects back to the working negotiations of survival as local and material arts-based practice. Survival, in the context of arts-based research depends on possibility. Strategies for local survival are contextual and contingent. Strategies for survival within an arts-based research process depend upon the ability to create spaces of critical, artistic, relational, and material engagement. Cob, as a form of arts-based research gives and it returns. It lives and breathes. It also decays and deteriorates. It dissolves into memory. As it dissolves, it is also recreated within the memories of each person involved in the process. The projects survive in our memories and our recreations. It leaves room for possibility and for other creations. I can only hope you hear these pages breathing.

The land breathes as arts-based research does. Before we can begin to build a structure out of cob, we have to understand the land as a living entity. It is not something

to control or conquer; it is a space for creating a home. The land is our material within this arts-based process. The land also breathes. The land holds the memory of my childhood contexts. These contexts, juxtaposed with my environmental politics, create an interesting pattern of land and home for me. Because of my past experiences with my family's economic and creative ventures, my own personal desires to buy a home in Florida, and ultimately the ability to build our own structure in Mini-City (that resembles a home), collage and create an interesting frame of home and land for me. Surveying the land takes into consideration the institutional and systemic elements that sustain mass-industrial building practices within the United States. My experiences within Mini-City are a reflective mix between industrialization/capitalism and natural building. A move towards natural building can create local and systemic change. Because of all of these elements and possibilities of sculpting the land as an arts-based process, I desire to build naturally. Before we build the walls or scavenge for local materials, we have to walk the site, listen to and feel the pulse of the land. We have to look within before we build up.

CHAPTER IV

LAND

Ultimately, to live in harmony with our neighbors on this planet, we must expand our concept of home. It must encompass not only the structure of the house but also the yard and garden, the surrounding site, the watershed, the entire bioregion. That way, in taking care of our home, in maintaining it and beautifying it, we will make life better not only for ourselves but also for the greater world of which we are an inseparable part.

-Peter Bane, *The Permaculture House*⁹⁸

Flashback: 1982

I run across the open front yard to the two large boulders that sit next to the enormous pine tree. My fingers grip the side of the rock. I push my legs up onto a smaller boulder. Instantly, the boulders become a pirate ship and lava is all around me. I have to keep my feet off of the ground as I navigate the ship's two levels. Each time I leap from one rock to another, I am in danger. I do not want to touch the lava. After a few minutes of jumping from rock to rock, I am bored. I lie back on the larger boulder and stare up at the sky, imagining. The wind dances across my skin. The tree's branches seem to scrape the clouds. I am at peace. I let my fingertips run along the rough surface of the rock. My body feels so heavy. My eyelids get droopy.

⁹⁸ Peter Bane, "The Permaculture House," *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds. Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek (Canada: New Society P, 2002) 75.

I wake to my mother's voice calling from what seems like miles away.

"GEE NEEEE!"

I run over the hill. She arches her back and cups her hands over her mouth to throw the sound. I see her chest raise and her neck stretch. She inhales deeply and sets her feet into the ground and calls my name again.

"MA! I'm here!" I call and wave my arms as I run down the hill towards the back door of our house. She turns, smiles, and holds her arms open. I fall into them.

Hours upon hours of my childhood were spent outside. As I look back, the way I interacted with the land as a child is so much different than I do today. My body seemed connected to the seasons.

[The committee: How can you claim that you were connected to the land as a child?]

It may sound simplistic, but being connected to the land is about interaction with it. I would build snow forts and revel in the warmth the ice brought. Packed ice and snow would keep me warm and protect me from the whipping wind. On summer days, I would let the sweat drip from my body and find sources of water to replenish me. I would dig holes in the ground, fill them with water, and sit inside them to feel cool. Nature provided for me. I didn't understand it in these terms then, but as a child I investigated and surveyed the land.⁹⁹ I understood the land's value in these intimate moments of imagined survival. I survive now because I am aware of the wind, trees, rocks, and sun. I survive because I want to remember and to interact intimately with these elements again.

[The committee: What does this have to do with the rest of your project? Be clear as to why you are bringing us into these memories. I am sure the reader would be so grateful to you if you unpack your reasoning. Be clear.]

⁹⁹ As articulated in Chapter One, *Building: The Process and Pulse of Cob*, surveying the land is time spent with it, interacting with it, and learning the natural rules of the environment.

The land has so much to teach us. I believe that because of the modern period and our urgency to produce housing as quickly and efficiently as possible, our ultimate understanding of land and home is skewed. My contextual frames of land and home are comprised of moments attempting to accumulate capital through land and home ownership. As a young girl, I understood more closely the rhythms of the land. Back then, in those intimate moments, the land was my home. As I grew older, I watched my family maneuver through the bureaucratic and capitalist structures of land ownership. Home, in these times, was scattered between the moving vans, the rhythms of packing and unpacking our things, showing the house to potential buyers and waiting for the sale to go through. I also tried at one point to buy my own house in Florida. A culmination of my childhood experiences and my more present experiences defined land ownership for me. These contexts offer my own account of why I am part of and believe in natural building practices. In this project, I am asking why do I care about natural building? Most of all, why do I think that the way our homes are constructed may have a positive impact on our environment? And ultimately, why do I believe the way we work with the land can improve our communication with each other?

[The committee: Can you please define home? Can you also please define and unpack the intersection of home and land?]

There are four terms used throughout this chapter. I use these four terms to differentiate the contextual elements of surveying the land. *Surveying* in this chapter is the literal and metaphoric practice of contextualizing how modern building practices are situated within a capitalist corporate climate. *House* is the structure of mass industrialized building practices. It is the skeleton of a home. *Land* is the space with and within which we build a home. Land is also comprised of institutional, social, and cultural contexts. Without an integrated understanding and appreciation of the land, a house is not a home.

Home is highly personal and political.¹⁰⁰ Rather than understanding home as a space for separating people, or a space of conformity and confidentiality,¹⁰¹ I argue that surveying the land, as part of home, integrates the complex diversities of living and non-living, institutional, social, cultural, ecological, personal, and local elements that exist there.¹⁰² Because of cob, I began to physically and theoretically investigate the relationship between land and home. Integrating the land into our building consciousness, material practices, and institutional discourses creates home. The root of my desire¹⁰³ to build naturally and to understand these four terms begins with my childhood experiences.

¹⁰⁰ “What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are “my people”? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space?” As Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2003) 126, asks these questions, she is convinced the answers are highly political. Her answers to these questions are not materially explained but realized through her theoretical and discursive practice. Her answers help us to reconceptualize and problematize our definitions of home so that our material and practical applications of this term may shift. How do we configure home in actual experience?

¹⁰¹ Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa deLauretis (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1986) 209 state, “To the extent that identity is collapsed with home and community and based upon homogeneity and comfort, on skin, blood and heart, the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa.”

¹⁰² In her discussion of responsive design, which is one form of natural building, Susie Harrington in “Responsive Design: Integrating the Spirit of Place with the Vision of Home,” *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds. Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith and Catherine Wanek (Canada: New Society P, 2002) 52, situates my movements and organization in this chapter. She states, “Responsive design can be likened to a tree, in which roots, trunk and crown are seamlessly integrated. The roots of responsive design are twofold. The physical, ecological, and historical information inherent in the site itself composes one root. Individual, social, cultural and programmatic desires compose the second root.”

¹⁰³ Harrington 53 continues, “The two roots reinforce each other and fully support the character of the site and the people using it. The trunk of the tree corresponds to the actual constructed environment. Where the roots are healthy and the trunk well established, the crown, delightful branches, flowers and fruit corresponding to ongoing integration and growth, can flourish.”

Scraping and Using the Land: My Childhood

At one point, my family's main source of income was derived from new home construction. My father and his business partners contracted and physically built million-dollar homes where we lived in Cold Spring Harbor, New York.¹⁰⁴ Cold Spring Harbor was and is home to some of the richest people on Long Island. When I lived there, Billy Joel and the Eighties pop singer Taylor Dane lived a few miles away from me. My father's business tore down and planted the trees I played on. They dug large holes in the ground with industrial machines. They flattened the land to prepare it for new construction. The boulders, my protective pirate ship, were placed there for aesthetic purposes. The pine tree was planted so the entrance to the home and the winding driveway looked presentable. I didn't know that the nature I was so connected to was, in part, constructed. I loved these houses. I won't forget them. I also understand now how these movements for my family's economic stability have created movements of our family's survival. My father and mother have economically and emotionally helped us survive through the creation of a series of homes.

During the eighties, our family moved around within the town's perimeters. We moved so my father could build and sell homes. Sometimes, my mother would help design the houses. We moved within this small community so we (the children) could stay in one of Long Island's best public school systems. Once one of my father's houses was finished, we moved all of our furniture into it. Each of the houses, while structurally unique, always looked the relatively the same inside. My mother would adorn the newly laid hardwood floors with her Oriental rugs. The kitchen was outfitted with granite counter tops and the dining table was set with fine china. These were glorious displays for potential buyers to see, adore, and desire. We would live in this luxurious house until

¹⁰⁴ Cold Spring Harbor and Lloyd Harbor are interconnected small towns. They are geographically and institutionally adjoined. Our small public school was made up of these distinct and interconnected towns to form a respectively larger district.

it was sold for a large sum of money. By the time the sale was finalized, the next house was built. It was an interesting rhythm of living, moving, and gaining capital.

These houses are my history.



Fig. 54. Where the boulders and pine trees sit

I can feel the strength of this house, the massive brick (see fig. 54).

[The cobber: Wow. That is a huge house. This construction seems like a waste of space to me. Was it warm? Did the house feel like home?]

My cousins, aunt, and uncle lived in this house. My family's house was over the hill, behind this house. My father and my uncle were involved in the construction business together. They built these homes together. On this plot of connected land, our two families built a small community. We were close in proximity and in familial love. When I think back to these times, as romanticized as they may seem to you, cobber, it

was warm. It was the only type of house I knew. I can hear Christmas carols ringing out the windows from the neighborhood Christmas parties thrown here. During one Christmas party, I tried to play my violin in sync with the Christmas carols sung around the Grand piano. I was asked to put it down because I am not a talented string instrument musician. I am a much better singer. The boulders and pine tree that became my childhood pirate ship sit to the left of the brick columns. My family's gigantic carriage house (see fig. 55) was behind my Aunt and Uncle's brick house (see fig. 54). These houses were separated by a giant hill.

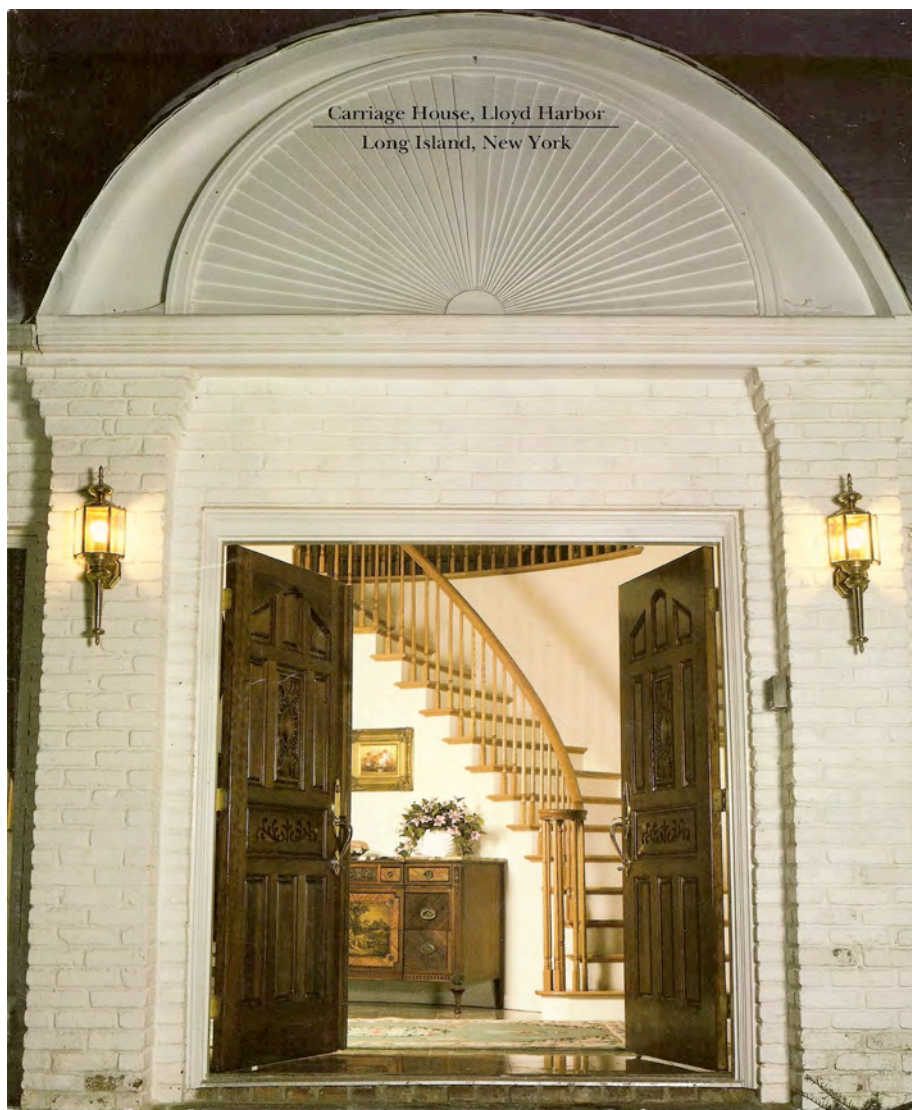


Fig. 55. Solarium house

In the carriage house, my favorite house of all, my mother designed a large two-story solarium. During thunderstorms, I would sit on the couch, curled in a blanket, and watch the lightning strike surrounding trees. My mother was cautious. She warned me softly of the imminent danger, the possibility of lightning striking, glass colliding and shattering on the marble floor. I didn't care. I wanted to watch the way the rain hit the glass. Dark clouds rolling past these large windows mesmerized me for hours as I waited anxiously for the orange reflection of the hidden moon.



Fig. 56. Water views and piano lessons

We had sprawling hills and large expanses of land (see fig. 56). The hill that connected my cousins and me was our sledding hill, our slip-and-slide hill, and our tumble-and-roll down hill. This hill produced faces filled with grass, water, mud, and snow. Our bodies were always filled with excitement and laughter. I remember a barn

with a row of empty stables. I always imagined them to be haunted by horses past. I would cautiously walk past the empty stalls. I would linger there with the stiff scent of hay and manure filling my lungs. I thought about the owners who loved or possibly hurt the horses. I wanted to set the horses, the spirits, and memories of this space, free. While I had intimate moments with the land, I was also taught about the industry of home.

Behind the Bulldozer's Wheel: 1985

The machine fascinates me. I take time to inspect the metal cogs of the conveyor belt-like wheels of this machine. I let my fingers trace the interlocking grids, heavy silver teeth, and the strange curve at the end of the line. "How does this work?" I imagine my body crushed underneath its weight.

"You ready?" my father asks with a grin.

"Yeah!" I am so excited. With five kids in our family, alone time with Dad is rare. I feel like a warrior, strong and tough enough to tame this metal beast. I try and claw my way up the sides but I can't even climb the bulldozer's metal steps. I need his help to lift me up.

I've watched with pride as my father moves the levers, directs the claw, and extracts dirt from the land that surrounds us. I've watched him pull down trees and level homes. And today, Dad is letting me take a ride on the bulldozer with him. I don't even know if my sisters are there. My brother could be in my mother's arms. None of these details matter to me. In this moment, it is just the two of us.

"Turn that key," he says directly and points to the shiny key to the right of the wheel. I do slowly, deliberately. The machine rumbles beneath my legs. My heart jumps. My father's protective body behind me seems to shield me from danger and yet fear and excitement pump through my legs. My bones shake. Dad lets me take the wheel. His arms hold the wheel lightly behind mine. This is my machine. We take it up over a hill of dirt and turn it back around. Circles. We drive in long, drawn-out circles. I feel so powerful. I move the dirt. I dump it where I want. I pull a lever and the bulldozer's mouth moves up and down. I have control.

This moment in my childhood cultivated a strong sense of self within me. I felt as though I could do anything. I was powerful enough to help my father tear down landscapes to build new houses. He was good at it. In all of our homes in Cold Spring Harbor, I let my imagination run wild. I didn't know it then, but while I was fantasizing about the romantic notions of land and home, I was also embodying the life of industrialization. I played around tractors and helped my Dad mix concrete. I dodged the rusty nails lying on the ground. I walked wooden planks to inspect the inside of a newly framed project. My past is why I am so fascinated with natural building today. I still romanticize the land and my connections to a natural environment. Yet, all the while, I am and was embodying a life of modern advancement and technologies.

Without these movements, I wouldn't have had the desire to investigate how houses, property rights, and capitalism impact the availability of land, and more importantly how ownership of this land offers people a sense of power and security. For me, lack of ownership keeps me desiring security. I have been a traveler, moving from town to town because of school and work. I have always rented because I don't stay long. I learned this pattern as a child. But when I moved to Florida, I decided to commit to a place for four years of my life. I decided to buy a house in St. Petersburg, Florida. Why not try and capitalize on this stability? Things come full circle. With my parents help, I could buy a house and then sell it four years later and make a profit. It didn't really turn out as planned. I moved five times when I was in my Ph.D. program. I never settled in one place, and I am still moving.

Dragonfly House: Summer 2004

We step out of my realtor, Tom's, Volvo. A dragonfly zips inches above my right arm. The dragonflies seem to love the front yard. We step onto the porch and I look lovingly at my Mom. She can tell this is the one.

She looks back and says, "Awww."

The backyard is small, but full of deep green foliage. It is perfect. The hardwood floor and high ceilings, the perfectly compact rooms, and the old crown moldings are all perfect.

“I want this one.”

My realtor says, “Ok. I like it too. Let’s look at the other one two streets away and then make the decision.” I feel my body resist.

“Alright,” I say tentatively. I should have gone with my instinct.

My mother and I came to Florida before the start of my Ph.D. program to look at houses. My parents and I thought that with this investment we could all make a profit. Everyone was whispering about Florida’s houses moving up in value. Why not take a financial risk? My parents took out an equity loan on their house and gave me ten thousand dollars for the down payment.

We turn the corner onto 6th Street. The street is cobblestone. The houses all look like gingerbread homes. We pull up to a purple and maroon shuttered house. “Wow,” I say in awe of its size. The front porch is maroon. It leads to a sidewalk interspersed with trees. I walk up the two steps to Tom and anxiously say, “This is too expensive.”

He laughs and approaches the frosted glass front door. “Well, we can’t say that for sure. There is an apartment in the back and that can supplement your mortgage. The mortgage lenders look at that,” he says jiggling the key in the lock. The front door opens into an immaculate living room. The wood floors have just been refinished and they shine. Man, do they shine.

“Wow. I know we can’t afford this.” My mom looks as hesitant as I feel. “Ma, even the curtains are perfect. Oh my! Look at this kitchen.” I walk towards the back of the house. The appliances, floors, and paint are all new. My stomach tingles with greed.

[The cobbler: I am pretty sure I know why you feel greedy. Why do you have to purchase your house? There are other solutions.]

My desire to own this property is greedy because I know this house is out of my price range but it will offer a larger profit margin when I resell it. It also reminds me of all the homes I lived in. The asking price is \$245,000 because of all of the upgrades. My realtor thinks we would have a better chance financing this house because of the income property in the back. The in-law suite could supplement my mortgage and make up for my lack of funds and credit. I believe him. We put an offer on the house. When my

mother and I get home from our trip to Florida, I brag to everyone about it. I show my friends the pictures and start decorating it in my head. The mortgage broker promises me it will work.

Three months later, the mortgage brokerage is still stringing me along. I move into the house with a temporary lease. My realtor tells me it is a good move to claim my stake physically in the house. Stress and tension press into my skin. I make phone calls to the mortgage broker every day.

“We are still processing your package. We will find the right lender. I am sure it will work,” he says confidently.

The mortgage broker can't make the deal happen. I lose the house. My credit and income aren't high enough. They don't think I will be able to make the mortgage payments with my salary. I have to move. I have a week to get out. I find a rentable house around the corner and walk my things down the street.

[The committee: Your stories are interesting, but I am still waiting for the connections to survival here.]

[The artist: I am still wondering about the arts-based process. Why have you moved away from a/r/tography?]

The more I think about it, the more I realize that I wanted to buy a house because I wanted stability, financial security, and a sense of accomplishment. I could buy my own community. Perhaps, I could even make friends.

[The community: You wanted to find us.]

Contextual Collisions: Why Natural Building?

Ultimately, I understand how capital or lack thereof keeps me wanting, struggling, and desiring security. I thought I could buy my own sense of home. I thought purchasing a house could cultivate permanence, peace, and safety. It didn't turn out as planned.

[The cobbler: This is a facile statement. You can't buy peace.]

The false promise of industrial capitalism leaves many people broken and longing for home. In this chapter, I conceptualize the definitions of home and land through a natural, sustainable lens as a way to advocate for the healing power of working with the earth rather than working to dominate it. How does natural building help me to reconceptualize land and home as I negotiate within the frame of modern progress?

[The committee: Why is this important?]

[The cobbler: This discussion is important. When we reconfigure these terms, we may be able to help teach other people that our relationship to the land is important. As natural builders, we have intimate relationships with the land. When we think about the land, we step more softly on it. We don't use and abuse it. We consider it as part of us. We consider ourselves to be part of the larger whole.]

Surveying the land is an important aspect of cob building. As articulated in Chapter One, *Building: The Process and Pulse of Cob*, to survey the land is to understand the natural laws of the environment. It is also a process of getting to know the interworkings of the building site. Cobblers know the slope of the land and think about access, location, local materials, and living beings. Cobblers understand houses in relation to the movement of the sun. Cobblers think about drainage and the surrounding foliage. When Sarah and I first began our cob projects, as articulated in Chapter Two, *Sketching Voices*, we thought we could cultivate, in the other cobblers and in ourselves, a whole systems approach to the land. In Chapter One, I discussed several ways to observe and be in tune with the land. Cobblers observe the natural laws of the environment. Cobblers listen closely to the pulse of the space. All of these elements of surveying the land shift when we think about it in terms of a capitalist frame.

[The cobbler: Why do you want to survey a capitalist site? Cobbing can build us out of capitalism.]

I argue that to survey the land in this context is to know the institutional, social, and cultural elements that situate cob building within each context. For example, one of Earth Work's building sites is in Mini-City. Mini-City is a working, interactive, and pedagogical representation of American urban space. I take into consideration what

David Harvey describes as “historical-geographical processes of place and community construction.”¹⁰⁵ Harvey writes,

“No social group can subsist without a working knowledge of the definition and qualities of its territory, of its environment, of its situated identity in the world, of the spatial configurations of actually existing and potential uses (Including symbolic and aesthetic as well as economic values) essential to its existence.”¹⁰⁶

Surveying the land materializes Harvey’s call for people to develop working knowledges of the territory.

[The committee: Did you know this before or after you started the project?]

[The academic: All along. I can connect to theory anytime.]

Shhh, Academic. You did not know all along. I couldn’t comprehend these elements until after the projects ended and I had time for my words to catch up, however fumbling, with my body. I first entered Mini-City in April 2006. I didn’t know any of this until I stepped on the site.

In order to build with cob you must walk the ground, lie on the rocks, sit in the grass, dig and feel the soil. Natural building accesses the land differently than modern building practices. I reasoned with myself that if I learned how to build with cob, I wouldn’t have to buy a house. I could build my own. I wouldn’t have to deal with mortgages and mortgage brokers. I would have financial stability. Natural building can work in the United States. It just takes more individual and collective effort, more time to walk the land, more labor intensive practices to understand the land, and to work it with your hands.

¹⁰⁵ David Harvey, “Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils,” *Popular Culture*, 12(2), (2000): 543.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils* 551.

[The artist: It also takes an artistic sensibility.]

How does natural building occur within our modern period of capitalism, consumption, and mass building techniques? Is it really that easy?

How might a natural builder's approach to land reconfigure our ideas of home within an urban or mass-produced, industrial environment? In order to answer this question, I historically situate natural building practices within the United States. From this vantage point, I move into the ways Sarah and I surveyed the land within the frame of Mini-City. Metaphorically and literally, Mini-City is a mock version of urban spaces in America. In this section, I "walk" the grounds to survey the way capitalism and corporations symbolically and figuratively teach the children in this setting how to consume and be consumers and ultimately, how building a structure out of cob can restructure this space. Next, I uncover how natural building uses a whole systems approach to the environment. Finally, I move into where I am now, walking the grid-like streets of Los Angeles, making sense of the relationships between land, home, and community. Integrating the land into our building consciousness, material practices, and institutional discourses creates home.

The Industrial Revolution: Natural Building's Decay

Human beings have been building naturally for thousands of years. Human beings, like other animals and organisms within our local biospheres, built and still build shelters out of locally available materials.¹⁰⁷ "Unbaked earth is one of the oldest building materials on the planet; it was used to construct the first permanent human settlements

¹⁰⁷ Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources* (Canada: New Society P, 2002) I state, "Natural building is nothing new. It is as old as the paper wasps who construct insulated hives out of chewed wood fiber, the aquatic caddis fly larvae who make protective shells by cementing together grains of sand, the rapier dogs who excavate enormous towns of interconnecting tunnels, and the chimpanzees who build temporary rain shelters out of sticks and leaves."

around ten thousand years ago.”¹⁰⁸ Cob houses were being built in England beginning in the 13th century. They became more popular with the peasant class by the 15th century. During these periods, building was a necessary survival skill passed down through generations. By the late 19th century, cob building in England lost its popularity. The Enlightenment period and modernist revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries changed human’s connection to nature, which ultimately changed building techniques and practices.

In the pre-modern stages of feudal Europe, man conceived of himself as an integral part of nature. Man’s connection with nature, reinforced by medieval Christianity, was a holy alliance. Modernist thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke rejected this faith-based notion and set the tone for the Enlightenment period, which advocated reason as the primary basis of authority. “Under the shadow of Hobbes, Locke divorced man from nature and transformed the latter into a realm of brute facts or a storehouse of physical entities to be ‘appropriated’ by human beings and made into their ‘private’ property.”¹⁰⁹ Man was separated from nature, thereby creating more distinctly the cultural sphere. In this conceptualization, nature is something to be conquered and used for man’s advantage. Culture can be broadly equated with the notion of human consciousness or with the products of human consciousness and symbols of thought and technology. It is culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature. This hierarchical separation of man from nature helped to form the modern period.

The modern period is based on three interconnecting metanarratives. First, there is a scientific, rational orientation to ontology and epistemology. This rational design of social order and scientific understanding of natural laws fuels man’s desire to objectively explain and order the world. Modernists argue that there is a world outside of human

¹⁰⁸ Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith, and Linda Smiley, *The Hand-Sculpted House: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to Building a Cob Cottage* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2002) 25.

¹⁰⁹ Brian Trainor, “The Origin and End of Modernity,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15 (1998): 134.

consciousness to apprehend and observe.¹¹⁰ Second, the narrative of progress says man can master nature through technological means. Through the objective application of technique and process, a solution can be devised for every problem. Third, progress advances industrialized production, which shifted social relationships and systems of exchange within building practices. As a result, scientific progress and the mastery of nature transformed building practices in Europe and the United States.

The modern impulse forwards progress through technology and industrial means. I draw out how this modern impulse impacted building practices in three distinct yet interconnected ways. First, industrialization brought with it dehumanization and alienation from work and work products.¹¹¹ Second, mass produced building materials replaced natural unprocessed materials. Third, commodification of labor and mass production of these materials is predicated on a disregard for our natural economy. Ultimately, our consumer-based housing movement has taken us further away from the body, community, and earth as viable tools for living. The modern impulse replaces man with machine, commodifies labor, and ultimately alienates man from the processes and products of labor.

Alienation From Labor: Commodification and Capital

The industrialization of building practices separates humans from labor and the product of their labor practices. For most of history, humans have created their own homes from local and primary processed materials.¹¹² Their hands and the hands of their families worked together to build and live on the land. As conditions in industry changed, so did social and political conditions. Land became privatized and commodified. In order to maintain possession of the land, farm laborers and artisans flocked to manufacturing

¹¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. (Princeton U P, 1979).

¹¹¹ Stanley A. Deetz, *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life* (New York: State U of Albany P, 1992).

¹¹² For further discussion of primary and local materials see Chapter Five, Scavenge.

centers and became industrial workers within urban settings. Cities grew rapidly, and the percentage of farmers in the total population declined. Cities became centers of mass industrialization and production. People became a part in the industrial machine when they went to work in the factories for a set wage. As part of the linear projection of progress, labor is no longer the most important element of producing and maintaining sustainable and survival-based barter systems. People don't have to work to grow sustainable food systems or build their own homes out of the materials closest to them. They need to work to gain capital to buy these items. Labor is but one element of production that takes a commodity form. In the face of mass production, workers no longer sell the products themselves but sell their labor capacity as product. The appropriation of labor, embodied in the acts of production and consumption, is always separated by exchange.¹¹³

[The committee: I think this relates back to your own experiences with trying to buy your house. It also speaks to your father's investments. How does it connect to your definition of land?]

If people can work hard enough and make a surplus income, then they may be able to buy a house. I viscerally felt the appropriation of labor and capital. For my family, our houses were never stable sites. Land and houses were material for income. In a sense, my parent's building practices were a form of survival but also of gaining capital, to get ahead, and to provide for a family of five.

Mass Production of Materials: Bigger, Better, Faster, Cheaper

The Industrial Revolution alienated man from labor, cultivated the advent and reliance on machines, which created and sustains mass-produced building materials. Mass-produced building practices rely on mass-produced building materials. "They produced the standardized, machine-made and prefabricated materials that were used for

¹¹³ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso P, 1990).

all aspects of life, including buildings.”¹¹⁴ The Industrial Revolution brought with it the development of new materials that were spliced, manufactured with chemicals, and mass-produced. For example, industrialization made brick available in the 1800s. Brick production increased due to the mechanization of the process. Brick was fired and formed into small pieces of transportable material. Local materials (cob and thatch) were replaced with manufactured brick, stone, fired clay tiles, and slate. The construction industry is also a major cause of mining and industrial processing. “Other modern building components depend on destructive mining: gypsum for plasterboard; iron for hardware, rebar, and roofing; lime and other minerals for cement.”¹¹⁵ Technology creates substitutes for commonly used and nonrenewable resources.

My parents were part of a housing construction industry that began almost sixty years ago. Post-World War II, with soldiers returning home from the war, the United States made a concerted effort to build huge quantities of single-family homes. “Below cost logging was subsidized, and as a result, it was no longer cheaper to use labor-intensive materials . . . The evolution since has been to reduce the need for trained labor on-site, leading to the mechanization and industrialization of the building process.”¹¹⁶ The mechanization of building practices further alienates man from labor. Machines can do more, faster, and for less money and time. These machine-made materials are cheaper and faster to make than hand crafted materials.

The housing industry exploits its workers and our natural economy. House construction is a big-money business, with all the problems associated with other high-

¹¹⁴ Weismann and Bryce 16.

¹¹⁵ Michael G. Smith, “The Case for Natural Building,” *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002) 6.

¹¹⁶ Ted Buchart, “Building as if Future Matters,” *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds. Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002) 16.

stakes industries. The housing industry produces more money for those at the very top of the corporations and less for workers. Within the industrialized building system, laborers mass-produce materials.¹¹⁷ Mass production is a result of the commodification, privatization, and exploitation of land and the materials it provides. The land is exploited in “cost-efficient” ways. David Harvey¹¹⁸ argues that the elements of the built environment and the geography of the land are themselves commodities. Land is mastered by man through mass production, chemical splicing, and the manipulation of nature through technological means to create cheaper materials.

Forms of natural building are suppressed because people do not have the time, money, or skill to build their own homes. Time, natural elements, people and their labor are all commodities. Manipulating and working with the earth to form our own homes takes more time, energy, and labor than purchasing a mass-produced house. These three integral elements are what most people need to make a wage to feed, house, and clothe their families. For most, it is easier and more time efficient to buy a piece of lumber from Home Depot than it is to cut a branch, shape it and work with it so it can fit the standard, straight lines of an industrialized or prefabricated home. In other words, mass produced materials are seemingly more accessible to us, assuming we have the economic means to buy these materials. However, buying these materials puts money back into the hands of industrial cartels and the housing industry.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ianto Evans, “Philosophy, Background, and Design,” *The Hand-Sculpted House: A Practical and Philosophical Guide to Building a Cob Cottage*, eds. Ianto Evans, Michael G. Smith, and Linda Smiley (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green P, 2002) 1-6.

¹¹⁸ Harvey 145 argues that the elements of the built environment include, “The commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption.”

¹¹⁹ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 1-25.

Mass consumption, building codes, the market economy, and governmental regulations keep mass-produced materials in circulation. “The building industry and government regulation concentrate power in the hands of government and selected corporations by enforcing compliance with a limited set of options. If the code says we have to use concrete foundations with every building, just think how much profit the cement manufacturers will make!”¹²⁰ But building codes are similar to environmental regulations. The commodification of the natural environment is dependent on the ceaseless expansion of consumption, production, and waste exploits our natural economy.

The modern impulse has created a desire and need for mass-produced building materials and exploited the natural economy. The commodification of labor has alienated humans from work and work products. The housing industry increases and normalizes the mass production of materials that intensely depletes our natural economy. Human beings need to make changes in order to shift these perspectives and take seriously what effects building practices have on natural resources, relationships, and well being. Any vision of an ecologically fit future, our ecological survival, must include a vision of a radically reordered building process, and this includes a reconceptualization of land, which also changes how we understand the concept of home.

[The committee: What about your family’s experiences?]

Driving the bulldozer with my father taught me about the power of technology and industrial machines. I pulled a lever and the machine’s large shovel would quickly pull up dirt and roots. But riding the bulldozer kept me separate from the land. I was above it, ripping and tearing it down. I manipulated it without thought. As I grew, my knowledge, consciousness, and thought processes expanded. The building process and turnover of homes for profit was not as lucrative as my parents had planned. While our houses were beautiful, they weren’t home because they didn’t speak with the land.

¹²⁰ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 18.

In order to reframe how people use and live with the land in the United States, I work with one cob building experience in a mock-version of a big city. How did I understand the land when working within the boundaries of Mini-City? How is Mini-City a physical manifestation of mass production, the industrial housing industry? How did I survey the land and intersect conceptualizations of home when building at Mini-City?

Surveying the Land: Building at Mini-City

I want to build my own home out of cob. I desire this connection with the land I stand on. Teens Alive and Earth Work actually built a miniature version of a home in Tampa. After five months of building, I know what it takes. I was there. All I need is the capital to invest in a piece of land, the time, and the labor to build it. Land. I have to buy the land.

[The committee: And that isn't an easy process. Is it?]

As I learned from my attempt at buying a house in St. Petersburg, I know acquiring land isn't an easy process. Building a structure out of cob is also difficult. It is also difficult to change our orientations to the land. However, it can be done. Surveying the land within a cob project reorders the way we understand land. If land is reconceptualized as home, the way we work with it and within it changes. But it isn't this simple. In order to build naturally, people must navigate institutional systems, government building guidelines and codes, and ingrained narratives about modern building. Using natural building materials doesn't mean that we were able to step outside of these systems. Working within these systems, we created a community arts program that worked with cob to reorder our orientation to the land. The institutions helped to build our own version of a hand-sculpted house.



Fig. 57. Satellite image of Mini-City¹²¹

From the satellite image, we can only see the roofs of buildings and the way the streets are configured (see fig. 57). Mini-City is an urban environment but that doesn't mean that elements of land aren't important. We aren't trying to escape the institution. We work directly within it to create change. The cultural, social, and institutional contextual elements of this specific space of cob building complicate the surveying process. It isn't just about the natural laws of the environment, but how the systemic elements intersect. Surveying the land in Mini-City, we look at these elements and systems from several angles: on the ground, metaphorically, contextually, and

¹²¹ 28 Feb. 2008, <<http://maps.google.com/>>.

systematically within the boundaries of corporate capitalism. Building naturally within the walls of Mini-City creates an interesting juxtaposition of the idealism of natural builders and the social ordering of capitalism. While walking the city, I contextualize how corporate capitalism materializes in the institutionalized experience of play at Mini-City. I also try and reconcile these elements to articulate how we create change within the space of Mini-City.

Walking Mini-City: April 2006

“I think I found the perfect place to build,” Sarah says. “Mini-City is a miniature version of Tampa. It’s perfect. Concrete block buildings that are representations of buildings around Tampa sit in neat rows. There is a post office, a grocery store, and a McDonalds. It’s almost like being a munchkin. When I was there I felt like Dorothy and Toto were going to jump out at any moment,” she says and laughs. “But all of the buildings are concrete block. You and I could construct a cob building and really change the landscape of the city. It will be great.”

I am hesitant. “Well, who would work with us?”

“Mini-City has a youth program. The youth program is based on helping teens with financial hardship. I spoke with the leader of Teens Alive, Ellie, over the phone. She is interested in this project. I think we should go speak with her, Jeanine.”

“Alright. I would love to see it. Mini-City sounds funny,” I say with a giggle.

“Great!” Excited, Sarah calls Ellie and they schedule a meeting. She calls me a few days later.

“Ellie is eager to talk about the specifics of the project and to let us explore the city,” Sarah says.

On the day of the meeting, we enter Mini-City and approach the front desk.

“We are here to meet with Ellie,” Sarah says confidently. I watch as the woman standing next to us at the front desk fishes through her purse for the entrance fee. The receptionist calls the office to speak with Ellie.

“She says to take a look around and then meet her at her office, which is in the building next to city hall,” she says as she puts the phone back on the receiver and turns to the young mother waiting to hand over her money.

As we step through the bright red doors, I am quickly transported into miniature land. The diminutive structures make me feel so large and the children seem so much bigger than they are. The bright blue steps lead me down to the paved streets. I laugh at the little yellow school bus that sits in front of the first building, the United States Post Office, painted patriotically in red, white, and blue.

The post office is set up so the children can take mail and deliver it to mailboxes placed around the city. There are envelopes addressed to City Hall, the grocery store, the doctor’s office, and two houses. The children learn how to locate which addresses correspond to which buildings. A red-headed boy pulls the post office door open and comes out with a laminated envelope, which he shows his father, who is waiting on the sidewalk. The father points to the grocery store and then walks his son down to the green mailbox. I watch as the boy places the envelope in the slot. He smiles, looks at his father, and then runs down another street. He disappears into a red building.

After the post office, Sarah and I pause to look at the stop light to our left. The stoplight blinks red, yellow, and then green and is supposed to teach the children how to observe traffic signals. I laugh as the children on their tricycles ignore the signal and zip quickly past each other in frantic races.

[The committee: So the children aren’t conforming?]

[The academic: There are signs and symbols that become engrained in us. Even as the kids zip past the Verizon building, they are learning to recognize the symbol. They see, enact, and repeat normal patterns of living in a social and cultural landscape.]

A group of kids in red t-shirts run past us. Most of the kids here seem to be on a school field trip or in summer camp program. I see a few families wandering the streets. It seems that the music room, the library (which is air conditioned), and the grocery store

are the most frequented because they have plenty of toys to play with and are, in the air conditioning of the library, cool.

[The academic: The children witness communal traditions in action even if they aren't abiding by the rules.]¹²²

The children also seem to enjoy being outside. The spaces that aren't fun are the ones without toys and interactive games. One of these buildings is City Hall.

City Hall is the next stop on our way down the street. We turn in. The walls are sterile. There are two empty desks in the center of the room. The area is mostly vacant, except for one poster board propped against the white walls. It reminds me of the real city hall where everyday citizens find it difficult to participate in local government. Curious, we move closer to the poster board. Sarah and I peruse the information. Our mouths drop open. The board has graphics and sketches of a proposal to build a new Mini-City in downtown Tampa. We weren't told about this before our meeting. The graphics are enticing. The new Mini-City is going to be gigantic, with high ceilings and several levels of interactive spaces. In the plans for the new Mini-City, there is a room transformed into a jungle tree house. They have sketches of long suspension bridges. It looks so high tech compared to the concrete block buildings in this Mini-City.

"What? Really?" I say and point at the board. "What about the cob house?" It sinks in slowly that this work will be impermanent, dissolving. We know eventually the cob building will disappear.

"Do you think the cob house can be moved?" I ask with tension in my voice.

"I don't know. Maybe if they brought in big cranes and put it on a flatbed truck."

¹²² Kenneth J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Harvard U P, 1994) 8 argues, "Knowledge of the world grows from relationships, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretive or communal traditions." Mini-City offers a space to create these communal traditions. As articulated within the story, children repeat and perform actions of conformity. For example, they pick up the mail and transport it to respective mailbox. They learn how to address an envelope. They watch, enact, repeat, and learn.

“Isn’t it super heavy?” I ask, confused.

“Yeah. I think we may have to see,” she says.

“Sustainability destroyed for expansion of Mini-City. Should we even start this project knowing it won’t last?” I ask.

[The artist: I don’t want our art to be destroyed. The cob structure is our visual, artistic, and interactive statement. I also know that cob is an arts-based process and release is part of the process.]

We pause to think. Silence bounces against the walls.

[The cobbler: You have to have faith in the project for it to get off the ground. This project is still important, even if the final product only stands for a few years. It will have an impact on those of you that create it and those that enter into the space when you are finished.]

Sarah breaks our silence. “I think we should still do it. If anything else, it will give us great practice.”

“OK. It’s about the youth program and the process of creation, right?” I sound like Pollyanna. I smile. As we exit City Hall, we leave the poster board behind.

[The committee: You have explored your desire for home, however impermanent, throughout this text. How does this connect to your labor and its impermanence?]

Hmmm. Let me think on that. Impermanence is certainly part of my working definition of home. I will come back to this in the final section of this chapter. I need to process this question.

Sarah and I have never really surveyed the land before. We have read all of the how-to-build with cob manuals and built cob ovens before. But we haven’t built on such a large scale or on a permanent, or at least a semi-permanent, site. We haven’t yet had to think about the slope of the ground or the position of trees. Still, we walk the site like we have done these things. We look at the other buildings. I follow the cob manual in my head and inspect the way the trees stand. I imagine the detrimental prospect of roots growing into each structure. I look at the slope of the ground.

After we pass City Hall, we see a small termite house. This is a house that teaches the children about the damage termites can do to wood.

“This is perfect,” Sarah says.

“This could be an interesting teaching moment,” I say and walk up to the tiny hut.

“Yeah. It is so cool,” she agrees and then continues. “Think about the juxtaposition of the buildings. We could contrast a termite-ridden house against a cob house. Termites don’t want to eat though cob. It would make a great point on how manufactured and processed wood isn’t as stable as we think.”

After we walk the space, we decide that the grass patch space next to the termite house isn’t big enough for the structure we want to build.

[The cobber: Do you know how big the structure will be?]

We don’t have a clear building plan, but we keep looking. We pass by the McDonalds. Two girls are playing with the fake cash register. One runs out with a plastic hamburger and hands it to the woman watching over them. She pretends to take a bite out of it. The girl squeals and asks for the plastic toy back. The woman hands it over and the girl runs back into the building.

I stand back on the sidewalk and pause for a moment. My eyes scan the buildings, symbols, colors, and space of Mini-City. It is a performance space for children. Most, if not all, of the buildings are sponsored by a large corporation. This city is buzzing with the same corporate colonization as Tampa itself. Mini-City seems like training ground for children to recognize symbols and to learn the rules and the regulations of our Western society. Through the act of play, they are socialized to be contributing, functional members of our society.

[The committee: Performance as play? A put-on? What do you mean?]

The children enact daily performances that are reinforced by the parents and guardians who follow them through the space.¹²³ In McDonalds, the plastic chicken nuggets and fake money are performance props, toys, and symbolic tools for the girls to enact, and reenact daily behaviors. These elements, for the most part, are part of their everyday lives outside of Mini-City. In the United States, there seems to be a McDonalds on every corner.

[The committee: Can you make this generalization? Any generalization, especially as a feminist poststructuralist?]

Come on. McDonalds is everywhere. Maybe not every child is learning to eat McDonalds food. Maybe their parents don't allow fast food in their lives. Maybe these children are exposed to alternative ways of living outside of Mini-City's doors, but we are inside Mini-City now.¹²⁴

The grocery store is the place we *purchase* food. The bank protects our *money*. McDonalds is the best place to *buy a happy meal*. The children and parents occupy the space of Mini-City and function within these intricate workings of capitalism and

¹²³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003) 392 states, "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts process; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts." The performative constitution of gender is similar to the repetition of actions within Mini-City. As each child repeats an action and learns with her or his body how to function within a capitalist context, they perform a consumer identity that has no origin or no endpoint.

¹²⁴ Deetz 15 states, "Children are born into corporate hospitals environmentally structured with corporate values of rationality and routine, go to corporate sites with their parents to participate in corporate-run daycare, and from there go to schools where they primarily learn positive work-related skills and attitudes.

corporate colonization. They internalize this information as natural, normal, and inevitable.¹²⁵

[The committee: So do you fault them for this? They don't have any agency here? Each person that enters this space is automatically scooped up and controlled by the corporate world?]

Silence.

[The committee: Wait. I agree with you in some of these aspects. But you are making generalizations about people. If I entered this space with my child I would teach my child to participate with a critical eye. I could use this set-up to teach my child how to work outside of the system.]

I think cob can create a critical juxtaposition with the other mass-manufactured buildings. Across the street from McDonalds are model homes. There is a large Remax 'For Sale' sign outside of a purple house. The presence of a cob building within this space can spark questions about the possibility of building a home out of cob, rather than buying the Remax house next door. I watch as two kids with blonde hair run up to the small house. They try the door, hoping to take a look inside. The windows are boarded up. The yellow construction signs leaning up against one of the houses signal to visitors that these houses cannot be entered. They are older models of buildings and their roofs seem to be rotting slowly. They are too small for children to enter or play in. Across the street is the music room. I listen as the children play dissonant music. They bang drums and cymbals and scream as loud as they want.

Next to the homes is a leaning wooden structure that seems constructed for outdoor assemblies. There are four wooden benches that are rotting and falling down. There are rusty nails sticking out of the structure. To the left of this leaning wooden

¹²⁵ Our communal traditions are internalized, socially constructed, taught in the first level of socialization. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966), describe the outcome of this teaching as internalized social order. Within Mini-City it seems this social order is a working model urban spaces in the U.S. These urban spaces function as capitalist frames of survival.

structure is a large patch of grass that separates it from two large trees and several plastic/metal picnic benches. The trees offer Mini-City guests shade and a nice place to picnic.

“Perfect. This is such a large space. I think we can make it work. We can also juxtapose the cob building with the other types of houses here. I wonder if we can tear down the wooden lean-to and use these wooden stakes and the benches,” I say to Sarah.

“Yeah,” she says. “Let’s go find Ellie and talk to her about it.” We walk past the music room back towards the first street. We find Ellie just leaving her office.

“So, what do you think? Did you find a spot to build?” she asks hurriedly. We walk back towards the site and tell Ellie it is the perfect building site.

“It would be interesting to contrast the cob house with the commercial homes already in the city. A cob structure is different than the rest of the buildings here. All of the other buildings are made of concrete block,” Sarah says to her. Ellie nods.

“That would be interesting. Tell me more. What do you see here?” she asks.

Sarah continues, “There is enough room to work here. We can also fit a tent here to keep the members of Teens Alive protected from the summer sun. There is enough space away from the trees so we aren’t concerned about the roots intruding into the structure. But we are close enough to the trees to offer shade. Also, if you look at the slope of the ground, it is conducive to proper drainage.” Sarah recites from what she has read in the cob building texts and in her short experience with Tim’s cob program in Chicago.

Ellie nods again.

I say, “I think it would also be interesting to teach them about growing their own food or gardening. Perhaps this could be the gardening house.”

Ellie smiles and says, “I like that idea. We don’t have that in Mini-City just yet. How big do you think the structure will be? How long do you think this will take?”

I answer, “Well, we have to map all of our schedules out and then we can talk about the particulars. Do you have the Teens Alive members on a set schedule?”

“Let’s go inside and I can show you what I have so far in terms of scheduling. And then you two can talk it over and we can solidify our schedule for the summer. This is so exciting!” Ellie leads us into her office. We are given a tentative schedule for Teens Alive. We shake hands and the summer building project is approved.

After walking the space of Mini-City and talking with Ellie, I am both perplexed and excited. Everything is coming together. We have permission to work with the Teens Alive program. We can cultivate and teach cooperation, conflict resolution, environmental ethics, and arts-based enrichment. We can cultivate a whole systems approach to the land. At the same time, we can create a building out of cob that gives museum guests an alternative to the corporate structures within Mini-City. We may even teach people about growing their own food and getting to know the land. In the car ride home, we talk about the all of these possibilities. My fear and enthusiasm grows. We have so much to do. We have to gather materials and get people to help us. We have to start mapping out our plans. We have to develop lesson plans. We have to _____. We have to _____. We have to _____.

[The committee: You have to connect how the institutional backdrop helps to support your organizations. You didn’t do this all on your own. You haven’t offered us that map yet. And this is the context. Why do corporations sponsor Mini-City? Your organizations seems to operate very similarly.]

The Institutional Backdrop: Framing Mini-City and Earth Work

Mini-City and Earth Work operate similarly in many respects. First, both organizations need financial support from corporate and bureaucratic institutions. Without this valuable funding, neither organization could survive. Second, both organizations survive because of the people who work within the organizations and those that support the organizations. We both need volunteers, members of the organization, and personal support from the people that work within the institutions. Finally, Mini-City and Earth Work offer cross-organizational support. Each organization needed the other to get this community arts program working on a very local and specific level. All of these interactions and levels of institutional negotiation helped our project to survive. All of

these interactions also reconfigure my ideas of home. Integrating the land into our building consciousness, material practices, and institutional discourses creates home. A home exists within the institutional framework. It exists because of financial support and the people that interact within the frame. Our home was cross-organizational. Our home was temporary. After our months together, we left our homes behind. Without the support from our respective institutions, this home couldn't have existed. This map demonstrates how both Mini-City and Earth Work operate within a larger political, capital, and institutional systems (see fig. 58).

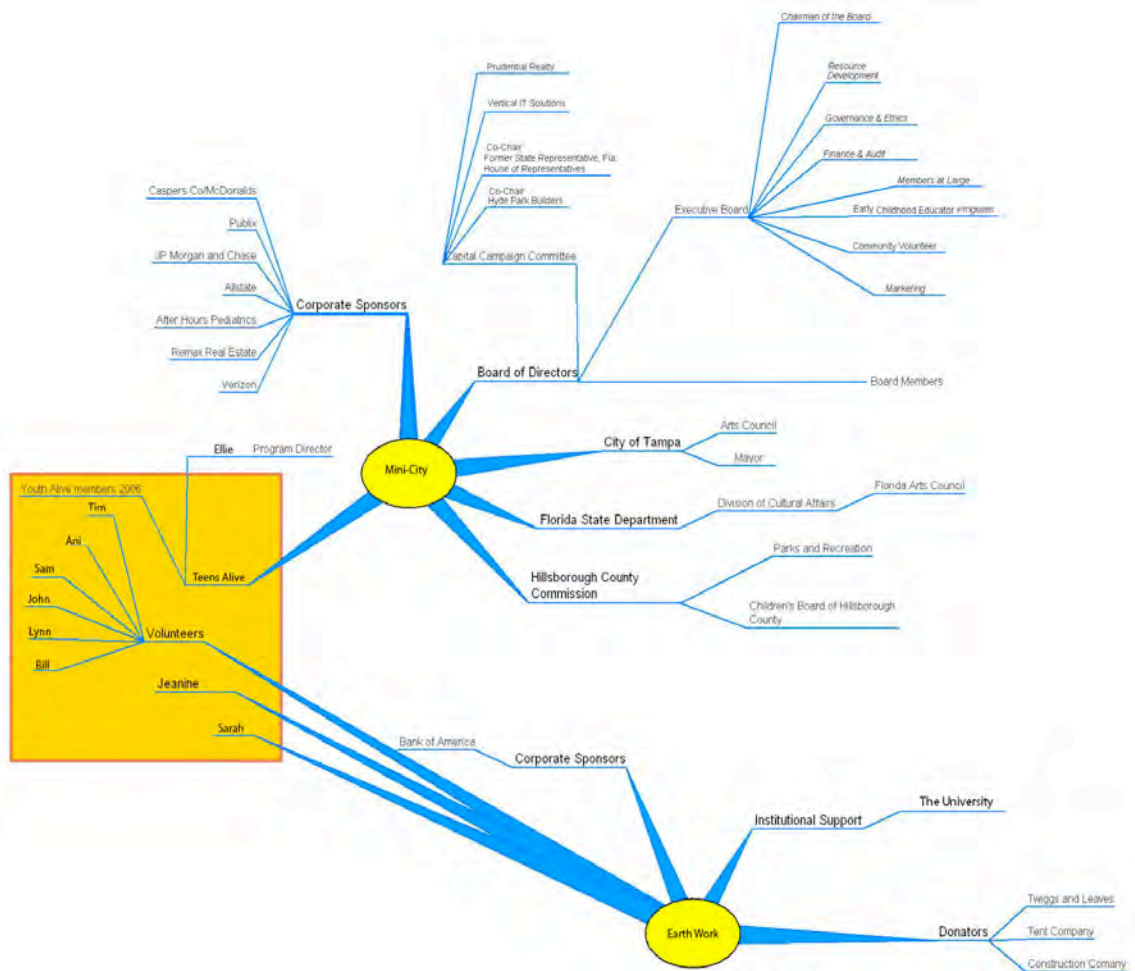


Fig. 58. Mapping the system

In terms of financial support, Mini-City is supported by earned income and is sponsored in part by the City of Tampa, the City of Tampa Parks and Recreation Department, the Arts Council of Hillsborough County, the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners, the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, the State of Florida, Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, and The Florida Arts Council. Each of these organizations offers their support and capital to keep Mini-City thriving. The Board of Directors is composed of representatives from the corporate sponsor and local members of the local government. The Board of Directors works to find corporate sponsors to donate and advertise within the boundaries of Mini-City. There are plans to move Mini-City into the center of the City of Tampa. The board wants to expand and enhance Mini-City in order to generate revenue and to reach more children in the surrounding areas. As of right now, Mini-City is not reaching a large enough population because it is small, outdated, and not centrally located.

Earth Work was sponsored through the Community Arts Fund from the Fine Arts Department at the University. This fund is given to the school in hopes that it will be used to aesthetically and culturally enrich the city of Tampa. Sarah and I constructed a budget and submitted the budget to the director of the Fine Arts Department who first approved it and then passed it along to the Granting Institution. The Granting Institution approved our budget and appropriated the money we requested. The Granting Institution and the Fine Arts Department benefit from this type of donation because the University was recognized for their community arts programs. The Fine Arts Department can add this project to the list of successful community art projects and gather more support from the institution and the state. In the end, the University benefits from the community art action.

[The committee: And this is a bad thing?]

No. It isn't a bad thing. I think working with and within the institutions is how we can make projects like these happen. Without University support, we wouldn't have been able to get this project off of the ground. Because of my work with Earth Work, I received academic benefit as well. I have been able to bring cob to academic conferences

and garnered attention for cob's unique position in the academy. Community arts programs are beneficial to all parties involved in the institutional mappings, that is of course, if they are done with respect to all parties involved. For a further discussion about community art see Chapter Seven, Commune.

In terms of working with people, our community art organization, Earth Work, operates no differently than Mini-City or any other non-profit organization. We rely upon the volunteers, leaders, and members of each organization to accomplish our mission. Surveying who works within our organizations is also an important component of surveying the overall site. We live within these organizations. In some aspects, we make these organizations home. We spend large amounts of time within the organization's boundaries. We set up the tarps on the organization's land. We make connections with the people that exist within the organization. In these ways, and in many others, we construct an impermanent home.

Mini-City partnered with Earth Work for this community art project. The Children's Museum of Tampa's Teen Leadership Development program, Teens Alive, is one subset of Mini-City. Without the members of Teens Alive there is no way we could have completed the cob house. Without the members of this organization, we wouldn't have built this structure at all. If Sarah and I tried to build this structure alone, it would have been a completely different project. Sarah and I were also given institutional support from our respective department chairs and advisors. Without this type of support, the time needed to complete this type of project would not have been available. I am very grateful for all this support. Cob building is a full-time job.

A natural builders approach to the city is also aware of how cob building is part of the larger system, not a separate entity. Rather than building fences between the city and the natural home, or the institution and the local organization, it seems quite necessary to see natural building as part of the land and as part of the urban landscape. We worked within the institutional boundaries of Mini-City, corporate capitalism, and our own academic institutions to create a temporary space of home. This is a home amidst all these other homes. Natural builders work to shift our relationship with the land. Our

houses and building practices are an answer to create an ecologically fit future and technology and technological advances are a part of this future.

An Ecologically Fit Relationship Between Land and Home

Using a natural builder's orientation to the land reconfigures how we see and understand the land as a possible space for community, for building relationships, and building home. People are necessarily nomadic in our current culture of globalization and neo-liberalism.¹²⁶ Each element is connected. Ultimately, understanding these elements as interconnected shifts the way we understand the land. Natural builders have reordered their building practices to help make environmental, social, and material changes in their local spaces.

In the 1980s, historical interest in natural homes and increasing environmental concern fueled the revival of natural building in the United Kingdom and the United States.¹²⁷ "Today, in the United Kingdom, there are an estimated one half million inhabited earth buildings ranging in types of construction and materials. "Thirty percent of the world's population lives in homes built of earth."¹²⁸ The locations space geographies such as Iran, Africa, England, Mali, Peru. In the southwest region of the

¹²⁶ Mohanty 124 states, "Globalization, or the unfettered mobility of capital and the accompanying erosion and reconstitution of local and national economic and political resources and of democratic processes, the post-cold war U.S. imperialist state, and the trajectories of identity-based social movements in the 1980s and 1990s constitute the ground for transnational feminist engagement in the twenty-first century. Multicultural feminism that is radical, antiracist, and nonheterosexist thus needs to take on a hegemonic capitalist regime and conceive itself as also crossing national and regional borders." In the increasingly global society, the idea of a localized home becomes very important. How do I define home? I define home as a transient position, one that is based in local situations. These local and impermanent spaces should take the land into consideration. While these conversations are necessarily political, without a concentrated articulation of the land that we stand, build, and create on, we are left without grounding. When we cross borders, we also construct them. In order to speak about national and political identity, a working articulation of the land, as a diverse intersection of both non-living and living beings, helps us to understand and deconstruct these borders.

¹²⁷ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 27 state, "A cob building revival started in the 1980s, fueled largely by historical interest and the real estate value of ancient cob homes."¹²⁷

¹²⁸ Weismann and Bryce 12.

United States, homes made of adobe brick are very popular. In the United States, the cob revival started in Oregon when Ianto Evans and Linda Smiley built their first cob home in the 1980s. After conducting extensive research in England, they founded the Cob Cottage Company to help start cob building in the United States. They weren't the only ones. There were a dozen other groups experimenting with cob and alternative building throughout the United States, but these collaborators were physically and geographically disconnected from one another.¹²⁹ Information sharing in the 1980s and 1990s is not what it is today. The natural, ecologically aware and sustainable housing boom in the Southwest attracted the interest of the mainstream national media. "When movie star Dennis Weaver moved into a passive solar earth-bearthed house made of recycled tires and soda cans, he brought instant fame to New Mexico-architect Michael Reynolds, developer of the 'earthship' concept."¹³⁰ Because of this new media coverage, natural building organizations began to hear about one another.

In 1994, the Cob Cottage Company organized the first Alternative Building Colloquium in Oregon. Here, people from diverse backgrounds gathered to attend workshops and share information about natural building techniques such as adobe, solar energy, straw bale homes, as well as composting toilets. "The many disparate efforts to relearn ways of building with local materials and adapt them to modern needs have been brought together into a single conceptual basket with an easily understood name: natural building."¹³¹ From the seeds of this colloquium, the natural building movement in the

¹²⁹ Michael G. Smith, "Introduction," *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources* eds., Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002) 2 lists natural builders around the country working at the same time as Evans and Smiley. He cites the work of Iowa-based Robert Laporte, Rob and Jaki Joy in Upstate New York and their Earthwood Building School, and Nadir Khalili in Southern California, who established Cal-Earth.

¹³⁰ Smith *Introduction* 3.

¹³¹ Smith *Introduction* 3.

United States was (re)born.¹³² Ideologically, most natural builders believe the environment is being destroyed through modern building practices. They believe natural building is one answer to help preserve nature's economy. Thirteen years later, there are even more natural building organizations working in the U.S. The land is our natural economy. Nature's economy consists of the natural systems and resources that support the market and the survival economies. One component of our natural economy is nonrenewable resources. "Nonrenewable resources, such as oil, metals, and other minerals, are finite. Renewable resources, such as soils and forests, will replenish themselves-as long as their use does not exceed critical thresholds."¹³³ The industrialization and mass production of building practices also cultivated a blatant disregard for the environmental effects that housing construction has on our natural economy. Seventy five percent of all trees cut in North America are used in construction.¹³⁴ Forests, soils, water, and fisheries are all being pushed beyond their limits by human population growth and rapid industrial development.¹³⁵ Industrial development rapidly increased processes of extraction and manufacturing of the land. "The extraction, manufacture, and transportation of building materials are major contributors to global environmental problems."¹³⁶ Our natural economy is being depleted without a working strategy in place for renewal. The consumer and capitalist culture thrives and survives on waste.¹³⁷

¹³² Kennedy, Smith, and Wanek 7.

¹³³ Stuart L. Hart, "Beyond Greening; Strategies for a Sustainable World," *Harvard Business Review*, 75, (1997): 68.

¹³⁴ Weismann and Bryce 20.

¹³⁵ Hart 66-76.

¹³⁶ Weismann and Bryce 1.

¹³⁷ Hart 68.

Natural resources are manipulated to create processed materials, which are cost efficient and technologically advanced. A commodified, consumer culture demands a continuous transformation of raw materials into refined goods, which ultimately creates waste.¹³⁸ On top of this waste, the materials being produced are toxic and impact our environment immensely. “Because industrialization has focused initially on commodities and heavy manufacturing, cities in many emerging economies suffer from oppressive levels of pollution.”¹³⁹ Manufacturing processes release toxic effluent into the water and hazardous chemicals into the air. “The housing industry, with its highly processed, modern materials, now contributes to around 50% of all pollution in the world, and cement processing alone creates 8% of total greenhouse gases.”¹⁴⁰ While the planet is a self-adjusting mechanism designed to accommodate waste, levels of pollution have been too great and the planet can’t adjust efficiently enough.¹⁴¹

The people involved in the natural building revival argue that current building practice is destroying our environment. Adam Weisman and Katy Bryce, cob experts and authors of *Building with Cob: A Step-by-Step Guide*, believe they can help create localized change by focusing on an ecologically sound relationship with the earth in their everyday building practices. For environmental builders, environmental practices literally start at home. Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce state, “We are at a crossroads. We can go one of two ways: either stumble blindly on into the future, and hope that something works itself out; or stop now, and start to make conscious changes on a personal level.”¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Hart 67 states, “Those affluent societies account for more than 75 percent of the world's energy and resource consumption and create the bulk of industrial, toxic, and consumer waste. The developed economies thus leave large ecological footprints defined as the amount of land required to meet a typical consumer's needs.”

¹³⁹ Hart 70.

¹⁴⁰ Weismann and Bryce 18.

¹⁴¹ Kennedy, Smith, and Wanek 11.

¹⁴² Weismann and Bryce 3.

Natural builders choose to make conscious and personal changes in their everyday, localized building practices and hope that their efforts to improve the state of our environment will gain interest. They hope other people will begin building naturally.

In order to make these changes, the natural building movement reorients relationships to labor practices, local materials, and the natural economy. First, natural building changes human relationships to labor. In natural building, people build with their own hands and natural resources to step (as efficiently as they can) outside of the capitalist and government regulated system. Building with natural materials is an intimate, reciprocal, and interpersonal process. In order to build with natural materials, people depend on and collaborate with each other. As explored in Chapter Five, Scavenge, natural builders often ask people for help finding local materials. They rely on each other for supplies, information, and aid in transporting materials. Second, natural builders use local materials to build their homes and shelters. They recognize that what they use in nature will ultimately recycle back into the system. Using local materials reduces ecological impact and works with the land rather than against the land. Third, natural building has fewer adverse effects on the environment, and it creates a relationship with the natural economy. Natural builders believe if we reorient ourselves to think of our relationship with nature as a whole, localized, and sustainable system, we may be able to positively impact our nature's economy, rather than deplete it.

Natural building reunites people and labor through a whole systems approach to the environment. The Industrial Revolution, in the name of progress, estranged people from the natural environment. Natural building changes this orientation. "If we can redefine progress to mean 'increasing benefit to the well-being of individuals communities and the Earth' rather than 'increasing levels of technology,' we can begin to

see the potential of simpler, more sustainable ways of doing things.”¹⁴³ Progress is not linear and efficient but a cyclical process of growth, decay, destruction, and rebirth. “In traditional societies, time is seen as a circle, ever linked to the eternal cycles of nature—the moon, the seasons, the spin of the earth around the sun, and the cycle of life and death.”¹⁴⁴ Following the lessons of traditional societies, natural builders use a deep ecological approach to natural building.

A deep ecological approach, as developed by Aldo Leopold, portrays the land as an intricate system, an “intricately interwoven and interdependent intersection of elements that functions as a whole organism”¹⁴⁵ This branch of environmentalism looks for interconnections, diversity, and richness, and sees human beings as a part of a whole system. This approach rests on the holistic assumption that everything is linked and that all actions have an impact on all parts of the system. Cob building helps people understand themselves as part of the whole environmental system, rather than an individual working to gain capital for individual survival in a capitalist system. At the very least, cob building reminds us of the land we build upon, and find refuge in.

We can have intimacy with land. I think about the spaces of my childhood. I smell the hay of the emptied stables. I feel the tall weeds that brushed my skin when I moved from one neighbor’s lawn to the next. I didn’t own this land, but it became part of my definition of home on an individual level.

Natural builders use their hands, time, and labor to create their homes. The goal of sustainable and natural building is to maximize life-cycle benefits. The costs of maintaining and operating a building or project are the life-cycle costs. “Benefits include

¹⁴³ David Eisenberg, “Sustainability and the Building Codes,” *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds. Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002) 28.

¹⁴⁴ Weismann and Bryce 4.

¹⁴⁵ Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 2 ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1998) 249.

the economic return and also the productivity, health, and well-being of the users who live in or work in a building.”¹⁴⁶ Humans brought up in a capitalist system rarely consider life-cycle value. Our labor is commodified to such an extent that there is little room for human growth within the building process. Humans are cut off from the physical, artistic, and emotional aspects of labor and building practices. In a consumer culture, we work to rent, buy, or pay people for their labor, to mass-produce houses and homes. Natural building can get people out of the capitalist institution that demands we obtain credit, capital, and mortgages in order to live in a mass produced home. Building with cob can also work within the system to disrupt the system. Natural building brings humans closer to labor and the fruits of their labor. After the labor is complete, the product is a home, an intimate and ultimately personal dwelling space that is full of life-cycle value.

But even now, I am ingrained in the system. I am in Los Angeles, estranged from the cob building process, writing this document on a laptop. I am not close to the labor or natural building processes we created within the space of Mini-City.

[The committee: As the writer, you are close to the writing process. Isn't that part of ecological survival?]

I am closer to the labor of writing. I am intimately connected to this story and to its creation. This writing process about cob is a part of ecological survival. I am not close to the land as I was as a child but right now, I am closer to these pages and the voices as an act of reappearance and disappearance.

[The committee: How can you feel a sense of home?]

I can cultivate a space of home when I am with others, with the land, intermingling and mixing diverse beings, living and non-living. But right now, I feel

¹⁴⁶ David A. Bainbridge, “Life Cycle Cost and Value of Four Houses,” *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds. Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith and Catherine Wanek (Canada: New Society, 2002) 31.

emptiness. I am estranged from any sense of community. I wanted to lie in a park or hike today but I don't have the time. Without my personal or intimate connections with the land, my home, I feel alone. I feel fences (see fig. 59).



Fig. 59. Fences

If I try and cross the borders the barbed wire would snag my skin (see fig. 60).



Fig. 60. Barbed wire

Living in Los Angeles: August 2007

After a long morning of writing, I walk my two dogs, Miles and Rhyn, up Magnolia Boulevard in Burbank. Well, really they are walking me. Miles tugs on the leash hard and expends more energy than I. The sun soaks through my shirt and bakes my sweat. I let them lead and my eyes wander from small box house to small box house. The patterns change. A condominium looms taller than the trees. New construction is happening throughout these streets. I have counted seven different condos going up in my neighborhood. I pull back on the leash and order Miles to sit and Rhyn follows suit. I stare at the rafters and the hollowed shell of a plywood building. It is a skeleton of an apartment building. The blank face of quick construction stares backs at me. The bulldozer rumbles in my memory. This looks just like my father's old construction site. I shake my head at this hurried fix of capital. I bet the owners of this land will make millions off this investment.

My partner Ani and I pay \$1,350 a month to rent our 570-square foot half of a duplex. People say Ani and I got lucky. After all, we live in the city of Burbank and we have a backyard. Backyard spaces are few and far between in this city. I get the most pleasure in the quiet, sitting on the metal chair with a glass of wine, a book, and the sun on my face. That pleasure disappears as I hear the neighbors over the fence scream about money or cheating. Because of the tall green fence, I only know them through their anger. Sometimes, I hear my neighbor's cats scurry about. I know he can hear our dogs bark, our coos of intimate moments, the creaking of the front door as we leave or come home. As neighbors, we know each other only through sounds. I physically saw my first neighbor the other day.

The scruffy man across our paved alley tends to his potted plants. I wave. "Hello," I say politely.

"Hello there." His gruff voice fits his scruffy appearance. "Sorry about the way the backyard looks. I was going to sell this house to condo developers but things have been happening a little slower than I thought." He offers his apologies and turns to carry the potted plants away from me. I see the dirt on his land as valuable for building a

natural building. But I can't use it. I don't own it. It isn't mine. As far as I can tell from this brief conversation, he sees this plot of land as profit. He just told me it is a possible space for capitalizing on land's monetary value. I don't fault him for that.

[The committee: You don't? It sure sounds like you do.]

I don't fault him for working within the capitalist frame. I know what land ownership can bring you. I was offered the best public education and lived in the largest houses in my town, riding on the same investments. As I watch the neighbor lug the pots from one section of the plot to the other, I wonder about the soil's composition and whether there is clay for creating batches of cob. That was the last time I saw him. Even with our houses so close to one another, we are so far apart (see fig. 61).

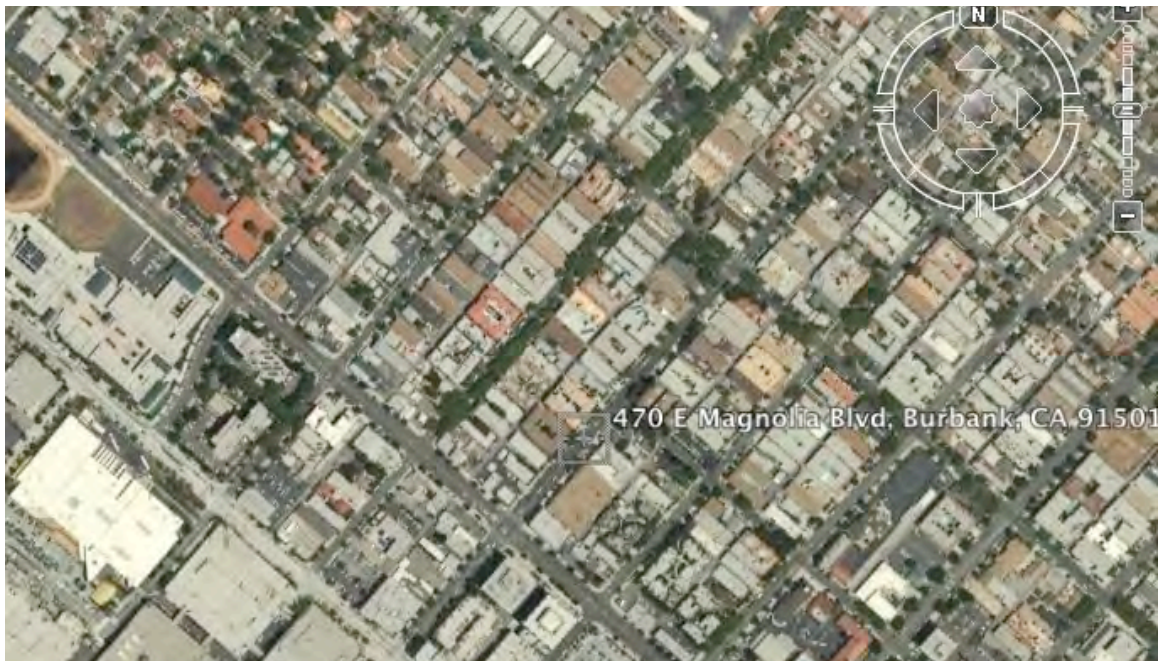


Fig. 61. Satellite image of our house in Burbank¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ 28 Jan., 2008 <<http://maps.google.com/>>.

I live within the steel and stone of Los Angeles. I am also in the middle of the steel and stone of my past, building mass-produced houses, and playing on industrial materials and machines larger than the house I live in now.¹⁴⁸ Since I was a young girl, I have been searching for something other than the houses that stand in rows, the close proximity actually separating one other.¹⁴⁹ My yearning turned into my involvement with Earth Work. This form of activism was and is my reach for something else. I want to create a space for local environmental change through working with cob. Throughout all of my experiences, I have discovered the complexities of working with a natural building process in a capitalist society. I still believe there is merit and value to building with local and sustainable materials. We need to reorder our building practices and our conceptualizations of land, home, and each other. This work can tear down fences. My activism is centered in a desire to create change in the world, one-person and cob structure at a time.

We need to reframe our relationship to the land to survive. I understand this survival on two levels. First, I propose a personal, but not individualistic, relationship with the land, as developed by natural builders, which can reorder the way we understand land, not only for capital gain, but also for constructing spaces of home. Second, surveying the land integrates the complex diversities of non-living and living,

¹⁴⁸ D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 23 states, "The streets in my city are a fraction of a larger grid, anchored to one in Los Angeles. That grid was laid out in September 1781. The Los Angeles grid is a copy of one carried from Mexico City to an anonymous stretch of river bank by Colonel Felipe de Neve, governor of California." I live in part of that grid. I am not alone in this. Waldie continues, "Three-quarters of the United States is platted on a grid that follows the lines of longitude and latitude across the continent" (23). How does this grid affect me? I feel alone, even though I am physically close to my neighbors.

¹⁴⁹ Bonnie Roche, "The Mishkan as Metaphor-form and Anti-form: On the Transformation of Urban Space," *Cross Currents* 52 (2002): 342 states, "At the center of steel and stone in our modern cities stands the same individual that once stood in the shadows of an ancient desert. This individual yearns for the same spiritual rootedness to a universe larger than oneself. This cry for a glimpse of the ineffable is becoming increasingly audible as a public voice in the canyons of our urban environments." I am the individual in the center of the modern city, yearning for a connection with the land. When I reframe the institutional borders and see them what situates the land, perhaps, I can create these alternatives within the capitalist context.

institutional, social, cultural, ecological, personal, and local elements that exist within and on the land. Integrating the land into our building consciousness, material practices, and institutional discourses creates home. A home is also the land upon which it stands. We need to reconceptualize our relationship with the land, reframe these spaces as part of our homes.

In order to define home, I keep moving back to my childhood past, where I explored intimately the spaces of land that surrounded my house. How do I define home? I define home as a transient position, one that is based in local situations and contexts. Still, these local and impermanent spaces should take the land into consideration. While these conversations are necessarily political, without a concentrated articulation of the land that we stand, build and create on, we are left without grounding. When we cross borders, we also construct them. In order to speak about national and political identity, a working articulation of the land, as a diverse intersection of both non-living and living beings, helps us to understand and deconstruct these borders. These spaces of engagement are similar to cultivating a cob builder's orientation to our natural economy. I remind myself that I am part of a larger interconnected whole. This whole is made up of a diversity of living and non-living beings. Land is precious, both in commodity and life-cycle value. Land is home.

A home is situated within its social and cultural contexts. As Sarah and I walked the grounds of Mini-City, we surveyed the land to find the appropriate site on which to build. We were novices surveying the site. We walked the space of Mini-City looking for things such as slope, access, and space. We saw these things and more. We saw in great detail the space as a miniature version of current modern, corporate, capitalist space. A corporation sponsored most of the buildings. We reframed the geography of Mini-City and created a building that marks an important relationship with the land. A relationship with the land is similar to surveying within natural building practices, but as we shift contexts, we consider the institutions that are part of the land.

Building is part of the land. It is comprised of land. As I explore in Chapter 7, Commune, the land is home to the memories of commune, the space of gathering and

community. The cob building in Mini-City is markedly different than the other buildings that stand on these grounds. The cob building's presence implores people to pause, to ask questions, and to imagine the possibility of natural building. It's presence in Mini-City reengages visitors with the land, with local materials. The cob building is not permanent. I have to get used to impermanence. Cycles, seasons, and environments shift and change. Nothing in nature is lost. It just changes form. After reading through the materials in city hall for the new Mini-City, Sarah and I chose to build the cob building and let it disappear a few years later. This decision marks the temporality of home spaces. I have moved over 18 times in my life. The moments I feel closest to home are when I have a working relationship with the land.

[The committee: And yet you know these relationships are temporary. Must they be?]

[The cobbler: It isn't always temporary. Cob can sustain. It can survive the elements. You just haven't had the chance to create these spaces yet. I know you will.]

I was lucky to be able to gain access to the cob building projects, to the land, through the institutions that granted us financial and academic support. This type of access shows the possibility in creating a space of home within these boundaries and borders. Working within and with the land is an intimate process. It directs us to local materials and supplies. More than anything, working with cob reorients us to the availability and workability of local and primary processed materials. In the following chapter, Scavenge, I articulate these connections. I work from my ecofeminist origins, and postmodern and feminist poststructural orientations to create the scavenger as an important metaphor for feminist theory.

CHAPTER V

SCAVENGE

Natural building is nothing new. It is as old as the paper wasps who construct insulated hives out of chewed wood fiber, the aquatic caddis fly larvae who make protective shells by cementing together grains of sand, the rapier dogs who excavate enormous towns of interconnecting tunnels, and the chimpanzees who build temporary rain shelters out of sticks and leaves

-Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*¹⁵⁰

To scavenge: To feed on. To salvage from discarded or refused material. To salvage usable material.

-Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary¹⁵¹

My small, black Toyota truck creeps down the side streets of South Tampa. I heard from a friend that there was construction happening around these parts. Construction sites, telephone companies repairing underground wires, city management replacing water pipes: these construction and deconstruction projects are great sources for

¹⁵⁰ Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources* (Canada: New Society, 2002) 1.

¹⁵¹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: 2003). As a scavenger, I have salvaged parts of this definition. I have taken up the elements that I see as important, necessary, and usable in my work.

my quest. My eyes scan the horizon for the yellow of bulldozers, the dark lines of hollowed pipe, white construction hats, and bright orange cones. Any of these signs lead me toward my treasure. I'm anxious. It is early in the morning and I have two hours to find what I need.

Today, I am looking for concrete. I have to gather at least two truck beds full of massive, dense, and processed chunks of stone so we can start building the foundations of our miniature house at Mini-City.

"I see it!" I think to myself excitedly and push on the gas pedal. I see the construction site my friend was talking about. I park my car on the side of the road and frantically wave my arms at the man driving the large crane. He points to another man who is closer to the ground and not operating a machine. The crane operator shakes his head as he swings the large metal monster to the left. I shouldn't be here. These construction sites can be furiously dangerous. I also shouldn't be wearing these flip-flops, but I always do.

"Hi there!" I say loudly over the roar. I smile and wait for him to get closer.

"What can I help you with?" he asks. He looks over at my truck, looks me up and down. I am even more aware of my almost bare feet in this construction zone. I begin my spiel. I have told this story a dozen times. I've been scavenging for concrete for a couple of weeks now. It has become part of my daily routine.

"I am part of a non-profit group and work mostly on donation. We are teaching a group of teenagers how to build naturally through a community art project. We use recycled concrete as the foundation for our cob building projects. I know the teens would be grateful if you would be so kind and donate these pieces of concrete to us. I know *I* would be grateful." I smile as sweetly as I can. I try and look needy but at the same time maintain a strong bodily stance. I want him to know that I am strong. I am a worker and a manual laborer, just like him. I want him to think of me as an equal. He whistles to his buddies and four of them come over to help me fill the truck bed with pieces of concrete. To prove my worth, I carry the largest stones.

I am a scavenger. I have to do what I can to help this project survive. We need this concrete. And we¹⁵² need it today. We are on a tight deadline. We are trying to follow and survive a schedule that is demanding of time and labor. I am also the only one in the group with a pickup truck. If I don't arrive in two hours with a bed full of concrete, we won't be able to work at Mini-City today. I can't let the teens or the team down. I am a scavenger.

[The cobbler: Scavenging is one of the best parts of cobbing. We have to use materials that don't hurt the environment. Recycled concrete is a good material because it is found and not bought. Recycled concrete is different than buying powdered concrete in the bags. Solid concrete already exists. If we didn't scavenge for this material, I don't know where the concrete would end up. At least, when we use recycled concrete, we use it without ecological repercussions. We have to really be conscientious of the materials we use. We have to look for natural materials.¹⁵³ I also think about transporting these materials. I would rather use my bike or walk to the site. I really don't even want to drive a car. I will use one to gather materials. Man, I will do what I have to. I just want to get back to the cob.]

We can go back to cob once we discern the differences between raw, natural, processed or unprocessed materials. I have to define what a scavenger is in the cob building process. In this chapter, as an academic scavenger, I find, use, interrogate, and yes, discard many of my own working ideologies. First, I explore the situated perspectives of ecofeminist, postmodern, feminist poststructural scholars. Throughout

¹⁵² The difference between the terms *I* and *we* is a complicated story. There are moments when cob building is an individual endeavor undertaken for the greater community. These individual efforts can routinely fall on the same shoulders. Sometimes the load was on my shoulders. At other times, the workload fell on Tim's shoulders. As each of us took on another load of work, the *we* became singular. The *we* became *I*. The *I* was always for the larger goal of the *we*. In this particular context, *we* are the group of cobblers at Mini-City. The cobblers include the members of Teens Alive, Tim, Ani, the volunteers, and me. The *I* and *we* shift within each context. These terms don't collapse but are contingent upon each situation. *I* and *we* only speak as one if *you*, the reader, want them to.

¹⁵³ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 14 state, "At the heart of natural building are natural materials. A convenient definition of natural materials would be materials that are not industrially processed. But unless you find a hole in the ground or a hollow tree and live in that, your home will comprise materials that are to some degree "processed."

this vast discussion, I unravel what seems most important, there needs to be a new metaphor, a new way to talk about the environment that sustains and surrounds us. A scavenger is just one part of the ecosystem. An ecosystem survives when there is a diversity of living and nonliving things interacting. These interactions between living and nonliving entities balance and counter balance each other. Second, I use scavenging experiences from the cob process to articulate and blur the distinctions between nature and culture. Finally, I propose the term scavenger to resituate the division between nature and culture into a working relationship. This relationship is fluid, ever changing, and never distinct.

Scavenger

A natural builder is always searching for local materials. These local materials are either recycled materials or raw materials. Raw materials are not processed. They are untouched by humans or machines. For instance, sand aggregate and clay come straight from the ground. A natural builder may argue that raw materials are the purest and cleanest form of building material.¹⁵⁴ Ideally, a natural builder wants to use raw materials. But it doesn't always happen this way. These materials are not always available. They are difficult to find. Purchasing these materials may cost more than mass-produced materials. They may not be what we need to complete a project. We may need metal piping to construct plumbing. We may need copper sheeting to edge the living roof so the soil doesn't spill over.

[The cobbler: A living roof is an ideal roof for cob. But why do we need to use purchased sheets of copper? We can find material instead of buying it. If we look in a junkyard or in dumpsters, we may find the right material to replace

¹⁵⁴ Raw material is not a useful term in this discussion. Rather, the way we *use* materials is more appropriate. I will use the terms primary and secondary processed materials. There is a level of personal involvement with primary processed material. This personal involvement may include a workable knowledge of the material as well as a respectful use of that material. Secondary processed materials are distanced from human hands. They are manipulated by machines and fused with other chemicals.

this act of buying. Trust in the universe. We don't have to buy anything. We will find it.]

Sometimes scavengers do have to purchase materials. I would rather use recycled material. Recycled materials are found materials. A scavenger uses recycled materials and recycles material. A scavenger experiments with these materials to find alternative, local materials that might work well with cob.

[The cobbler: You are right. Remember when I found cattail near the river? I had never used that material before but it worked just perfectly in the lime plaster mix. As a fiber, it was strong and I didn't have to buy it. I gathered it.]

For natural builders, cattail is a raw material. It was found by the river and then manipulated by the scavenger, used, and processed into a lime plaster mix as the fiber. Ultimately, these raw materials are processed and manipulated by human hands within natural building. Therefore, throughout the discussion that follows, I use the terms primary processed materials and secondary processed materials to denote different levels and layers of interaction with raw materials.¹⁵⁵ I will also speak about recycling materials. These recycled materials have been processed by human machines, chemicals, or have been manipulated or affected by human beings. For example, throughout my work with cob building, concrete served as the foundation for each structure. Concrete, as articulated in Chapter Four, Land, is one of the most highly processed materials on this planet. The production of concrete emits large amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Rather than buying bags of processed concrete to fill the foundations in quickly, we use pieces of concrete to help reduce waste and to reduce the overall cost of the project. Using and recycling found material ultimately reduces waste.

¹⁵⁵ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 15 state, "Almost all any modern building, however natural overall, will require some materials that have been unnaturally processed. It's hard to build passive solar without using glass. Even cob, composed of completely natural components, is somewhat industrially processed if we use mechanically baled straw."

[The cobber: Ok. I can see what you mean. I did find and use those old windows. Glass is a processed material and so is concrete. When we find and use these materials, we have a positive impact on the planet! Rather than purchasing concrete directly from the manufacturer, we are scavenging for the discards and the remains. So maybe it's about *how* we use these materials rather than solely *which* materials we use. I recycle concrete because I then get it out of the dumps and I get it for free.]

Scavengers stay true to natural building ideals yet understand that compromise is also necessary. Compromise is the use of both primary processed and secondary processed materials.¹⁵⁶ Within each project, as scavengers, we recognize the need to compromise on the type of materials we could and should use.

[The cobber: Natural builders try to use as few secondary processed materials as possible. The point of natural building is to step outside of mass industrialization processes and to build structures out of local and primary processed materials with a respect for the environment. Still, I know we have to make compromises. Just, please, don't make too many compromises.]

I agree, Cobber, I do. As scavengers, we gather and use primary processed materials more often than we do secondary processed materials. We also try to use found pieces or recycled pieces of secondary processed materials to help reduce the waste that matriculates because of secondary processes.

[The committee: When you create a distinction between primary processed and secondary processed materials you are setting up a distinction between nature and culture.]

¹⁵⁶ Evans, Smith, and Smiley 15 unpack the important differences between primary and secondary processing. "Primary processing has been a part of folk tradition for millennia. After primary processing, the material remains a separate element: shaped and squared rock, fired-clay bricks and tiles, lime form limestone, milled boards, sand fused into glass, straw bales, iron melted into nails, linseed oil." Secondary processing is where the elements are combined into synthetic amalgams that don't exist in nature (and which are relatively slow to break down into toxic byproducts): aluminum alloy, stainless steel, plastics, most preservatives, paints, varnishes, particle board, drywall, and above all, cement. Recycling secondary processed materials, like cement, can help to diffuse the purchase of secondary processed materials.

Setting up a distinction between primary processed and secondary processed materials, as a scavenger's compromise, seems to divide nature and culture. I argue throughout this chapter that the act of scavenging doesn't divide these two concepts but rather points to the layers of negotiation and compromise between nature and culture that materialize on a local level in the forms of primary processing, secondary processing, and the recycling of materials. The act of scavenging rearticulates my relationship to the environment. Materials are part of larger interactions and interconnections between the conceptualization of nature and culture and the localized use of these products. I write to unpack and dissolve these distinctions. In Chapter One, Building, I make the claim that natural building helps us move away from mass-industrially processed materials. Yet, within this chapter, I introduce the term scavenger as an interesting and complex metaphor between the layers of technology and nature that compromises the separation of culture and nature.

Throughout this chapter, I articulate how academic scavenging is an important movement of survival. In order for cob to survive, I need to connect to larger branches of theory in order to articulate how cob works in context. I scavenge through ecofeminism because I believed cob is one way to connect to the sacred realm of nature. Yet, ecofeminism may not translate to the most appropriate theoretical perspective within the cob building context. Ecofeminism uses a biological essentialism that keeps women subordinated to men. Within the cob project, one of our goals is to eradicate these oppressive systems. Ecofeminism does not help cob survive theoretically. Academic scavengers use what is in front of them with seemingly incompatible components to help the project survive. Postmodern feminism unravels gendered hierarchies of nature and culture through the discursive constitution of the subject and the discursive structures that shape our realities.

Academic Scavenging

The scavenger is a manifestation of feminist poststructuralist theory within the practice of natural building. Similar to a natural builder's whole systems approach to the ecosystem, feminist poststructural theory explains the world as an interconnected web. A

feminist poststructural perspective recognizes the historically rooted ideologies and material practices that make natural building so complicated. Feminist poststructuralism allows researchers to investigate the multiplicity of interactions and contradictions among competing discourses, power, non-fixity, language, and what we know as common sense in building practices and everyday local habits. A feminist poststructuralist is a scavenger, a bricoleur, always searching, moving, and collaging texts. I scavenge through these three theoretical positions in order to survive as a feminist poststructuralist. I have to complicate my understanding of ecofeminism, postmodern feminism, and poststructural feminism in order for cob to survive as a viable and workable orientation and alternative perspective.

[The academic: This is where things get exciting.]

My Faith-Full Spiritual Ecofeminist Beginnings

I grip tightly to the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism and the spiritual connections it offers me. I find solace in the idealistic version of spiritual ecofeminism. I believe in the voices of nature. In Chapter Four, I argued that the land is my home. I listen to and revel in my connection to the land. These voices of nature allow me to characterize and empathize with nature as an organism and as an interconnected, complex web of dynamic relationships between human, non-human, living, and non-living elements.

Spiritual ecofeminism is a branch of ecofeminism that combines the repossession of religion with repossession of a female and environmental ethic. As a spiritual ecofeminist, I am drawn to non-duality and understanding the sacred whole of which I am only a part. I believe that building with cob repositions the way I understand the environment as part of me and I a part of it. Using a spiritual ecofeminist standpoint, I see within our small community of natural builders a circle of energy, interconnectivity, and

embedded relationships that are co-constructed and ever changing.¹⁵⁷ I approach these relationships with a feminist ethic, grounding myself within a system of non-domination, non-violence, and power-with rather than power-over.¹⁵⁸ I believe that cob building is a physical manifestation of the communal spiritual ecofeminist ideal, which demonstrates how spiritual ecofeminism is an effective living and social model. Through our actions and the process of building together, we take apart Western systems of domination, hierarchy, and dualisms, on the local level.

[The community: We also feel uncomfortable with you using the terms *we*, *you*, and *I* interchangeably. We don't believe in ecofeminist ideals. How can you speak for us?]

[The artist: How can you speak for me?]

[The cobber: I believe you.]

[The academic: I can help. Listen to me in the footnotes.]

I am using the terms *we* and *our* to describe a belief system that may be solely my own. I have to be careful about these articulations. I am making assumptions about the way each person interacts with cob and ultimately how each person interacts with the environment. I assume that the reader is sympathetic to this endeavor. I assume that the artist is concerned with the environment and not solely the art object. I assume that each cobber can feel the energies of nature.

[The cobber: I believe you. I know it is true.]

¹⁵⁷ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979)

¹⁵⁸ Starhawk, *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004)

I am making assumptions. These assumptions close off my arguments. They narrow my own vision of this work. I cannot, theoretically or faithfully, blind myself, or this work. I have to ask myself: How does spiritual ecofeminism materialize in praxis and occur in context? What does spiritual feminism look and feel like when we move from the theory to the ground? What boundaries do we cross, create, and dissolve when we work together? How does a diverse group of people create this living model? Or do they at all? What type of model of nature and culture is constructed at this site of varying positions and peoples?

[The committee: I am so glad you are doing this. How does spiritual ecofeminism work at the site?]

To be honest, I can't answer my own questions using spiritual ecofeminism without feeling as though I am forcing the answer so I pace the kitchen floor, open the refrigerator, and stare at nothing. I am not hungry. I am waiting for the right story to explain the spiritual ecofeminist position within cob building. I am looking in my refrigerator for some sort of answer, perhaps in a fruit that might taste like an idea. I am scavenging, searching, and collecting. The articulations in my head are as cloudy as the divide between nature and culture. I close the refrigerator door and realize that my conceptualization of spiritual ecofeminism in praxis, within cob building, must be problematized.

As a theoretical standpoint, spiritual ecofeminism works for parts of my own positionality, the parts that hope and dream. As one of my subject positions, I believe and have faith in the energies of the earth, the shapes and rhythms of Gaia. As a spiritual ecofeminist, I understand the world as an interconnected weaving and intersection of energy, bodies, and atoms all colliding. Not everyone at the site believes in these same ideals. I have to leave room for a multitude of positionalities. I have to situate these claims in the everyday happenings of cob building. I pace the kitchen floor. I draft and redraft ideas. I listen carefully to the voices inside me. I read and reread ecofeminist texts. I realize that there are theoretical gaps within the branches of ecofeminist thought.

Ultimately, it seems that ecofeminism maintains and strengthens the binaries between culture/nature and man/woman. These binaries are exclusionary. Here, Man is better than woman, higher than nature, the conqueror of the planet. Modern technologies helped man to search the earth for ultimate Truth and to use the environment to forward progress. When I take a spiritual ecofeminist position, I enable these hierarchical binaries. I now move into the roots of ecofeminism to articulate how my spiritual ecofeminist position perpetuates these binaries that do not account for the multitudes of positionalities present at the cob building site.

[The cobber: I can be either male or female. I don't like these biological assumptions either. I think you need to resolve this tension.]

The Boundaries of Nature and Culture: Unpacking Ecofeminism

In 1974, Francoise d'Eaubonne first used the term ecofeminism to express the direct connection between oppression of women and oppression of nature.¹⁵⁹ Ecofeminism is rooted in the belief that there is a connection between feminism and ecological values. This connection has been shaped by what Karen J. Warren calls "an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework."¹⁶⁰ This framework consists of value dualism, value-hierarchical thinking, and logic of domination. Value dualisms associate men with culture and women with nature. Women have been naturalized and nature feminized. Value-hierarchical thinking associates men with power because culture is said to dominate nature. The logic of domination naturalizes the idea that men have power over nature as they do women. This is embodied in practices such as rape, pillaging, and

¹⁵⁹ Francoise d'Eaubonne, "The Time for Ecofeminism," *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, ed. Carolyn Merchant, trans. Ruth Hottell, (Reprinted Atlantic Highlands: NJ: Humanities, 1994) 174-197.

¹⁶⁰ Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1998) 246

pollution. “The hatred of women is the same as the hatred of nature” is one of the principle mechanisms governing the action of males and this patriarchal culture.¹⁶¹

Rosemarie Putnam Tong, in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, notes that there are three feminist reactions/resolutions to the nature/woman connection. The theorists within the first position, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*,¹⁶² move to sever the link between woman and nature through language and definitions of women. Radical feminists and ecofeminists, within the second position, want to embrace and revere the link between women and nature over and above the man-culture connection. Some posit women are closer to nature because of their essential spiritual and biological characteristics.¹⁶³ Socialist and Marxist feminists, within the third position, object to the woman-nature link because this connection is

¹⁶¹ Putnam Tong 247

¹⁶² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Howard Madison Parshley, trans. and ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1951).

¹⁶³ Mary Daly is a radical, separatist, lesbian feminist. She argues in *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) that women should completely reject the system of patriarchy and put women back in the original and wild natural world, freeing them from men’s domesticating cultural world. Further, the woman/nature alignment is as powerful as man/culture, perhaps even more powerful. Daly believes that in the wild, women are free to understand their own bodies, have loving relationships, commune with animals, and connect to the earth. Men’s gynecology segments reproduction as if it was a mode of production/cutting into parts. Women’s gyn/ecology privileges women’s living, loving connections, and relationships. Women can save nature from necrophilia (death). Similar to Mary Daly’s argument that women are closer to nature than men, Susan Griffin’s poetic writings in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), imply ontological connections between women and nature. She states, “And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature. Nature weeping” (1). She believes women have special way of perceiving and knowing because of their fundamental connections to nature. Further, Griffin believes Western culture has privileged culture over nature and this is disastrous. Women must try and challenge the dualisms created by male culture. Through her poetic writing, Griffin asks us to enter Plato’s cave where matter and spirit merge, the true habitat of human beings who are more than just ideas. Women must refuse to let themselves and nature be treated in such violating ways.

socially constructed. Because a woman's connection to nature is socially constructed,¹⁶⁴ it can be socially resolved.¹⁶⁵

Ecofeminists have argued over the nature/culture dichotomy since its very move from deep ecology. Inherent within all of the arguments made by the radical/cultural and spiritual ecofeminists of the 1970s and 1980s is their reliance on the nature/culture dualism, what Catriona Sandilands describes as “an elaborate narrative of the development of difference into a hegemonic, patriarchal, antinaturist structure.”¹⁶⁶ Further, she states, “The focus of these founding works is the historical polarization of humanity from nature, men from women, mind from body, and reason from emotion in the philosophical and religious development of ideals of transcendent humanity.”¹⁶⁷ Our focus on this dualism only perpetuates and recreates the grand narrative that women are innately closer to nature on both their biology and the world around them.

¹⁶⁴ Dorothy Dinnerstein in “Survival of Earth: The Meaning of Feminism,” *Healing the Wonders: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Santa Cruz, CA: New Society Publishers, 1989), believes Western dichotomous thought must be dissolved in order to end oppression of everyone and the devaluing system. From her social constructionist standpoint, Dinnerstein finds that the way in which men and women are socialized in the nature/culture dichotomy impacts how we treat the natural world. As form of social construction, we come to understand women through mothering. Men who cannot be their mothers, or are taught to not cultivate the social characteristics of a mother, will instead seek to control and separate her from all that is identified as masculine. This is the same for nature. As we understand women, so too, we understand nature. She states that the attempt to exclude women from culture and men from nature only hurts any reconciliation or reimagining of the nature and culture divide. We need to include women in culture and men in nature in order to understand that we are one, not separate entities.

¹⁶⁵ Putnam Tong introduces Karen J. Warren and her argument that dualisms are social constructions and all forms of oppressions are linked. Therefore, feminism, a movement to end sexism, is also a movement to end naturism. Because ecoethics are laden with sexism, we need ecofeminist ethics in order to overcome naturism. Warren pushes for transformative feminism which recognizes the interconnections between all systems of oppression, stresses diversity of women's experiences, rejects logic of domination, rethinks what it means to be human, and cultivates an ethic that stresses both traditional feminine virtues and science and technology should be used to preserve the earth.

¹⁶⁶ Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 15.

¹⁶⁷ Sandilands 15.

Because of this intimate connection to the womb and ultimately the earth, women can develop what some ecofeminists call an ethics of care.¹⁶⁸ An ethics of care is based on the essence of the mother and is characterized by nurturance.¹⁶⁹ The ethics of care places emphasis on a woman's ability to care for others.¹⁷⁰ Ecofeminists¹⁷¹ focus on these essentialist assumptions about women's innate connections to nature prides itself on the ability and duty of women to take care of the environment.¹⁷² This gender-specific care metaphor naturalizes a woman's ability to care and celebrates uncritically her life-sustaining ability.¹⁷³

Catriona Sandilands in *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*, describes this orientation as motherhood environmentalism.¹⁷⁴ This metaphor is based on biological essentialisms that reduce a woman's activist or political orientation to maternal instincts.¹⁷⁵ There is something inherently unnerving about ecofeminist biological essentialisms. How can women and men be reduced to categorical assumptions about their relationships to nature and culture because of their body parts, socialization processes, and the discourses that frame their very existence? I do believe that each of these discussions is important in establishing that a gendered hierarchy does

¹⁶⁸ Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism," *Healing the Wounds: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990) 106-121.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹⁷⁰ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Beacon, 1989).

¹⁷¹ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper Collins, 1976).

¹⁷² Mary Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries: Towards a Feminist Green Socialism* (London: Virago P, 1992).

¹⁷³ Sherilyn MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* (Vancouver, Canada: UBC P, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ Sandilands 15.

¹⁷⁵ Ariel Sallah, *Ecofeminism as Politics; Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

exist. This hierarchy extends into and creates oppressive acts within nature and culture, but we are missing the mark. When we include discussions of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, these dualisms on which these essentialisms are founded aren't so sturdy. Postmodern feminists unravel the dualisms on discursive and material levels.

A scavenger understands the inherent contradictions within all paradigms, within all theories, and within all positions. Adapting to change is a necessary tool for survival. Postmodern feminism offers the scavenger theoretical tools to adapt to these changes. I believe that postmodern feminism problematizes the biological and maternal essentialisms inherent in the current ecofeminist debate.¹⁷⁶ Postmodern feminists argue discourse frames and creates essentialist thought. These essentialisms also create erasure of differing subject positions. I work with postmodern feminism to see how the essentialisms within the ecofeminist debates can be discursively renegotiated. Perhaps

¹⁷⁶ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, authors of *Ecofeminism* (London, Zed Books, 1993), are socialist transformative ecofeminists. They believe that Western culture's obsession with the idea of sameness, capitalism, and patriarchy stamp out difference and alienate people from one another. They argue that human beings lack physical contact with the earth. Sex is one of the only ways we can connect with mother earth. Because of this lack of physical contact with the earth we yearn for physical intimacy. In order to create change in our society and dissolve all the practices and systems that threaten to destroy the earth they offer ten steps:

1. Live simply to satisfy basic human needs
2. Use only amount of nature that you need and create communities capable of meeting these needs
3. Participatory democracy
4. Develop synergetic problem solving approaches
5. Combine science with magic
6. Break boundaries between work and play
7. View earth air water as community goods not possession
8. Adopt socialist transformative ecofeminist view
9. Men and women should cultivate traditional feminine virtues
10. Each person to have enough means no one can have it all

postmodern feminism can move this debate closer to the localized movements that happen within cob building.

Postmodern Feminism: Disrupting the Subject

Postmodern feminists reframe the nature/culture debate and posit that there is no singular view of the world and no single truth to be discovered. Western, objective, patriarchal conceptualizations of science have transformed nature into a mindless object, a realm to be discovered, and claimed for human use. But this ethnocentric, anthropomorphic, capitalist, and scientific conceptualization of nature does not register in other cultures. There are different viewpoints—human and non-human—contextualized within language, history, culture, class, race, gender, and location. What was once conceived as an objective reality to be discovered through scientific measurement and observation is now a contextual and shifting embrace of possibility. Nature and culture are also structures of discourse, imaginary places between the real and the symbolic, without a single and operational definition. Postmodern feminists believe we can rearticulate the imagined binary between man and woman, nature and culture and that this articulation can change material and social practices.

[The artist: I am confused as to why there is no mention of art or cob as an arts-based process anywhere in this section of the text.]

[The cobber: I want to get back to cobbing.]

[The documentarian: I want some pictures. Don't you think the documentation will show you what is real and what isn't?]

[The academic: I am trying to connect all of our ideas here. Discursively, we need a framework to talk about cob. Cob doesn't just stand on it's own. I want to be able to articulate how cob works theoretically and materially. Just give me the chance. Be patient.]

Postmodern feminism is highly influenced by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan,¹⁷⁷ deconstructionist Jacques Derrida,¹⁷⁸ and existentialist Simone de Beauvoir.¹⁷⁹ From the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Simone de Beauvoir, postmodern feminism has carved a space for theorizing about non-phallogentric, non-binary, empowering, and/or feminine language.

Some scholars, while capitalizing on the insights of postmodern thought, reject the label, arguing that their own individual theories are distinct and without need for

¹⁷⁷ Putnam Tong 196 summarizes Jacques Lacan's articulation of the symbolic order. For Lacan, the symbolic order regulates society through "interrelated signs, roles, and rituals." The symbolic order is inscribed and internalized into the unconscious of every member of our society. Each of us goes through three stages: the pre-Oedipal, mirror and Oedipal phase in which we fit in to the order and submit to the Law of the Father. The anatomy of the woman deems them unfit to internalize the symbolic order, confining us to the margins. What women feel and think cannot be expressed in the masculine language. Women are reduced to mumbling or silence. "Women are, therefore, unknowable" (197). According to feminist interpretations of Lacan, in order to break the boundaries of the phallic and patriarchal order, one must come to understand *jouissance*, feminine sexual pleasure, by using a nonphallic language.

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, his critique of the symbolic order, has influenced postmodern feminism as well. Putnam Tong 198 states, "Derrida criticized three aspects of the symbolic order: (1) logocentrism, the primacy of the spoken word; (2) phallogentrism, the primacy of the phallus, which connotes a unitary drive toward a single, supposedly reachable goal; and (3) dualism, the expression of everything in terms of binary oppositions." Derrida wants to free thinking from singularity by providing alterative interpretations of texts. Derrida's *differance* describes the gap between reality and language. Postmodern feminists find that women were left in this gap between reality and language and silenced in this abyss and need to find their way out of this gap, especially the gap between binary oppositions.

¹⁷⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), asks the question, "Why is woman the second sex?" This question prompted postmodern feminists to problematize the answers. Postmodern feminists assert that the idea that woman is an other has its advantages. "The conditions of otherness enable women to stand back and criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone" (179). Women then have an advantage. They can stand from this "oppressed" position and revel in its glorious realm of differences plurality and openness.

classification. Postmodern feminists such as Heléne Cixous¹⁸⁰ and Luce Irigaray¹⁸¹ avoid labels and generalizations finding such categorizations or answers too narrow and confining. These scholars reject feminist theory that relies on one Truth and one answer to what they see is a plurality of experience and difference. However, it is extremely difficult to challenge the symbolic order when the words available to do so are words that have been issued by this order.¹⁸² And still, one thing is clear: each of these theorists

¹⁸⁰ Heléne Cixous finds freedom through feminine writing. While masculine writing is rooted in the phallus and cast in binary oppositions, feminine writing asks that women write themselves in their own form. Putnam Tong 200 states, “She urged women to out themselves—the unthinkable/unthought—into words. The kind of writing Cixous identifies as woman’s own-marking scratching, jotting down—connotes movements that bring to mind Heraclitus’ ever-changing river.” There is power in this space for women. I remember reading Cixous’s work in my undergraduate career and connecting to her poetic and free flowing voice. Her words spilled onto the page. She asked me to find my own woman’s voice. She was the first feminist theorist to really grab my attention. I also believe that her writing greatly influences my own style of writing. Cixous asked women to write their own place in the world with woman-speak, a poetic language that was not confined to the strict, narrow and heavy burden of masculine logic. Throughout her writing Cixous connected language with sexualities. Woman’s sexuality, like her writing, is open to possibility, fluid, ever changing, multiple, rhythmic, powerful, full of pleasures, and unpredictable. Desire, not logic or reason, is the way woman can escape Western thought. And a woman’s writing can create freedom. Yet, what I have done here, in my undergraduate connection to Cixous, is perpetuate and highlight the biological essentialisms associated with women and their writing.

¹⁸¹ Luce Irigaray argues for psychotherapeutic freedom. Through psychotherapy and writing, Irigaray aims to liberate the feminine from masculine, philosophical thought. She adapts Lacan’s theory of pre-Oedipal development, that within the imaginary stage of developing a sense of self as a distinct and separate subjectivity, boys are liberated from the illusory mirror image and move into the symbolic order. Girls are disconnected and lack because they look to their mothers for their sense of developing self but girls are still caught in the imaginary. Irigaray argues that while girls are not liberated from the imaginary, the imaginary is a world full of possibilities. We need to explore how women see women and how women understand the feminine through the female gaze and subjectivity. Putnam Tong states, “Where woman does not reflect man, she does not exist and, stressed Irigaray, will never exist until the Oedipus complex is exploded” (203). Irigaray’s plan of action towards feminine liberation can be maneuvered in three ways. First, women can create a female language, eschewing gender-neutral language as forcefully as they eschew male language. Gender neutral and objective scientific language does nothing but mask the identity of the speaker. She encourages women to speak in the active voice and to take responsibility for their own voices. Second, women can create a sexuality that is female. The feminine voice is in the labia, in her two lips, in her plurality of sexuality. Woman must displace the phallus and not be penetrated by it because it keeps the lips separated. Women can free themselves through lesbian and autoerotic practice. Third, women should take men’s images of women and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions. Irigaray embraces her self-contradictions, the fluidity in rebelling against logical consistency.

¹⁸² Putnam Tong 200.

attempts to offer women freedom from oppressive thought in discursive and material practices.

Postmodern feminism embraces a woman's otherness without reveling in it. Postmodern feminists have criticized traditional notions of "subjectivity" and "essence" for their universalizing tendencies to exclude and marginalize choosing, instead, to focus on how discursive structures shape our reality. According to postmodern feminists, it is crucially important to disrupt our definitions of Woman. "Read through the lenses of the 'politics of location' the re-definition of the female feminist subject starts with the revaluation of subjectivity, rejecting any universal, neutral, and consequently gender-free understanding of human embodiment."¹⁸³ Woman can no longer be readable in terms of Other, or part of man, but is rather a complex, multi-layered and embodied subject. She is "a subject in process; a mutant; the other of the Other; a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis."¹⁸⁴ If the woman/feminist subject is multiple, the critique of an essential unitary self is quite clear. There is no unity to the subject. Therefore, the claim that a woman is closer to nature is contextual, not universal. As women disrupt biological binaries, there is also a refiguring of the ordering and relationship between nature and culture.

Currently, ecofeminists are using postmodern theory and complexifying the nature/culture debate. Ecofeminism and postmodern feminism seem to be playing with each other, mixing and mingling their assumptions about the social, political, cultural, essential character of woman/nature/culture. While the discourses of nature and culture are an important place to begin unfolding the distinctions between nature and culture, it seems that the question I had so much trouble with a few pages back—how does spiritual ecofeminism work in praxis?—is still bothering me. How do these theories about nature

¹⁸³ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) 44.

¹⁸⁴ Braidotti 45.

and culture, gendered relationships, primary and secondary processed materials work in local interactions? How do ecofeminism and postmodern feminism help to articulate the relationships between local, raw, primary processed, and secondary processed materials?

[The committee: So far, they haven't really moved us close enough to your question of local practice. So, academic scavenger, what are you going to use?]

After scavenging through ecofeminist and postmodern feminist philosophies, I am not convinced that these theoretical materials work well enough alone or together within the context of cob building. I look to feminist poststructural theorists Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to unpack how *bodies* situate, materialize, and problematize claims about nature and culture.

Feminist Poststructuralism: Reconceptualizing the Body

We are facing what Donna Haraway¹⁸⁵ calls boundary breakdowns between human and animal, technology and nature, physical and nonphysical. Nature is just as messy as the term Woman. Haraway offers new metaphors and frameworks from which to understand this multiple, complex, and indefinable relationship between the discourses and materializations of nature and culture. Haraway¹⁸⁶ theorizes that the oppositions in the nature and culture dichotomy are broken down into networks of material, social, and cultural relationships between actors. Actors are not necessarily human or living beings. Haraway notes,

“There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category

¹⁸⁵ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

¹⁸⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.”¹⁸⁷

She proposes, instead, that feminists should concentrate on the actor as a cyborg rather than the Woman because this definition is not fixed.

“Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen ‘high-technological’ guise as information systems, texts and ergonomically controlled laboring, desiring, and reproducing systems.”¹⁸⁸

As cyborgs, we are also machines, “communications systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.”¹⁸⁹ Arguing for ironic cyborg feminism, she states, “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”¹⁹⁰ In order to escape and parody the essentialism associated with biology and science, the cyborg metaphor forces people to rethink our accepted knowledges about Western culture, science, nature, and technologies.

[The community: So in order to get out of the bind of nature and culture, you are going to call us cyborgs? That makes us feel pretty uncomfortable. We are still human. Aren’t you?]

[The committee: It is an important metaphor. It does, in some ways, get us out of the bind between nature and culture.]

[The academic: Metaphors can be painful and useful. Isn’t there something else? I think that we need to bring this back to the community.]

¹⁸⁷ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* 155.

¹⁸⁸ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* 1.

¹⁸⁹ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* 1.

¹⁹⁰ Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan@Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 503.

[The cobbler: I want to see it happen in the cob. How does a machine understand what cob feels like between your toes? How can a cyborg understand intentions and emotions?]

There is an important distinction happening here. The voices are all speaking around the idea that metaphors construct and form new discourses to discuss and (re)imagine the nature of our identities. Haraway's cyborg creates an important distinction. She argues that we are not nature, nor are we culture. There isn't a distinction between the two but instead, hybrid subjectivities form in the intersection of nature and culture. She is using these metaphors to make room for new metaphors and workable relationships that aren't reduced to biological essentialisms. Ingrid Bartsch, Carolyn DiPalma, and Laura Sells, in *Witnessing the Postmodern Jeremiad: (Mis)Understanding Donna Haraway's Method of Inquiry* state, "The cyborg performs the function of radical nominalism; it names the condition of women's lives within the logic of late capitalism in which key boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, and physical and nonphysical have imploded."¹⁹¹ These implosions set up an interesting dynamic between living and non-living things and rearticulate our dependence on identity politics. In this way, we are free from the categories that may narrow our possible identities. A person's relationship to nature means different things to differently situated people. Subjectivities are grounded in local, social, political, contextually based experiences at the intersections of race, class, gender, and identity. Multiple subjectivities are grounded not in nature, nor in culture, but in the space between nature and culture. Antiessentialist identity politics also opens up the space for differently situated political models, more specifically eco-conscious political models.

Haraway's eco-conscious political model of civic practice includes responsibility with nature. She understands nature as an active subject that can and should participate in

¹⁹¹ Ingrid Bartsch, Carolyn DiPalma, and Laura Sells, "Witnessing the Postmodern Jeremiad: (Mis)Understanding Donna Haraway's Method of Inquiry," *Configurations* 9 (2001): 140.

civic culture. Rather than focus on oneness with nature, Haraway argues that people should focus on our relationality with nature. Human connectedness with nature is not stable or fixed but is rather fluid and constructed along the vectors of power that define civic life.¹⁹² Haraway's metaphors and new directions in cyborg feminism shift the relationships of nature and culture.

[The committee: I am still confused. How does this help your argument about the scavenger in feminist poststructural thought? What does any of this have to do with cob building?]

[The cobber: Right. Where are the stories about cob?]

[The documentarian: Ah hem, excuse me. I haven't seen one photograph in this chapter. Who, besides the committee, really wants to read any of these ideas without any stories or pictures?]

[The academic: I do.]

[The documentarian: That's why you are in the footnotes, so stay there!]

[The cobber: Come one y'all. We just need to reflect about why we are getting so frustrated here. Let's use our reflection journals and sketch out where we want to be besides right here.]

Shhhh. Please. I will get to most of you. Don't you realize that I want to be in the stories, too?

Haraway's use of the cyborg and her model of eco-conscious model of civic practice calls for relationality with nature. I argue that the scavenger can create and materialize these relationships.

[The artist: Ah! The scavenger is an a/r/tographical metaphor. Collaging theory is an art form.]

¹⁹² Bartsch, DiPalma, and Sells 149.

I move the scavenger metaphor into local and workable situations that occur in praxis. I look to Rosi Braidotti to help articulate another layer of the scavenger in local practice.

As an academic scavenger, I take a part of Braidotti's argument for a nomadic subjectivity. A nomadic subjectivity entails a constant state of becoming. Our subjectivities are always in process, in flux. The nonessentialized feminist subject is no longer grounded in feminine nature but is capable of ethic and moral agency. A nomadic subjectivity cultivates what Braidotti calls a feminist philosophy of 'as if.' The *as if* philosophy leaves room for a feminist imaginary, new metaphors, definitions, and new relationships between the body and technologies. The as if philosophy is a "technique of strategic re-location in order to rescue what we need of the past in order to trace paths of transformation of our lives here and now."¹⁹³ The *as if* philosophy leaves room for the scavenger within cob building to help complicate distinctions within nature and culture. Yet, Braidotti insists that a nomadic subjectivity is always grounded in real contexts and situations. Nomadic subjectivity is therefore not an essential act because subjective specificity is grounded in lived experiences, with multiple discourses, physicality, and contexts creating the flux of the *as if* philosophy.

If a nomadic subjectivity is always grounded in real situations, Braidotti posits the *body* is the mediator between nature and culture. Human beings originally extended the body "through tools, weapons and artifacts, then through language, the ultimate prosthesis."¹⁹⁴ Braidotti, like Haraway, proposes that there is no clear distinction between the natural and the cultural. What is important for this discussion about cob building is Braidotti's argument that the body mediates technology.

¹⁹³ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* 6.

¹⁹⁴ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* 144.

Braidotti's focus on the body moves the scavenger into material practices and into the actual *act of scavenging* within cob building. If the body mediates technology, scavengers mediate the use of these technologies within cob building in order to assert and materialize an environmental ethic. While scavengers do use technologies to their advantage, they do so consciously and practically.

[The cobber: Wait a minute. You want me to use technology? Yuck. You won't see me around a bulldozer anytime soon.]

I know you feel that way, Cobber. I understand the scavenger as the mediator between nature and technology that scavenges with an environmental ethic in mind. In Chapter Four, *Land*, I argued that the land is made up of so many other context-specific components, like institutions, technologies, and the capitalist systems. When we understand the land as part of and within these components, the land still complicates the distinction between nature and culture and ultimately grants the scavenger a place within feminist poststructural theory.

Scavenging within feminist poststructuralism and cob building is one component of the arts-based process that materially mediates our use of materials gathered in nature.

[The artist: I see you are still working with cob as an arts-based process. Can you be clear about cob as a material, or scavenging for found art materials?]

As an arts-based process, scavengers gather components of the land as sculpting and building material. The environment is their canvas. The land is their home, yet, we can't leave out all of the elements of the land that seem undesirable to natural builders or marked as spaces of culture that are manipulated by human hands.

Rather than using the term natural to describe cob building materials, scavengers use primary and secondary processed materials to their advantage with an environmental ethic in mind. The scavenger is one metaphor that extends Braidotti's call for new imaginaries within the *as if* philosophy.

[The committee: Oh. I see the scavenger now. I can see the scavenger in terms of an *as if* philosophy. I can imagine myself a scavenger. The scavenger is the movement between technologies and the body. The scavenger moves through

the layers of technology and the body, using and playing with what s/he can in the theory and natural building. Exciting!]

The Scavenger in Feminist Poststructuralism

The feminist poststructural scavenger, as a metaphor within cob building, intersects identities, historical positionings, discourses, desires for change, institutionalized boundaries, and differences at each contextually based cob building site. The scavenger can take advantage of portions of theory. The scavenger moves through each layer of ecofeminism and postmodern feminism and uses theoretical ideas to her/his advantage. From ecofeminism, I take away an ethic of ecological citizenship and work to alleviate the essentialisms that ultimately divide men and women, nature and culture. From postmodern feminism, I look to the discourses of Woman that create these binaries and disrupt them through discursive practice. Feminist poststructuralism works from the postmodern perspective and focuses on discourse as the root of hierarchical privileging between man and nature, nature and culture, man and woman. Feminist poststructuralism works to find opportunities for resisting these discourses. The scavenger is a working metaphor to imagine new relationships to our ecology. Our ecological system is made up of humans and non-humans, living and non-living elements, and primary and secondary process materials.

Scavenging offers, through action, the materialization of this resistance. Scavenging within feminist poststructuralism and cob building is one component of the arts-based process that materially mediates the use of materials gathered in nature. As an arts-based process, scavengers gather components of the land for their sculpting and building material. First, as an embodied mediator between nature and culture, a feminist poststructuralist scavenger creates local change by using local materials. The local materials are neither natural nor cultural. The scavenger chooses materials based upon levels of processing. Second, in order to create these acts of resistance, a feminist poststructuralist scavenger examines local action and interaction between people, positionalities, and competing differences. The ecosystem is a scavenger's canvas.

First, the feminist poststructuralist scavenger is amenable and creates localized change by using local materials within the cob building process. Rather than using the term *natural* to describe cob building materials, scavengers use primary and secondary processed materials to their advantage with an environmental ethic in mind. As an arts-based process, scavengers gather components of the land for their sculpting and building material. The land is the scavenger's home. The land includes the institutionalized discourses of modernism and capitalism.

[The cobbler: How can cob be natural building if we no longer distinguish what is natural from what is not?]

The scavenger is a manifestation of feminist poststructuralist thought within the context of building with natural materials. Rather than using only the term *between* nature and culture, I propose the scavenger works *within and on these terms*, through the layering and intersections of nature and culture. Poststructuralist feminist scavengers recognize the layers of material processing. Scavengers gather and use primary processed materials more often than secondary processed materials. S/he tries to use found pieces or recycled pieces of secondary processed materials to help reduce the waste that matriculates because of secondary processes. A scavenger understands the impact each material has on the land. A scavenger always works with an environmental ethic in mind.

Second, the feminist poststructuralist scavenger closely examines the intersections of localized identities. A feminist poststructuralist perspective allows for a diverse understanding of human and non-human connectedness. Haraway¹⁹⁵ theorizes that the oppositions in the nature and culture dichotomy are broken down into networks of material, social, and cultural relationships between actors. Actors are not necessarily human or living beings. Braidotti claims the *body* is the mediator between nature and culture. Scavengers are part of a larger interconnected web of discourses, actions, natural

¹⁹⁵ Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*.

materials, and perspectives. The act of scavenging complicates and negotiations these interconnections. Scavengers need other scavengers/cobblers/artists/students/teachers.

The following chapter gives storied examples of how the scavenging body mediates between *and* creates practical realities within the act of scavenging. Following my desire to articulate how scavenging is one element of survival, I bring these theoretical articulations into material and local situations. I work from the claim that survival happens on the local level, within and between people, materials, and within institutions. The practical realities of movements and moments of survival, happen within all stages of the building process.

CHAPTER VI

PRACTICAL REALITIES

An embodied and embedded nomadic entity feeds upon, incorporates and transforms its environment (be it 'natural,' 'social,' 'human,' or whatever) constantly. Being embodied in this high-tech ecological manner means being immersed in fields of constant flows and transformations. Not all of them are positive, of course, although in such a dynamic system this cannot be known or judged *a priori*.

-Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions*¹⁹⁶

We find the thing in the world as our resource for making things, and in the process we leave our trace on things, we fabricate things out of what we find. The thing is the resource, in other words, for both subjects and technology.

-Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*¹⁹⁷

Scavenging is one of the most important elements of survival. To scavenge is to feed off of discarded materials. As Braidotti claims above, a scavenger is an embodied, nomadic entity that is constantly transforming the environment. Survival within cob is dependent on the scavenger's ability to find these materials and then transform them into functional and sustainable cob structures. As Grosz notes above, *the thing* we find in the world becomes our resource for subjects and technology. Cob is a technology that

¹⁹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006) 267.

¹⁹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002) 132.

addresses survival. One goal in cob building is to minimize negative ecological impacts and to be ecologically and environmentally aware when making these material and embodied scavenging choices. One goal in scavenging is to find and use materials as efficiently and creatively as possible. Efficiency depends on the type of material that is collected. The creative and artistic elements of scavenging are how we use these materials. There are three types of materials that scavengers collect: Primary processed, secondary processed, and recycled secondary processed materials.

Cobbers want to use as many primary processed materials as possible. But as scavengers, cobbers use secondary processed materials. There are two types of secondary processed material. Store-bought secondary processed materials have the greatest impact on our environment. Rather than contributing to modern notions of progress and industrialized, mass-produced, building practices, scavengers use materials that would otherwise be discarded. Using found or recycled secondary processed materials lessens our environmental impact and maximizes our potential for ecological survival.

Materials: A Scavenger's Guidebook to Practical Realities

A scavenger digs through trash bins looking for treasure. As a scavenger, I use discards from other industrial processes and I build from these things. Getting prepared, finding the right amount of lime, clay, sand, straw, and concrete pieces is no easy task. Cob building works at the local level. Cob rearticulates the metaphoric divisions between nature and culture, primary and secondary processing of materials, and gendered, racial, class, and ethnic identities. This project is also about the aesthetic process of responding to industrialization and the mass-produced environments and modern notions of progress. I use storied a/r/tographical moments and movements of scavenging within each cob project. Each a/r/tographical concept unpacks and complexifies the art of scavenging as a survival strategy within cob building.

[The artist: Thank goodness. I have been waiting for you to reconnect to your art in this text.]

[The cobber: Don't forget that cob is an art.]

[The documentarian: Do you use pictures?]

I use pictures, stories, and a/r/tographical concepts to connect how the art of scavenging creates *openings*, *reverberations*, and *excess*. These movements and moments of cob aren't closed articulations but possibilities and potential engagement of survival tactics.

First, I argue local positionalities and identities intersect at the cob building site. The intersections highlight *openings* that negotiate a seemingly hushed attitude towards race relationships in the United States. Second, I argue that scavengers find a subtle balance between primary and secondary processed materials. These *reverberations* blend definitions of nature and technology. Third, as a point of *excess*, a scavenger faces the practical realities of time and its constraints. Fourth, as another form of *excess*, a scavenger is taunted, trapped, and saved by capitalism's modern conveniences. Finally, a scavenger looks for and needs people¹⁹⁸/artisans/cobbers willing to offer their labors to the project. Local support creates *reverberations*. Scavenging for people to work with cob is an a/r/tographical desire to allow researchers/artists/students/teachers to negotiate active processes and practices of living and learning deeply. The following practical realities help to rearticulate the feminist poststructural scavenger *within* each compromise, movement, layering, and negotiation of material practices and material choices.

Practical Reality: Local Identities and Positionalities

Ani, the documentarian, is taking photographs of our work at Mini-City. She laughs and says, "Hey, Jeanine. Grab some of the sand and clay so I can take a picture of it before it is mixed." I put my hand in a bucket and grab some clay to pose for a quick shot (see fig. 62).

¹⁹⁸ The beauty of cob is that everyone becomes each of these subject positions. The process of building with cob is accessible. Anyone, who is willing, can learn how to cob.

“We need another hand. You aren’t in this alone,” she says. She looks around for another cobbler. She calls to one of the Teens Alive Leaders. “Jamal, can you grab a handful of this clay and hold it up next to Jeanine’s hand?”

He slowly walks over and says playfully, “Gotta have the token black hand in the picture.”

I look at him with surprise.



Fig. 62. Our hands

“Jamal, come on now, don’t be silly. You really think we want your hand in this shot because you have dark skin?” He grins. He puts in hand in the bucket next to mine (see fig. 62). He knows about race relations in the United States. I also know about race relations but my subject positioning is so much different than his. I am a white, middle-class woman who is in love with another woman. Jamal is a young, black male. I assume, because he is part of the program that helps teenagers with financial hardship, he comes from a family that is considered lower class. I also assume that he is in the program to help him get out of this class category. His perspective is so much different than my own.

After Ani snaps the picture and brings the camera down, she looks at me with her serious eyes. From this glance, I can tell that she wants me to carry on this conversation. I want to keep it going too. She is right. This is the perfect time to talk about this. I am nervous. What should I say?

This is an opening. This is a space of engagement. I try and begin a conversation about race relations in the United States. I want to start a dialogue in order to create social change. These are the moments that make a difference in our lives. He has so much to teach me.

I ask, “What does it mean for you to be a token black hand? Why do you think this would be a token picture?”

“You know what I mean. People take pictures of black folk doin’ well in this program to make their program look good.” Jamal raises a great point.

“I don’t know about your family, your communities, and your life. I want to know more. I live in South Seminole Heights. Where do you live?”

I realize in my heart of hearts how surface-level these questions are. But I have to start somewhere.

“I live off of Washington and Martin Luther King.”

My mind flashes to the corner store that people who have lived in Tampa for some time talk about. It is the store where African American men gather. They sit on milk crates and talk. There is rumor that drug dealing is rampant there.

“Cool. I don’t live that far from you.”

We live so far apart. I flash in my mind to the gentrification of neighborhoods, to the way racial divisions stereotypically divide us. I think about where I live in Seminole Heights and how I don’t socialize with my black or Latino neighbors.

Jamal walks away.

[The committee: Is this really what happened? You asked this question and he responded? This seems too easy and too contrived.]

I remember him talking about the ‘token black hand’ and the program surviving because it was helping folks “like him.” I remember asking him about where he lived. I

remember him walking away quickly. I wasn't satisfied with this discussion. I want to eradicate the binaries and boundaries that separate us. Our conversation didn't seem to go anywhere. When we took this picture, we didn't know anything about each other. I didn't know anything about Jamal's personal life. I didn't know anything about his perceptions of me and of the world around him.

In this short conversation, he is aware of the ways race constructs difference. Cob creates these openings to listen, interact, and speak with each other. In that moment, I didn't think about the picture as a 'token' black and white photograph. But he did. I didn't think about the significance of this moment until Jamal made it clear to me that there was a white female and black male hand in the same bucket. Jamal made me speechless. I stumbled in my responses and in my conversational prompting.

This opening seemed to close quickly. Openings are not passive holes through which we pass easily. Openings are cracks, tears, and passages that refuse to be comfortable or predictable.¹⁹⁹ The interaction with Jamal was not comfortable. I can feel the pages ripping. I know this first tear will open further. The practical reality of this situation is that identity negotiation isn't so simple.²⁰⁰ Conversations about race in our society are connected to a multitude of issues. I didn't expand the conversation in this specific moment. I was caught off guard. Yet, this first conversation created an opening for further conversations.

Although openings are difficult, unpredictable, and uncomfortable moments, I do not want to turn away from them. Openings are spaces of engagement that seek understanding through the continued movements through the articulation of ideas and

¹⁹⁹ Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind

²⁰⁰ Ruth Arber, "Defining Positioning Within Politics of Difference: Negotiation Spaces 'In Between'," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3 (2000): 46 states that "all of 'us' and all of 'them,' are multipositioned, implicated in unequally empowered ways of understanding and doing; that people share positionings in common and yet are not simply defined by sets of binaries; black/white, working class/middle class, female/male." I agree with Arber. The interactions at the site point to the multiplicity of identities and the difficult task of talking about these positions.

response. Within each of these openings, I am faced with a difficult personal and practical reality. The practical reality is that although I thought I was breaking down borders, negotiating identities and difference, I maintained systems of power and oppression in the United States through localized and specific action.

Practical Reality: Power and Identities

I pull my truck down the streets of Mini-City. I have to be careful of each of these small corners and the young children crossing in front of my truck on their three wheelers. Without caution, I could really hurt someone. I think of this statement in many different layers. Without caution, I could hurt someone. One practical reality of working with multipositioned people is that our conversations and our intersections can become tricky. But cob building creates openings through our embodied experiences and conversations.

My truck pulls to a stop in front of the building site. “Hey, Miss J!” Mario calls to me from the tarp.

“Hey y’all! Can you come help me unload these poles?” I roll down the windows a little and turn on the stereo. “What do you want to listen to today?”

“I want to listen to 98.7. But I bet you have no idea what that is.”

“I know what it is,” I say defiantly.

“Yeah, I bet you do,” Jeremiah snickers as he grabs the wooden pole from the truck bed.

“I like a few rap artists. I like Goodie Mob. They are really political.” I grab another end of the wooden pole. Jeremiah nods at my help.

“Kanye West is my favorite,” Mario says as he steps in the cob mix. “Ya know, he really is right about the President not helping out the black folk who live in Louisiana.”

“Yeah, our President doesn’t care about me, or any of us,” Jamal says as he walks over to the cob pile.

“Miss J, listen to this song. I brought it so you could listen to it,” Jeremiah grabs a CD out of his bag.

“Cool. Go put it in the truck’s CD player.”

I listen. I watch as Jamal, Mario, and Jeremiah nod their heads with the rhythm of the music. They move their bodies. They rhyme in sync and laugh when one of them misses the word or the beat.

Mario shakes his head and says, “I just can’t believe that all of us are dying over there and that jerk of a President hasn’t done a thing to save them.”

Jamal jumps into the song and follows the words. He breaks from the line and says, “Yeah. Kanye is the man for sticking up for all of us like that on NBC.”

Mario continues rapping loudly, “George Bush gets paid off for all of that.”

“Miss J. Did you hear that line? It’s right on. He thinks that AIDS is a man-made disease and that our government uses it against people they don’t like. I wanna be just like Kanye. He is the man. I mean, he said it straight out during the telethon. He said that George Bush hates all black people.” Mario leans down and pulls the tarp over to help mix the cob.

“I heard the line. I think Kanye West has a lot of guts to speak up like that. I agree with you. He really has the platform to stand up against the President,” I say and join them in the cob pile with the music spilling out of the truck’s windows. A new song comes on the radio. I hear curse words. I don’t mind. I cuss way too much. They want to hear Kanye West. For the past several weeks, we have been listening to folk music and a little bit of pop music. They asked me the week before if they could bring this CD in and I said yes. I want this to be an open musical forum. I don’t want to assert power over them and make their musical selections for them. I want to make the cobbers happy.

Ani walks over from the bathroom. “Hey guys. We shouldn’t have this on. There is a lot of cussing. I don’t think Miss Ellie would be too happy.”

Shit. She’s right. Curse words and calling women bitches doesn’t seem appropriate, especially not in front of teenagers. I change my mind. I don’t want to upset Ellie. I know she doesn’t want us to play music that contains curse words because this is

a children's museum. I look at the guys and nod in agreement with Ani. They shake their heads.

Mario says, "Aww, man. That's really unfair. I mean what kind of music are we allowed to listen to? Your weird folk stuff? Why is it that your music is allowed and our music isn't?"

They are right. Why is folk music more appropriate in this situation? Why can't we listen to the music they want to hear? Is it because it is rap music? Is it because it uses cuss words? Is it because *I* don't like the way some of the music portrays women as sex objects?

Over their angry grumbling, I ask, "Why do some rap artists treat women like objects? Have you ever thought about the way women are called bitches? I don't think it's fair. So I don't like gangsta rap. I do like political rap and slam poetry," I say as we roll the tarp together.

"Why do you assume that all rap has curse words in it?" Jamal asks.

"I don't. But I do know a curse word when I hear one. And we just heard a lot of them in a row," I say teasingly.

"Yeah, she got you there, man." Jeremiah laughs and points at Jamal.

"But Kanye is my favorite," Jamal whines.

Ani turns off the Kanye West and shuffles through our small pile of CDs.

"I know he is. Can you bring in a CD that doesn't have curse words in it?" I ask trying to find a compromise.

"Naw. Miss Ellie won't like it. She doesn't think its appropriate music for Mini-City."

"You knew that all along and you still brought this CD in?" Ani asks annoyed. They each look at each other and become very quiet. Mario shakes his head. Ani turns on The Be Good Tanyas, a folk music band with a twang.

As a feminist poststructuralist theorist, I have to unpack the layering of power dynamics that occur in this opening. In this moment of music and movement, I listened to the ways poetry, music, and political activism can critique the systems of oppression. I

felt connected to this group of young men. I thought we were all articulating our angst and anger toward the President through Kanye West's political statements. I felt like we had the same desire to create change in the world. This moment is both inspiring and complex. I don't know how they felt, but I gather that when I turned off the music that I was just like President Bush, a white person with oppressive power. I took the power to turn off their music. In this sense, this moment felt like a closing but it wasn't.

As an a/r/tographical opening, the tear still exists. I want to uncover and eradicate these binaries that construct racial lines. I haven't done that. These conversations also seem so futile and empty. Not all difficult discussions will immediately tear down binaries or boundaries but they start the process.

[The cobbler: Didn't that just happen, man? I mean we were talking about difference even if we didn't say it directly. We spoke about oppression and activism through Kanye West's statement against the President.]

We spoke about oppression but then enacted a form of oppression through our move to change the music. We were supposed to cultivate openings to deconstruct racial lines. I believe cob can cultivate these openings, these moments that have the capability to change social relationships through intense reflection and critique of our own positionalities. Perhaps the change that needs to happen is within me. If anything, this opening has helped me to rearticulate and understand my own position of power and the differing ways I use this power, however subtle, or blatant.

As a scavenger, I have to navigate through differing perspectives as well as be honest about my own positionalities. I am torn by our choice to turn the music off because of the derogatory terms used in some of Kanye West's lyrics. If this is the music they listen to and are attached to, then why take it from them? They also find a role model in Kanye West and agency in his musical commentary against President Bush. Why would I turn the music off? I took power and control. When I made this decision, I had power over the teens, not power with them. I used this power to put on music deemed more appropriate by the leader of Teens Alive, Ani, and myself. We policed this moment. To Mario, Kanye West uses his music to highlight the horrible treatment of black people

in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. For the teens, Kanye West tells it like it is. For me, music can be a tool to construct and deconstruct issues of race in the United States. But sadly, I have only perpetuated racial divisions in this moment and in this text. After some time together, we began to share our music. At one point, Jamal even asked us to put the Be Good Tanyas back on the radio. I assumed he didn't like this music. It was another stereotypical assumption. I wonder how many assumptions were broken and erected throughout the summer.

This situation is complex. As a feminist, I am concerned about the treatment of women in some rap music. The discursive constitution of women as sex objects and derogatory terms only perpetuates and frames women as less than men. They are not agents of their own making. Women in some rap music are objects. As one of the leaders of this group and someone who wants to and argues that cob can eradicate racial boundaries and borders because of our interactions at the cob site, I was responsible for facilitating this teaching moment and creating a larger opening within this text. However, this position was glossed over and my responsibility to this desire wasn't adequately addressed.

As a white woman, I am interested in and also positioned differently from black cultures. Cob building creates openings on the tarp to begin conversations about our subject positions. These conversations scraped the surface of our layered identities. The practical reality within this situation is that as difficult as it is to talk about our subject positions, they should be addressed. Another layer of this practical reality is that even though we may start the conversation, begin to tear open the pages, the conversations won't ever be complete or wrapped up neatly. But the power in cob, and in scavenging through local positions, is that we can begin the conversations and create a/r/tographical openings in search of a different and more complex consciousness.

As a feminist poststructural scholar, I should be aware of power differentials that are cultivated or reinforced at the cob building site. While cob strives to eradicate these differences and hierarchies, these efforts take time. My personal awareness of power differentials happened after the moment. I can't speak for the members of Teens Alive. I

know that my experience at the cob building site has made me more aware of my power positions and how I use this power within certain contexts. These interactions highlight the practical reality of varying positionalities that happen in, between, and within relationships.

These varying positionalities lead to differing positions on the use and definition of local materials. I change the focus to how scavengers collect, gather, recycle, and use materials. In each of these moments, the distinctions between nature and culture blur. Primary materials are respected, used, for what they are. There is a level of personal involvement with primary processed materials. This personal involvement may include a working knowledge of the material, as well as respectful use of that material. They are manipulated by human hands and formed into different shapes. They are not altered into something that is not already found on earth. Secondary processed materials are distanced from human hands. They are manipulated by machines and fused with other chemicals. Using secondary processed materials is helpful when we are in a bind, or when we have to use secondary processed materials.

Practical Reality: Natural and Local Materials

Using a balance of primary and secondary materials for cob building is another practical reality. For our first few cob projects, we used store-bought clay and bags of sand from corporations like Home Depot or Lowe's. Finally, here in Oyster Bay, we are digging for our own local and primary processed clay.

Heidi, Sarah, and I drive the red Neon rental car over to David's house. We walk around to the back of the house and immediately see the cob greenhouse. The cob greenhouse is amazing in its brown, muddy splendor. I feel a jump of excitement. I know that we will be building something like this in the coming summer. We walk over the two white planks that wobble with our weight. If we fell, it would be about fifteen feet down into the hole David is digging for his pond.

Sarah says, "All of the agriculture, the plants, and the materials in this backyard are organic." The design of this space is well planned. The three of us walk around the cob house and inspect how it was built. The large windows were scavenged. The house is

positioned so that the appropriate amount of light will give nourishment to the plants inside. David has thought of everything. Inside the greenhouse, he is growing herbs and vegetables in small buckets. The roof is insulated with wool rather than fiberglass. Wool can insulate just as well as fiberglass and does not contain any hazardous materials. The wooden roof, door, and window frames are scavenged and placed into the cob. Then, cob was placed around and above these elements to keep them solidly in place. This is a fine and sturdy building (see fig. 63).



Fig. 63. Cob greenhouse in Oyster Bay

After taking pictures and discussing the house, we move into the fifteen-foot hole to dig for clay. Sarah goes first and touches it with her hands. She coos, oohs and ahs about the texture.

“This is clay! Oh my gosh. And it comes straight from the ground. I can’t believe we actually buy this stuff. Feel it. It is so beautiful!” Sarah says. Heidi and I climb down and each of us takes a piece into our hands. I rub mine between my thumb and forefinger. It feels so nice. It’s the perfect consistency. It’s sticky and well packed. We can definitely

work with this. We grab the shovels and buckets and dig (see fig. 64). My body sweats and I love the tense of my muscles. The heat sticks to my skin. My hands feel rough and calloused. We fill three buckets.



Fig. 64. Local dig

In Oyster Bay, I feel so proud of being able to dig for raw material. It makes this project feel like a natural building practice. We are actually using local, raw, primary processed materials. They are not store bought, but found, donated, and scavenged. This moment in Oyster Bay is different from how we scavenged for clay and sand to use at Mini-City. The juxtaposition of these two stories points to the layers, uses, and definition of “local materials.” This juxtaposition is a *reverberation*. Reverberations draw attention to the conversions and conversations that resonate between our understandings. As a dedicated scavenger, I desire to use primary processed material. And yet, primary and secondary processed materials are in constant negotiation. Found raw materials are

eventually touched and manipulated by humans and machines. Technological advances have an impact on a natural builder's definition of raw material so much so that I don't want to use the term raw when describing a material. As a scavenger, I use this knowledge to our advantage and we use caution. I do not want to use secondary processed materials but at times, I do.

The massive dump truck has a difficult time maneuvering into Mini-City's driveway. I know that that huge truck won't make it through the gate of Mini-City, so the material must be dumped outside of the fence, next to the small parking lot (see fig. 65).



Fig. 65. Dump truck

The tires make a hooting sound and the extra exhaust fires as the driver stops the machine. I stretch my neck to talk to the man three feet above me in the driver's seat. I point out the dump site. The hydraulic system pushes the bed of the truck high into the sky. I listen to the sound of falling sand. I watch as the dump truck's bed moves slowly back down into position and the bang of the metal door as it slams back into place. I am fascinated by the hydraulic components of these machines. As I watch it move, I am catapulted back into my childhood. I smell the construction site and hear my Dad's voice.

When I try to yell to the dump truck driver, he points at his earplugs. He shakes his head and turns the machine around to continue moving the dirt.

I am shaken out of this memory when the driver backs the truck up to where I am standing and yells down to me. “I have to make another trip. The first was sand and the next one coming is clay.” I look over at the mound and my eyes widen.

“There is more?” I think to myself. Sarah is the one who coordinated this donation. I am not sure why or how she determined how much sand and clay we would need. So I smile and say, “Well, all right. Thank you so much for all of your help. I know the teens will be really grateful. I’ll be here when you get back.” The pile of sand seems excessive. After his second trip, I tip the guy twenty dollars for his time.

The only reason we got enough clay and sand to build a small house out of cob at Mini-City is because a dump truck dropped it off. Sarah made calls to several construction companies to scavenge for donations. One company was generous. They gave us a load of each material, sand and clay, to build this cob sculpture. They offered people to drive the truck and to excavate the site from where they originally collected the sand and clay. We didn’t dig directly into the ground, as we did in Oyster Bay, to gather these local materials. Our process at Mini-City would have taken an extra year to dig, with hand-held shovels, twenty or thirty feet down into the ground to scavenge enough material for the structure. We had a few weeks to gather this material. This practical reality reminds me that in order to get this large-scale project accomplished, we had to make compromises.

In our own way, at Mini-City, we did gather our local materials. Rather than digging directly into the ground for our materials, we had to move the sand and clay wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow from the dumpsite to the building site. At Mini-City, as cobbers, we had to walk the empty wheelbarrow outside of the city walls to the large pile of sand and clay. We had to shovel deep into the piles and lift the heavy clay and sand into the wheelbarrow. After the wheelbarrows were full of clay and sand, we had to wheel the materials back to the cob building site. Sometimes it took two people to wheel the materials back. With the Florida sun beating down on us and with shovels dragging

and arms trying hard to keep the wheelbarrow steady, we made these trips at least six times a day. It became part of the routine.



Fig. 66. Reverberation of local materials

Reverberations are echoes beneath the surface of knowing and not knowing. As a/r/tographical reverberations, these juxtaposed stories and photographs present and draw attention to the conversations and resonate between each suggestion on how to define local materials (see fig. 66). As articulated in Chapter Four, Land, local materials are best suited for their respective environment. Clay and sand used to build cob structures should be materials from the region. Local materials are used to survive the elements, like the weather, and work with the organisms that thrive in that space. How does the dump truck transporting large amounts of clay into Mini-City change the definition of local materials? What is the difference between the materials we dug from the ground in Oyster Bay as compared to the materials that were donated from the construction company for Mini-City?

The differences and similarities reverberate between these two stories in the tools and technologies used to transport the materials. Once primary processed materials are hauled in with a large dump truck, they are marked as not local. Primary processed local materials are from the immediate area. They are dug with shovels and human hands. The dump truck separates cobbles from the material and the local land. We were separated from the land as a result of another practical reality, time. Because our project at Mini-City was so large and we were limited in the amount of time we had for its creation, we

had to compromise and allow the juxtaposition of gathering materials to reverberate. It is a practical reality that scavenging for materials takes a lot of time.

Practical Reality: Time

Scavengers have the task of searching for primary processed materials like clay and sand from the ground. For example, s/he scavenges for materials to recycle blocks of concrete. S/he searches for fibers like straw or cattail. If s/he wants to use primary processed materials then s/he needs to search for them. Most often, building mass-industrialized homes requires the use of secondary processed materials like drywall, fiberglass insulation, or concrete. All of these materials are easily found at Lowe's or Home Depot or a local construction business. These materials are cut down to the appropriate size for your standardized building project. These materials are convenient and easy to find. Using secondary processed materials when s/he doesn't have the time to scavenge for primary processed materials creates an a/r/tographical moment of *excess*. In these moments of excess, scavengers re-imagine which materials are the most helpful for the survival of a cob project. Sometimes, when time is a practical reality, scavengers compromise and use these modern conveniences.

[The cobbler: I hate when that happens. It feels like a cop-out. I think if you trusted in the process more, you wouldn't make such hasty decisions. I bet if you looked harder or dug a little longer, you would be able to find the right materials.]

It doesn't always work that way. It didn't work that way at the Walton School.

Heidi asks me to attend a silent art auction. This art auction will benefit her son, David's, school. In passing conversation, she tells the director of the school and one of the third grade teachers about the cob building projects. The third grade teacher, Paula, grabs onto the idea and wants to speak with me about it.

Heidi and I wander through the sea of people. We order a glass of wine at the makeshift bar and smile at the strangers around us. Heidi points out a few people she knows but we are more excited about the tables of jewelry, meditation classes, psychic readings, and the possibilities of winning the silent auctions for these items. We find a

chakra necklace that would be perfect for our dear friend Lynn. We put our name in the pile and set a bid. After some time with strangers, music, wine, and food, Heidi sees the third grade teacher. We scurry through the crowd to speak with her.

Her mouse-like features, glasses, graying hair, and long skirt remind me of my elementary school teachers. We wait as she finishes up a conversation before we jump in to talk to her. She is taking a long time. She hasn't even acknowledged us standing there. I feel a little put off. Finally, she turns to us.

"I wanted to introduce you to Jeanine," Heidi says. "She is the one who builds with cob."

"Oh!" She extends her hand to me and we begin to chat about the possibilities. "It is so nice to finally meet you. I have heard a lot about your work. I know that my third graders would be so excited to try this out. Have you worked with third graders before?"

"I have worked with almost all ages. I worked with a group of middle-school girls at the Girls Harmony Home. We built a cob bench. I worked with teenagers at Mini-City and together, we built a large cob building. Have you been over there before?"

"Oh, no, I haven't, but I know we are taking a field trip to the zoo soon. Isn't that right next door?"

"Yeah, maybe you can stop by Mini-City to see the structure," I say excitedly. I am proud of our work. Paula waves to another parent. She is a gruff woman, direct, and preoccupied. She doesn't spend too much time with me.

She says, "Well, I was thinking we could build an oven. They are learning how to bake bread and it would be perfect if they could bake their bread using a cob oven."

I smile and think, when I have kids, I want my child to go to this school. I don't necessarily want her as their teacher but I like the overall goals and direction the Walton School seems to take with their students. Heidi told me all about the school's practices and orientation to teaching and learning. The school is very hands on, artistic, and practical. After all, Paula seems to think learning about a cob oven would be beneficial for her students. This seems to say a lot for the school's mission and approach. We

quickly set up some ideas and say we will be in touch. She waves again to another parent and begins a conversation before she says goodbye to me.

Several months go by and my time is tight. I am writing a dissertation prospectus, as well as taking and teaching classes. I just can't seem to fit this project in anywhere. I know the amount of time it takes to gather the materials. It takes time to find the mostly unavailable primary processed materials like lime. It takes time to dig for clay. In Florida, clay is hard to find. Of course, finding sand is relatively easy. I also know and understand the amount of time it takes to build a cob structure. I don't think I was clear with the teacher about the amount of time required to scavenge for materials. I don't think in our conversation at the art auction, I told her exactly what she was getting into. I write Paula, the teacher, and Michele, the administrator, an email in March to get the scavenging stage in motion so we don't run out of time.

Dear Paula and Michele,

I hope all is well with the both of you. I am very excited about the upcoming project. I wanted to discuss budget, materials, and timeline with you both.

We are in need of all of the materials and tools to make this happen. Is it possible to collect and borrow these tools and materials? If not, we will have to discuss a budget for buying these tools. Gathering the materials is probably the lengthiest behind-the-scenes process that happens when building with cob. To give you an idea of what we will need, I have attached a list of tools and materials.

Tools

1. Pegs and string to mark out your oven outline
2. Shovels (three to four)
3. Wheelbarrow
4. Pitchfork
5. Tarps for making cob mixes

6. Buckets (large orange ones)
7. Sculpting tools: spoons, knives, and artist's tools
8. Mesh screens for sieving cob
9. Tape measure
10. Spray bottle for dampening sand form
11. Spirit level for leveling firebricks
12. Rubber mallet

Materials

1. Stone for the foundation plinth (amount depends on height of oven: plinth must be one foot above ground to protect the oven from water damage or flooding)
2. Concrete rubble as filler for the foundation plinth
3. 21 firebricks for oven floor
4. Fine silica sand in which to bed the firebricks
5. 4 bags of play sand for oven form
6. Newspaper
7. Water source
8. Lime for outer plaster (NHL 3.5 Lime)
9. Cattail for fiber in plaster mix (we can collect this at any local stream)

Cob materials

Florida ground is difficult because it is mostly sand. We can try and dig three feet into the ground to find a clay source or we can ask for a donation from a local construction company.

1. $\frac{1}{4}$ of a bale of straw (not hay)
2. Sand (ideally comes straight from ground)

3. Clay

4. Water

I would love to speak with you personally about a budget and the timeline. My phone number is 813 ----- . I hope to hear from you soon. And again, I am very excited to work with you and the students!

Sincerely,

Jeanine Minge

After several emails back and forth communicating about the materials, tools, and resources we need, Paula hands the responsibility over to the administrator, Michele. It seems as though Paula has too much on her own plate to gather these materials. Perhaps Paula saw the scavenging stage as an administrative duty. Michele sends me the following email:

Hi Jeanine,

Following up on the cob oven project, we are hoping to work the project in after the 10th of April (when we return from Easter break). Attached is the list of supplies you said we'd need. Paula has reviewed the list and highlighted in red the items we still need (either to purchase or borrow).

Do you, or anyone you know, have some of the supplies highlighted that we could borrow or pay a reduced rate for? We're a non-profit and could use any donations or "deals" we can find! What dates and times would work for you (after April 10th but before June 15th—our last day of school)?

Thanks.

Michele

Scavenging isn't easy. They can't find a wheelbarrow, tarps, lime, the firebricks, the mesh screen, or the straw. I think they want me to take the lead.²⁰¹

"I just don't have the time to gather these materials on my own," I tell Heidi. "I am moving to California in one month. I have to sell my furniture and finish all of my work here. I just don't have the time." The panic rises in my throat.

In this moment of a/r/tographical excess,²⁰² where control and regulation disappear, I have to re-imagine the act of scavenging.²⁰³ As a moment of excess, scavenging for material, I have to let some of my responsibility go. I can't hold on to all of these tasks and compete them alone. I keep still under the pressure (see fig. 67).

²⁰¹ I begin to realize that I may be alone in completing the scavenging stage of this project. Because of my work with the Walton School, I became constantly aware of the democratic nature of cob building. I was aware because I felt dismissed by the people there. The act of scavenging for materials and material bodies to help with the act of collecting stretches my conceptualization of an ethics of care. Sherilyn MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* (Vancouver, Canada: UBC, 2006) 118 works from the tensions implicit in ecopolitical visions of green citizenship and feminist citizenship theories. She argues "There is a need to value the specificity of citizenship as an intrinsically important practice at the same time that there is a need to recognize the foundational aspects of labor (provided by women and nature) that allow this specificity to flourish." For MacGregor, only a feminist ecological citizenship can address both democracy and feminism. Feminist ecological citizenship provides "a space for the public performance of the multiple and shifting identities that women simultaneously hold" (219). Eschewing critics that state citizenship is too closely tied to masculine and patriarchal ideologies, MacGregor finds that citizenship moves women's ecological concerns from the matronly metaphor into the political sphere. Rather than eliminating the care metaphor, she finds that politicizing care is as important as developing our idea of woman as citizen. I believe that when scavenging for materials, that politicizing care for *all* people is more appropriate. Any and all help would be appreciated.

²⁰² Springgay, Irwin, and Kind 908 state, "It is the nature of excess as an *activity* of the sublime, the horrible, and the magnificent intertwined and moving that is central to his claims about excess' generativity. It is the motility of touch, the reverberation that folds back on itself, that allows excess to un/ravel, un/write, and re-image in a continual process of exploration."

²⁰³ Springgay, Irwin, and Kind 902 state, "It is often an anxious life, where the a/r/tographer is unable to come to conclusions or to settle into a linear pattern of inquiry. Instead, there is a nervousness, a reverberation within the excess of the doubling process. Living inquiry refuses absolutes; rather, it engages with a continual process of not-knowing, of searching for meaning that is difficult and in tension. Tension that is nervous, agitated, and un/predictable."

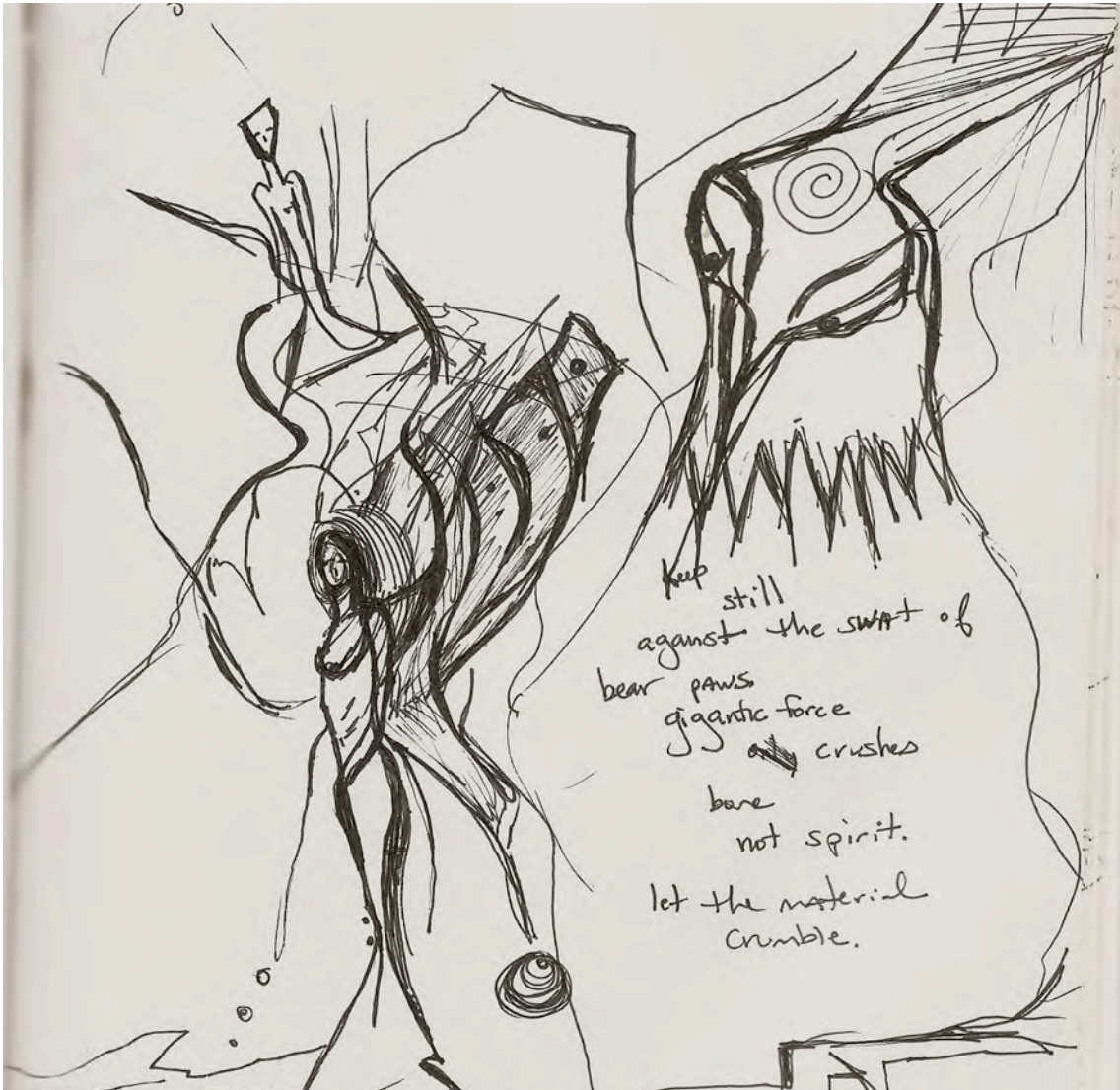


Fig. 67. Keep still under the pressure

I have to open to the local shifts of responsibility. I have to let the definition of primary and secondary processed material crumble. I have to re-imagine who the scavengers are in this process and how they can help this cob project survive.

“So, just tell them that they have to get the materials in order to make this project work. You can supervise and teach them how to build with cob. You don’t have to be the only one doing all of the work. That isn’t what cob is about. Remember?” Heidi reasons

and reminds me that I don't have to do this alone. "I can always help you in any way I can," she continues.

I agree to continue this project because I trust Heidi and I want to be there for her son. It would also be great for my dissertation.

[The cobbler: And you love cob, right?]

[The community: You care about us. That's why you continue with this project.]

[The artist: It is another chance to practice and play with your art.]

I continue with this project because no matter how much trouble scavenging becomes, I believe in cob. I write Paula and Michele another email explaining my situation. I feel responsible for the gathering stage because I am the experienced scavenger. I should find some of these items with them. It is, after all, a collaborative process. If I find the more difficult items, like lime and the mesh to sieve the mix of sand and clay, then they can focus on gathering the clay and the sand from their own property. We will be able to get this project going. I write them another email to let them know the progress and the plans.

Hello again,

I am excited to start this project. I can find the mesh, the tarps, and the lime. I hope you can find someone to donate a wheelbarrow for a week. We need to collect concrete stone and rubble. Can you find someone to donate their time and their labor to find and haul broken up pieces of concrete and stone? These pieces can be found at construction sites or wherever phone or water companies are tearing up the sidewalk to do repairs. City workers are usually happy to let people take it so the city doesn't have to pay for the clean up. It takes some time to scour for broken pieces of concrete, so I don't think I can do it. I have a few pieces, but not enough for this project. The amount of recycled concrete or stone that we need depends on how high you want the oven to be. If

volunteers from your school do this work, it will free up some time. Paula, can you have your students collect the clay and sand from school property?

I am moving to California in May, finishing the teaching semester, and finishing my dissertation proposal, so my time is limited. I will be available April 18-22nd. We can either have one day-long cob workshop or we can break it up in two-hour sessions among those days. I know you are a non-profit organization with a limited budget but if you could make any small donation to me for my time it would be greatly appreciated. But, of course, it is not necessary.

If we aren't finished within the time frame, I can teach you all how to finish the oven. Once you get the hang of cobbing it is relatively simple. I hope this helps and I will speak with you soon! If you would like to work out the particulars please call me.

Jeanine

The administrator, Michele, replies.

Hi Jeanine,

We're excited about this, too. I know a few dads who work at or near construction sites. I'll see if they can get some of the concrete for us.

Paula will need to address the date and timing, whether it's one long event, or two shorter events. (I believe the 3rd/4th grade is spending the 20th at Lowry Zoo and the 21st is a big Open House at our school. So, we'd probably need to get it done/completed before the 20th.) Paula, how about all day on the 18th? Or we can work half of the day on the 18th and the morning of the 19th?

Michele

We are running out of time. All of this seems rushed and poorly planned. Paula and I make an appointment over the phone to go over the size and location of the oven, the amount of materials we need, and to survey the land.

I walk up to the small front desk. There isn't a receptionist or any institutional sense of order. I ask a passerby, "Is Paula here? I have an appointment with her." I wait

in the small hallway. After ten minutes, I wander outside to see if I can find her. I see Paula talking to another woman. I wave to get her attention.

She walks over and sternly says, “Can you wait right here? I am in the middle of something.” I think to myself, “She is a severe woman.” It takes another ten minutes for Paula to find me again.

“Ok. I was thinking we could build right here.” She leads me over to the side of the building. Her classroom’s side door opens to this thin strip of land. They have a garden and a hose here. She wants the oven in the corner next to the fence. I start to tell her about the cob oven needing shelter from the rain. Another teacher comes from around the side of the building and Paula is called back into the school. It doesn’t really feel as though she is listening to me.

[The committee: Perhaps she is dealing with her own time crunch.]

When she comes back, I tell her in a very serious tone, “The kids are going to have to dig a lot of clay. Clay is really hard to come by in Florida. Have you started scavenging for clay?”

She walks me out back and shows me a large pile of sand. “Well, they have been excavating back here and they said they found clay.” I go to the large pile of displaced dirt and sand and feel its composition. I hesitate and then grimace.

“Well, this is mostly sand, so if you are trying to find clay in this pile it is probably about six feet deep. I am not even sure if there is enough in here. We need at least four full buckets of clay. They are going to have to really gather a lot of the clay bits in order to have a good ratio of sand and clay. I try to point to the soil composition diagram in the natural builder’s book. “I can make you a copy of this if you like.”

“Great. The information will be very helpful. Just leave the copies for me at the front desk.” We walk back to the building and she directs me back to Michele to take care of all of the details.

“Geez,” I think. “I don’t really want to work with this woman. But it’s for David and I am sure the kids will really like it.” I brush off her distant attitude and try to stay positive in the midst of chaos.

After this brief meeting, I am even more hesitant. I give them a few weeks to find all of the materials and tools I listed in the emails. It is no surprise that they run into a world of difficulty finding all of this material. It is a practical reality that finding local materials is a difficult task. Michele calls to tell me that she has found a company willing to give us the concrete rubble but that she doesn't have a truck or the means to pick it up. I am frustrated. I know they want me to pick up the slack. I hear it in her panicked voice.

"Ok," I say. "I'll go get a load, but we are going to need much more than one load. And if we start next week, we need to have all of the materials ready."

She assures me, "I can get my husband's truck and we can get the rest later. I am just not sure what concrete stone size is the most appropriate. Can you get one batch to show us what we need? We are also having a really hard time finding straw. Do you know where we can find that?"

I tell her, "The Hay Exchange. It is about forty miles away from your school"

She pauses then says, "Ok. I will try and gather the straw. If we can't find it, I think another teacher here has access to the material. I will ask around."

A few days before the first cob building day, I drive to the excavation site to collect a load of concrete. I ask the woman at the front desk about picking up concrete. She radios her fiancé on the walkie-talkie. "Hon. There is someone here that wants to pick up the concrete. Can we fit it in her truck?" I hear him laugh on the other line.

"There is no way that we can dump concrete in her truck." His voice annoys me. Huge bulldozers roar in the background.

I ask her, "Well, can I just go and pick it up by hand?"

She clicks the side of the walkie-talkie and puts her mouth to the microphone. "Babe?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

"She wants to go out into the yard and pick up the concrete pieces by hand."

Long pause.

"Tell her to watch out for the machines and to back up to the right. Over."

"Alright. Tell the guys to be on the lookout. We don't want any accidents, ok?"

Silence.

She turns to me and says, “If you go out in the yard, then watch out for the machines. Sometimes they can’t see you. Try and make it quick.”

My heart is pounding.

I back the truck up and jump out while it is still running. The piles of stone are massive. There is gravel, silt, and dust flying everywhere. I hear the excavators roaring around me. I have no protective gear. Nothing. Fear pumps through me.

“I can do this,” I say to myself.

I throw chunks of concrete into the back. My feet slip in the thin layer of mud next to the piles. I grab some brick, hoping it is fire brick to line the bottom of the oven. My muscles ache. Sweat and fear soak my skin. Each time the yellow machines come closer, I pick up the pace. I fill the back of the truck. The tires are dangerously low. A man in a white construction hat comes over and gestures to help. With his help, filling the truck bed goes faster.

“Thank you so much,” I say over the roar of the machines.

“De nada,” he replies. The weight of the concrete pushes the truck’s steel frame down.

I drive to the school slowly. I am cautious and aware of the weight on my small truck. Each of my turns is slow and people honk at me to go faster. With all of this concrete in the back of my truck, my 4x2 can’t go much faster than this.

When I arrive at school, I ask to speak with Paula. I hope she can get some people to help me unload the truck. She says, “Oh. Great. You can back your truck up in the driveway next door. And then you can just throw the stones over the fence that separates the school from that building.” She turns her back and then goes to back to her class.

I am unloading the concrete alone. I throw each piece of concrete over the twelve-foot fence. Now I am angry. No one is helping me.

[The cobber: You are alone and it just doesn’t feel right. Cob is about building community. Why aren’t the members of the Walton School helping you?]

[The community: I don't know you need me. You never explicitly told me. Why didn't you speak up?]

After I finish, I walk inside to speak with the Michele, the administrator.

“Can I show you the type of concrete you are going to need to get?”

“Oh, of course. That would be so helpful. My husband and I aren't sure about what type of concrete we need. That would be great. Just give me one minute to finish this up.” Her bubbly voice helps my mood. She seems more excited about this project than Paula does. We walk outside to the pile of stone I have gathered.

“I just went to the site and unloaded and loaded all of this stuff alone. So just to give you a time frame it should take you and your husband about three hours to get this done.” I am trying to make a point. She seems surprised by the amount of time it took me to get this seemingly small pile of concrete. My scratches and sweat show her otherwise.

“Ok. So how much more do you think we need?”

“I would say about three more full truck beds”

“Really?” Again, she seems surprised.

“Yeah. It depends on how high you want the foundation of the cob oven. If you want it waist high, like we have talked about, then we need three loads.”

“Ok. I am working on it. We will pick up all of the materials this weekend and we will see you on Monday.”

I get in my truck and drive away with so many different questions, so many concerns. How is this all going to work? If we don't have the materials, how can we get this done? Are they really committed? Am I? I remind myself that I have a million other things going on in my life that take priority over this project.

[The committee: Why don't you ask them? It might alleviate some of your problems.]

The day of cob building, they still don't have everything they need. Michele is apologetic and panicked. They have rented a U-Haul truck and at lunch time are going to pick up more concrete. Paula thinks it would be a nice idea for the students to start digging. The kids have shovels and stones and Paula is trying to organize them into

groups. One group is going to dig for clay. I am already frustrated with Paula. I told her some time ago that they needed to have the clay. This process takes time. I told her that several times. She obviously wasn't listening to me. Another group of kids is going to help me dig the hole for the foundation. Thank goodness Heidi and David are here. I look at Heidi, exasperated by the teacher's inconsistency.

"Jeanine, I would like you to help them dig. Can you also go and check the clay that they have found?" Paula is trying to keep everyone in line. I am sure she has a lot on her mind, but it feels so disorganized. Paula barks orders at each group. The U-Haul truck arrives with the extra concrete we need to build the foundation. Paula has several of the kids go and help unload the truck. Other students are digging holes in the ground and replanting the grass we have dug up to create the hole in the ground.

There is a scuffle. I hear Paula reprimanding some of the students. "I told you not to play in the U-Haul truck. I told you not to go in there. I want all of you inside now."

I think to myself, "We have only worked for one hour. Why is the teacher bringing all of the kids inside? This is ridiculous. I understand that she is angry with the students and probably frustrated with this process, but doesn't she know that we need them to make this project work?" I look at Heidi and our eyes communicate our dismay.

David, Heidi, and I keep working while the students work on another project inside. We move the stones around. We try and help them fit together. We lift the concrete pieces. We move them around and set them in place like a puzzle. It has to be even and sturdy.

David has the important job of making sure there is no wobbling. He walks the circle of stone and when a stone wobbles he says, "Jeanine, this one is moving."

"David, can you help me find a small stone that might fit in here to make it stop moving?" He searches through the piles and brings back a stone. It fits perfectly.

"Great job! Thanks David!" He smiles and keeps looking around for smaller stones. Working with David and Heidi makes this all worth it. They make me smile.

We only have a few days to finish this project. Today is the crucial foundation building day and there is no time left. The students have all gone inside. We aren't even

close to finished with the foundation. Although Heidi and I are shocked and stunned by Paula's move to ignore the cob building process, the three of us just keep on working. We work the stones into a pretty even foundation.

I whisper in a concerned tone, "Heidi, the teacher didn't have the kids dig for clay so we don't have the necessary materials to make this project work. We don't have cob."

Michele's husband has been sitting on the stump near the building site. He is resting after gathering and unloading the concrete stones. He walks up to me and says, "I can just go to Lowe's and buy bags of concrete. I can pour it in there tonight and let it sit. Then when you come back, it should all be ready for the kids to build." I look at Heidi.

[The cobbler: Natural building?]

I just shake my head. I am disappointed and despondent.

On top of all of this, a few hours later, Paula sends out a few students to work with us. They have been told that they have to work with the cob project as punishment for their behavior in the U-Haul. I find Michele to voice my disappointment.

I say, "I just feel as though Paula is using cob building as a punishment. She sent the kids out to help us during their recess because they were misbehaving in the truck. I am getting pretty frustrated here."

Michele looks concerned. She says, "Let me talk to her and find out what is happening."

Michele's husband goes on a quick run to Lowes, which is located just up the street. When he gets back, Paula brings her entire class back outside. Swirls of chemicals lift into the air as he pours the bags of secondary processed material into the stacked stones. My body clenches tight.

"Children, step away," I say and motion for them to step back. These chemicals should not be inhaled. Michele's husband takes a hose to the powdered chemicals. Each kid wants a chance at the hose. They want to watch the concrete solidify. They don't realize how this changes the foundation of the cob oven. The cob process was taking too long at the Walton School and none of them seemed to care that using bags of store-bought concrete filled with chemicals would somehow change the shape and purpose of

the natural building project. We aren't using found secondary processed materials anymore. We aren't recycling. We purchased secondary processed materials.

[The cobbler: This is just so disappointing. They should learn that they can find and use the materials around them, not use the materials they buy from the store. I feel your anger.]

As a scavenger, I have to accept the realities of time constraints. Still, I know that the manufacturing of Portland cement is responsible for as much as eight percent of greenhouse gases²⁰⁴ and that the endless stream of polluting trucks are the ones that brought these bags of cement to Lowe's for mass consumption.

[The artist: Isn't this a moment of a/r/tographical excess? I can feel the loss of control and regulation.]

I also know and hate that Lowes is a corporate machine. I have to lose control of my ideals. Scavengers compromise for survival. This project is limited by the amount of time I have to offer it and how much time the teacher is willing to put into it. The concrete purchase and compromise opened the possibility of us finishing the cob oven on the next and last visit to the Walton School.

On our last visit to the Walton school, Heidi and I make our way over to begin the cobbing process. I arrive at school ready to work. I walk to the front desk to announce my arrival. Michele, the administrator, comes out to speak with me. Paula follows. Paula says, "We have a play coming up and I just don't think we have time to cob today." I look at her, shocked. "Maybe you can teach us how to make just one batch of cob and then we can take it from there."

"Alright. Did you collect the clay?" I am so angry but I smile in spite of all of this mistreatment.

²⁰⁴ Michael G. Smith, "The Case for Natural Building," *The Art of Natural Building: Design, Construction, Resources*, eds., Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek (Canada: New Society, 2002) 7.

Paula replies, “No, but I think we can use the clay we have in our arts and crafts room.” She leads me into the arts and crafts room and pulls out a huge chunk of secondary processed, store-bought clay. The children run into the room and get excited about the clay. They each take a turn at breaking it up with their hands. Paula tries to delegate the tasks again. She asks one group to go and get a bucket full of sand, another to get a bucket full of water.

After all of these materials are found, I try and teach them how to make one batch of cob. It is too hectic. They aren’t listening. We make one batch in less than an hour and Paula seems satisfied.

“Children, go wash up because it is time for our play rehearsal. Let’s thank Jeanine for helping us today.”

The work at the Walton school isn’t about natural building anymore. It is a lesson in the practical reality of the amount of time it takes to gather materials for cob building. It also speaks to the level of cooperation we need in order for a project like this to succeed. The store-bought concrete foundation is the materialization of our lack of time and dedication. Paula’s desire to use the clay from her arts and crafts supply speaks to our culture of mass-production and how gathering materials for natural building is a time-consuming process. As a scavenger, I have to be aware of the compromise between primary and secondary processed materials. Practically everything that surrounds us has been touched and manipulated by human hands or in the extension of human hands, manipulated by human technologies. However, I am not happy about this exception. I do not know whether or not this project came to fruition. I left two weeks later for California. I do not know whether or not these students learned about using local or primary processed materials. I am not sure they learned anything at all. And in my heart, it hurts to think about it.

[The cobbler: It hurts me too.]

This brings me to the next practical reality of building with primary processed materials. Secondary processed materials are cheaper, accessible and ready-made. It is also important to have the financial support and material you need to build with cob. The

accessibility of primary processed materials is limited. With our large, \$15,000 budget for the community art projects we accomplished, we purchased a plethora of tools and materials to start and to finish the projects.

[The artist: These practical realities create moments of a/r/tographical excess. You are controlled and regulated by the systems of time and capitalism. I wonder how cob can speak with these moments of excess. As hard as you try to step out of these systems, you seem ruled by them.]

Silence.

Practical Reality: Capitalism and Accessibility

When we started building the roof at Mini-City, we went to Lowes, Home Depot, and gardening stores to buy the materials we needed. This section unpacks how throughout the cob building process, most specifically at Mini-City, we used every cent of our budget and I would argue that we used this budget efficiently. This is also about compromise. I did not want to buy materials from Lowes but we needed them. When we couldn't find certain tools, like nails, hammers, wheelbarrows, and buckets for mixing the lime, we bought them. We used modern conveniences to get the job done.

At least one fourth of my overall time with the Mini-City project was spent making runs to the store to pick up nails, saws, buckets, wheelbarrows, and hammers. As articulated in Chapter Two, *Sketching Voices*, Sarah and I constructed a budget that seemed to work for three separate cob building projects. We idealistically believed that we could fund and finish all of these projects. But the bulk of the grant monies, \$15,000, were spent on the largest cob project at Mini-City. We didn't expect it to be such a gigantic project. We didn't realize how much time, how many people, and how much material we needed to construct a project like this. Sarah still has all of the tools we purchased in her art studio. I wonder how these tools are being used today. We bought more tools and secondary processed materials than we expected, but I still wanted to give larger stipends to the members of Teens Alive. For most of the summer, the Teens Alive leaders participated in the cob project because it was part of their summer youth program.

Those that stayed on with us after the program ended were compensated for their time and labor. We paid them stipends based on a daily rate. In my opinion, it wasn't enough.

[The committee: Doesn't this speak to your arguments about the commodification of labor?]

I was in charge of the budget all summer. I kept all of my receipts (see fig. 68).

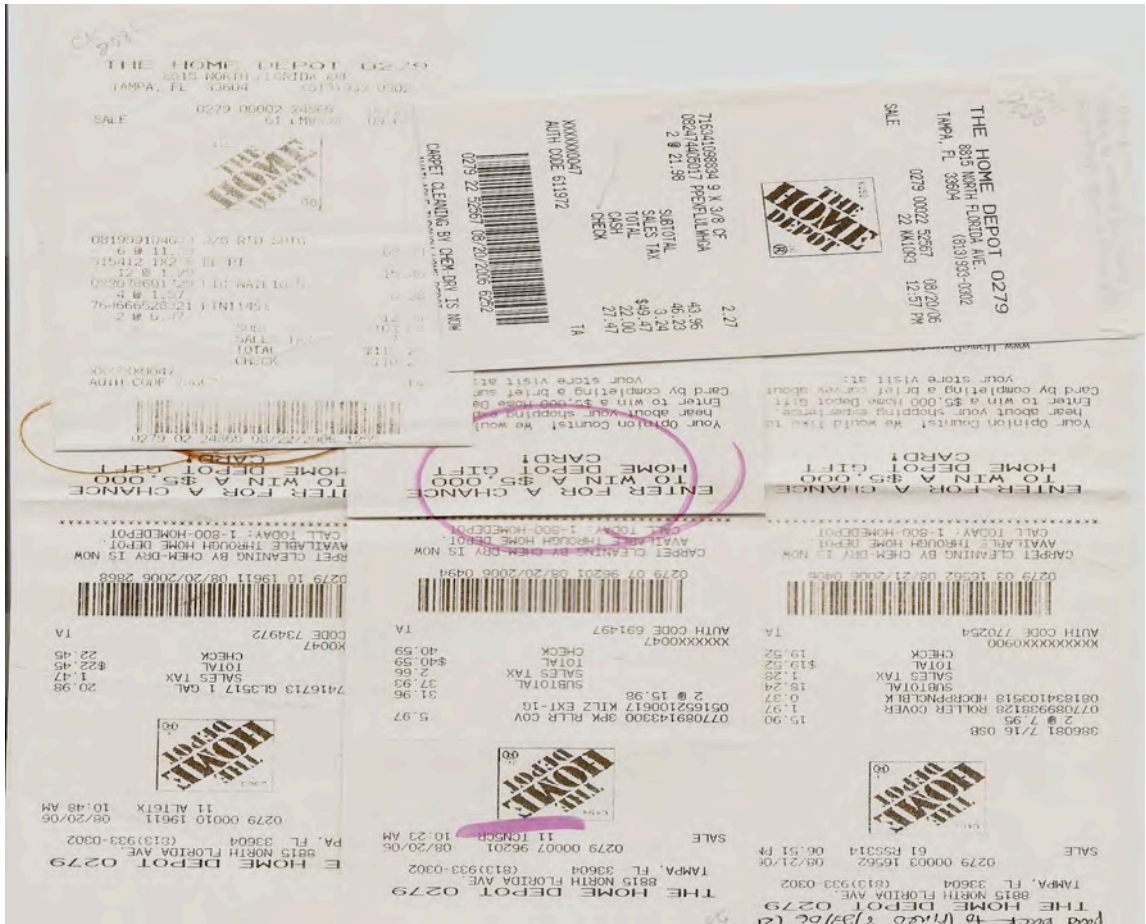



Fig. 68. Receipts from Mini-City 1

Page 1 of 2 No. 0279-241370

NOT VALID FOR MERCHANDISE CREDIT


THE HOME DEPOT 0279
8815 NORTH FLORIDA AVE.
TAMPA, FL 33604 (813)933-0302

0279 00033 07394 07/29/06
SALE 32 VCS337 10:58 AM



CUSTOMER AGREEMENT # 241370
RECALL AMOUNT 24.66
SALES TAX 1.73
TOTAL \$26.39
CASH 16.73
XXXXXXXXXXXX6131 VISA 9.66
AUTH CODE 029189/1332258 TA

paid back to in neo 8/23/06



0279 33 07394 07/29/2006 3957


ENTER FOR A CHANCE TO WIN THE HOME DEPOT
"NASCAR PROJECT WEEKEND" SWEEPSTAKES!
VISIT HOMEDEPOTRACING.COM FOR DETAILS.

ENTER FOR A CHANCE TO WIN A \$5,000
HOME DEPOT GIFT CARD!

Your Opinion Counts! We would like to hear about your shopping experience.

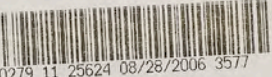
THE HOME DEPOT 0279
8815 NORTH FLORIDA AVE.
TAMPA, FL 33604 (813)933-0302

0279 00011 25624 08/28/06
SALE 11 SMS7XG 03:57 PM



022078454035 LN PANL AD 5.74
2 @ 2.87
038753420974 PVC DRAIN SS 25.12
4 @ 6.28
SUBTOTAL 30.86
SALES TAX 2.17
TOTAL \$33.03
CHECK 33.03

XXXXXXXX0047
AUTH CODE 680824 TA



0279 11 25624 08/28/2006 3577

CARPET CLEANING BY CHEM-DRY IS NOW

CUSTOMER PICKUP #1

STOCK MERCHANDISE TO BE PICKED UP:

REF #	SKU	QTY	UM	DESCRIPTION	TAX	PRICE EACH	EXTENSION
R01	161-756	8.00	EA	2X6-12FT. #2/BTR KD-HT SPF	Y	\$5.58	\$44.64
R02	161-721	10.00	EA	2X6-10FT. #2/BTR KD-HT SPF	Y	\$4.48	\$44.80
R03	161-799	2.00	EA	2X6-16FT. #2/BTR KD-HT SPF	Y	\$7.82	\$15.64

SCHEDULED PICKUP DATE: 07/29/2006

MERCHANDISE AND SERVICE SUMMARY

REF #W04 SKU #1111604 Customer Pickup / Will Call

we reserve the right to limit the quantities of merchandise sold to customers.

TOTAL CHARGES OF ALL MERCHANDISE & SERVICES

ORDER TOTAL	\$105.08
SALES TAX	\$7.35
TOTAL	\$112.43
AMOUNT PAID	\$112.43
BALANCE DUE	\$0.00

END OF ORDER No. 0279-241370

END OF CUSTOMER PICKUP - REF #W04

MERCHANDISE TOTAL: \$105.08

Fig. 69. Receipts from Mini-City 2

After Sarah came home from her work with the performance troupe, she hired a financial advisor to make sure all of our financial records were in order and that the monies were spent appropriately. She wanted to make sure that the money from her department's community arts fund was going to the appropriate places. When she returned, I gave all of the receipts to her (see fig. 69). Besides the cost of the materials, the cost of labor is one of the most important aspects of this project. Ideally, we would all be volunteering our time. Ideally, cob wouldn't have anything to do with the capitalist system. I can't forget that contextually these projects happen in the Western, capitalist system. As previously mentioned, I wanted to give more money to the Teen Alive leaders. I thought they deserved it. I have approached another moment of a/r/tographical excess.

This is a chapter about the practical realities of cob. I move between the ideal and the practical to rearticulate this relationship. Cob exists in a system that seems unforgiving for cob but depending on context, and specific local situations, it can help each project survive. If we didn't have the funds to reimburse the Teens Alive members and ourselves, I do not know if these projects would have even started. We wouldn't have had the funds to pay for Tim to travel from Chicago to help us build the cob building in Mini-City. Capital granted us access. While capital granted us access, it also created tension. Ideally, we would scavenge for primary processed materials. We had to purchase secondary processed materials. We had the funds to buy the materials. Ideally, accounting accountability would be based on trust, cooperation, and communication. But it only created a painful tension between Sarah and me.

[The artist: So using capital created excess. Some issues in cob, as a form of arts-based research, are beyond your control.]

[The committee: Artist, that statement feels like a cop-out. Don't moments of a/r/tographical excess highlight what is seemingly obvious or mundane as important components for deeper understanding of cob building?]

[The cobber: All of these compromises feel like a cop-out. Which natural builder's ideal are you going to hold onto?]

I hold onto the cobber's desire to build locally, together. Building with cob needs local support from people/artists/cobbers/teachers/collaborators.

Practical Reality: Local Support

Within the context of the Qualitative Research Conference, we were given a day-long slot of time to build a mobile cob oven with members of the Oyster Bay community. Gathering materials is also about gathering people together. In natural building, scavenging is about searching for support, in this case labor and material support for this cob building project.

[The artist: Gathering support speaks to a/r/tographical reverberations. As more people become involved and aware of cob as an arts-based process, its potential to create change reverberates within each local position.]

We were also concerned about cultivating interest in this cob building project. What most people don't understand about building with cob is that it takes a lot of effort to find people willing to help with a project like this. I wonder how many people understand the preparation, sweat, and frustration that go into a project like this. I am not sure I do. It is so difficult to quantify these efforts.

[The committee: So don't you see this as a failure of cob itself? Can you talk about that? The material is inconvenient. It does take a lot of labor and time. So why do it?]

[The cobber: How can you even ask that question? Yeah, there are complications and problems but when you actually step in the cob and build something so beautiful, those practical realities mean nothing. I think that speaks to the larger problems with technology and culture.]

[The community: Cob is supposed to teach us about environmental building. Aren't we supposed to learn how to collaborate and build with each other?]

Heidi and I drive into Oyster Bay on Wednesday in the red Neon with no pick up. The drive is flat with long stretches of green highlighted by sporadic farmhouses hidden behind the trees that separate the highway from the farmland. We have two days to gather materials. Friday is cob day. Sarah has been here for a few days preparing the base for the mobile oven. Sarah and I worked for months prior to the conference connecting with

community members in Oyster Bay to establish who would help us gather materials and who would come and build with us at the site. Sarah and I contacted natural builders and also researched departments and student organizations on campus that seemed interested in natural building techniques. We composed this list of possible participants, scavengers, cobbers, and administrative support hoping to gather community response.

Hello everybody,

This is Earth Work. We are a collaborative of two who use sustainable processes to engage communities as a strategy to make each other aware of our lovely mother earth.

We are presenting on the University campus for the Qualitative Research Conference. While we are connecting scholars from around the world, we are also looking for local collaborators and some assistance. Our work is all about community, so the more the merrier! We hope you will all be able to join us to stomp in the cob!

The project is about the process of building a mobile cob oven! As of now, we have secured resources to assemble a cart to support the weight of the oven. Generally, we have used angle iron to build a cart that is approximately 4'x3'x3' on wheels. After that, we use cement casters as the base, then fire bricks above. We build the oven on top and viola, a mobile oven.

We are still looking for a couple other resources. We are still in search of the following:

1 bale or less of straw

8-10 buckets (5 gallon) or bags of sand

A slightly less or equal amount of earthen clay

Sifter for the sand/clay (hopefully it's coming straight from the ground)

2-4 tarps

3-4 buckets

AND THE MAJOR MISSING LINK IS:

A home for the completed oven

We are interested in leaving the oven with someone who will use it. It does not have to belong to any one, but hopefully can be a vehicle for other interesting performance/installation/social interactive works. For example, Sarah's Beginning Sculpture class just finished their first oven and they are going to walk their oven to an area in town where they might be able to feed people who need food. The students will be exposed to folks/geography/walking, all of which they are not aware of being major vehicles to create art in context.

In any case, we are sure you can imagine the possibilities.

We will be arriving in town on or before Wednesday, May 3rd. The actual workshop/building/presentation will be taking place starting 9AM on Friday, May 5th at the Gateway on campus. More specific details/location to follow.

Please let us know how you would like to be involved in this project (let's use REPLY TO ALL)! We are very excited to meet you, and look forward to your ideas!

Yours,

Earth Work

We had a large response to our email. A few of the people centrally located in the Oyster Bay area said they would help us find the materials and that they would be there to physically help build the oven. The Oyster Bay locals did the hard work, the scavenging, staking out where and how to get the materials. However, there were a few concerns circulating through the emails.

Hi Earth Work,

This is Josh of the Urbana Permaculture Project.

There are definitely a few potential homes for a cob oven here in Urbana, IL, and I could easily see to it that all the materials you need for your workshop.

Specifically, our friends Tony and Jim in town make bread daily and Jim at least uses a conventional oven. We're also getting into making multiple ovens and comparing them for an upcoming energy efficiency stove workshop of our own! So this oven might

be a nice thing to have in the pool of alternatives. Otherwise, there are plenty of others who could use it.

I must admit its already a pet peeve of mine to see cob ovens, or any other permaculture resources turned into objects of display instead of use.....so watch out ;)

Besides this concern about the oven being used, another email respondent told us of another cob structure built on University grounds that was destroyed. We responded to Josh and the group with the following email.

Hello Josh and everyone,

Thank you kindly for the quick reply. Also, thanks for the confirmation on the materials.

We realized that we missed an item on our list of necessities. The missing ingredient: fire bricks for the oven floor.

Could you guide us in locating these as well?

Perhaps if other interested parties chime in, we could arrange how any interested party can utilize it for projects (maybe we could start the first cob oven timeshare...but for FREE)! We are very open and feel that during the workshop (and maybe into the weekend) the oven's home/route of homes will reveal itself.

We strongly agree with you on the perma of permaculture. We have lost an oven before. Because we didn't have anything to lift it into a truck bed and had a limited amount of time to move it from a space, we had to take it apart.

We are dedicated to the utilization and life of the oven. It is an integral part of our practice of sustainability. We are also practicing the idea of aesthetics in action (function) as opposed to the typical aesthetic value usually related to visual appearance or as you put it, display.

Look forward to meeting you and learning more about your projects and ideas!

Yours,

Earth Work

People seemed interested and willing to help us find materials and connect us to people in the area. Ultimately, only three Oyster Bay community members showed up to help us build the cob oven. It wasn't the large response we expected. We asked conference goers, through the conference program and an announcement at the keynote address, to be there. Honestly, only a few conference goers became a part of this cobbing event. In total, ten people helped build the cob oven and four of us were panelists. Still, as a scavenger, I have to be appreciative of any help we had.

Local support and labor doesn't have to be a large crowd of people. Cob, as an arts-based process, survives in the reverberations the process creates. Reverberations call attention to the echoes between the spaces of knowing and not knowing. I don't know what impact cob had on our small group. I do know that each person that came together and offered us their materials, their support, emotional or physical, created the space for cob to survive. Local support makes each cob project happen. I do know that I am writing about our local support here. Writing about local support is also a form of a/r/tographical reverberation. Technologies, like email and transportation systems connected these bodies together. These technologies allow people to connect with one another without ever meeting.

Practical Reality: Using Technology

Technologies such as excavation systems, hammers, welding machines, and electric saws helped form the base for the mobile oven. I can't argue that technology is inherently wrong. I can, however, argue that what counts are the ways we use technology.

[The artist: Redefining technology creates a/r/tographical metonymy.]

Heidi and I call Sarah to get directions to the metal shop. We make our way to the art studios on the University campus. They are barn-like structures that have been converted into art studios and classrooms. A local Oyster Bay artist, Don, has offered Sarah the metal shop, the materials, and his efforts in order for us to make the base for the cob oven. Don has also shared his living space with her. Sarah emerges from Don's

studio in her tank top, dirty clothes, and boots. She pulls back the safety glasses from her eyes, hugs us both, and then leans against the wall. She lights a cigarette.

“I met Josh Smith,” she says with intensity in her voice. Josh Smith is one of the local community members in Oyster Bay who teaches and works towards developing sustainable communities in the area and he is the one who emailed us his concern about the perma in permaculture.

“You did? What is...” I begin, but she interrupts quickly.

“He is a trip. He is really abrupt.” She seems a little put off, but I can tell she is interested in his work. He is teaching about sustainability and I would love to talk to him. Sarah puts the cigarette out on the ground, drops it in the ashtray, and walks us into the shop. “Don has really been so generous. We have to repay him somehow. Here. Look at the cart so far,” she bends down to point at where she has welded the metal together. She looks up and says, “The wheels need to be attached to the base. The oven will be low and close to the ground. That way, it is not as fragile and the movement of the cart won’t break it. While I am putting the wheels on, would you two mind cleaning up the metal shop? I think Don would really appreciate it.” Heidi and I grab the brooms and start sweeping the dusty shop. Sarah puts the eye protection mask on and starts the welding machine. Blue sparks fly everywhere. She stops and pulls up the mask. She says, “Don’t look at the sparks, ok? They could burn your eyes.”

Without these technologies—the access to the metal shop and the welding machine, the cars to transport the material, and the shovels we bought at Lowes—we couldn’t have completed this project. Without virtual technology, we wouldn’t have connected with Don or the rest of the people that helped us build the oven. Without the compromises of tech/nology, primary and secondary processed material, and the use of labor, this project wouldn’t have succeeded.

In this moment of a/r/tographical metonymy, I play with the meanings and the uses of tech/nology. I am reminded of Donna J. Haraway’s boundary breakdowns between human and animal, technology, and culture. I argue that all of these elements construct networks of material, social, and cultural relationships between actors. Actors

are not necessarily human. The actors in this circumstance are also the physical and the nonphysical such as the tech/nologies we needed in order to complete the project. The tech/nologies we used throughout each cob building project have been necessary. They are a part of this project as much as our bodies and our physical labor. We needed to use these tech/nologies to construct the metal base, to travel far distances to try an erect a working cob community in Oyster Bay. These networks need the scavengers to help piece these elements together, to move through and within the liminal spaces of nature and culture.

As a scavenger, I have encountered the practical realities of intersecting local identities and positionalities. Intersecting these positions creates openings within cob building. Through a/r/tographical openings we begin to recreate understandings of each other. As a scavenger, I gathered local materials. I question my own definitions of local materials interrogating transportation and our physical proximity to the material. This interrogation of local materials creates reverberations. Finding local support for cob projects also creates reverberations. As moments of a/r/tographical excess, I have worked within a strict time frame and used the accessibility of capital. A/r/tographical metonymy re/considers the use of modern tech/nology within cob building.

Feminist Poststructuralist Scavengers: Deconstructing the Boundaries

Just like my revisioning of spiritual ecofeminism and move towards feminist poststructural thought, I have begrudgingly admitted the idea that cob building faces practical realities.

[The cobber: Why would you do that? We need to show people that it works!
We want people to catch on.]

I have embraced the scavenger within me. As a scavenger, I have encountered the practical realities of intersection local identities and positionalities, gathering materials, and finding local support for cob projects. I have worked within a strict time frame, used the accessibility of capital, and compromised on what I consider to be use of modern tech/nologies in order to build with cob. The practical realities of building with cob and

scavenging are local and contextual. A scavenger understands that negotiating material, relationships, people, and discourses happens by being physically proximate to one another. Each of these practical realities develops an element of a/r/tography and materializes my desire to articulate arts-based research as a form of living inquiry.

A scavenger is also aware of relationships. The intersection of identities and positionalities creates a moment of a/r/tographical openings. These openings extend the term primary and secondary into both personal interactions and theoretical interactions as an interesting way to approach the complex and varying positionalities within the cob building site. A scavenger looks to the negotiation, compromise, and movement between categorical assumptions and human interpersonal relationships. Cob building creates primary relationships through the local intersection of subject positions. Secondary processed interactions are those interactions that are fueled by categorical assumptions. People are taught to define and structure difference based on race, class, gender, ability, national identity sexuality, ethnicity, and age. “In the face of corporate power and entrenched, systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on, even those with material comfort and privilege can feel helpless in their efforts to support social change.”²⁰⁵ Secondary processed relationships are so affected by categories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and national identity and discourses of power that it seems so difficult to intersect lives meaningfully. I believe cob can help to intersect and problematize the layers of secondary processing in order to create localized change.

Cob building brings diverse bodies together in an active space of identity negotiation, critique, and applicable and embodied learning. The modern impulse alienates and compartmentalizes people into stratified class structures and solitary social systems. When I think about secondary processed relationships, I think back to the bucket and the hands story. I am intrigued at the level of categorical and stereotypical

²⁰⁵ Sharon Green, “Boal and Beyond: Strategies for Creating Community Dialogue,” *Theater* 31.3: 53.

understanding we had of each other. I think back to the selections of music and the way we continued to unpack our positionalities through cob building experiences. In the end, I took the power and the control in that situation. But as a cobber, I want to create change in the world by being aware of the difficulty of intersecting subject positions and recognizing that secondary processed identities can be intersected, taken apart, and deconstructed through active and embodied moments. I would like to work from this a/r/tographical opening and tear it a little wider. I don't want to take power, but share it with the Teens Alive members.

There are three levels of material processing that I find helpful when trying to define and categorize materials. Defining and categorizing materials creates moments of a/r/tographical excess. For example, primary processed materials are those that we respect from the first moment we interact with them. From a cobber's point of view, nature is not something to be captured and used solely to our advantage but something to be respected and worked with efficiently. Secondary processed materials are more convenient to find and easy to purchase in corporate warehouses. Recycled secondary processed materials are found, secondary processed materials. They do not contribute to the capitalist framework but use discarded secondary processed materials to their advantage.

As a feminist poststructuralist, I believe the nature/culture binary is not static. Definitions and uses of the terms nature and culture exist in context. Binaries are fluid, slippery, apprehended, and apprehending. As a form of a/r/tographical metonymy, the scavenger makes room for the negotiation of materials as s/he dissolves definitions and intersects with modern conceptualizations of tech/nology. Furthermore, there isn't inherently anything wrong with tech/nologies. What is wrong with tech/nology is the way we use it. Culture is what humans have done to extend, manipulate, and exist within the natural world. Culture could not exist without nature. The human being is not above nature nor is the sole purpose on this earth to conquer the natural world. The human being is a part of nature. Culture, in all of its perceived failings, is nature. Recognizing that nature and culture are not separate but dependent and within the other, is one tactic

for survival. Ecological survival recognizes the balance between non-living and living entities and elements. Scavengers work to create and cultivate balance with an environmental ethic in mind.

Working within these boundaries can also help to situate the practical realities of scavenging. There is no endpoint, no final say, only the moments of hope, hope that these compromises, these acts of scavenging created some empowering, enlightening, and agentic moments of creation. Cob building has the potential to physically intersect people from varying positions and through action cultivate collaboration. Poststructuralist feminism and cob make room for the shifting and complex relationships we have to the environment and to each other.

The scavenger allows for a more diverse understanding of human and non-human connectedness through cob as a form of arts-based research. Working with people from varying and intersecting perspectives deconstructs the binaries between man and woman, nature and culture, and ultimately focuses on a shifting manifestation of identity. The scavenger makes do.²⁰⁶ The scavenger is a manifestation of feminist poststructuralist thought within the context of cob building. As we make do, we survive, together. Surviving together creates spaces of commune, of community building. The scavenger works within these identity negotiations, compromises, and manifestations of subject positions to create spaces of community, to be able to work through the shifting of local

²⁰⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 29 states, “Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of ‘making do’.” While we did not leave the actualized place of cob building, the contextual elements of working within a corporate capitalist system, time constraints, or systems of oppression, we did try and change our modalities of action. We have to make do. Although modalities of action are dependent on context, “These transverse tactics do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it. In this respect, they are not any more localizable than the technocratic (and scriptural) strategies that seek to create places in conformity with abstract models. But what distinguishes them at the same time concerns the types of operations and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (29-30). In all of these practical realities, we were faced with the very tactic of making do, of scavenging, of trying to survive a place while reinscripting the happenings of the space.

subject positions. I argue a space of commune is based on creating, the act of working together. It is a form of community art through the *doing*.

CHAPTER VII

COMMUNE

As the artistic, political, and ethical pitfalls of community-based art become more visible and more theorized, the need to imagine alternative possibilities of togetherness and collective action, indeed of collaboration and community, becomes more pronounced.

-Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*²⁰⁷

In some cases our artistic practice has come out to meet our social activism. In other cases, a sense of specific, personal identification with civil and human rights has nurtured our practice . . . We are from the inside of the belly of the beast trying to be responsible for and to people and things seriously wronged and wrong, that need work all around us in our immediate environment.

-Martha Fleming, *Afterimage*²⁰⁸

The land is surveyed. The materials are scavenged. Concrete stones lie in a big pile next to the building site. We will dig into the ground now. Then, we will lay the foundation by moving the chunks of concrete into the hole. We will build a foot above the ground. The process of laying the stone is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. These layers of concrete will support the larger cob structure. Laying the stone for a cob building is the

²⁰⁷ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004).

²⁰⁸ Martha Fleming, "Letter to the Editor," *Afterimage* (June, 1995): 3.

metaphoric and material process of building a strong foundation for cob building as a form of community art. Community art, while a discipline of its own, is a subsection of arts-based research. Community art connects directly with a/r/tography in that it is living inquiry and focuses on the grounded relationships that happen at the cob site. The stone is also the foundation for the theoretical arguments placed within the footnotes of each page. The footnotes provide the theoretical stronghold, the mortared base on which to lay my own theoretical ideas.

[The academic: I am the stronghold. I like that.]

[The artist: God, don't sound so cocky. The *art* is the most important foundation here, not what you say about the art.]

[The cobbler: Communing with nature and to each other is the most important thing to me. The act of creation is beautiful.]

[The community: We still feel like you aren't even speaking to us or about us. Who are we? Isn't this chapter about us?]

This chapter speaks directly to the layered and problematic definitions of community and how art works within community spaces. I shift through institutional, social, and geographical contexts of community art, relational aesthetics, and activist art and arrange the pieces of concrete stone²⁰⁹ to articulate how commune works in praxis. I use the term commune to step outside of the idea that community is a fixed definition. Throughout this dissertation, the voice of the community has been confused and confusing for the reader. This confusion exists because defining community is not a stable act. The term community is too elusive and often times a crutch for articulating

²⁰⁹ As articulated in Chapter Four, Scavenge, concrete is a secondary processed material. I believe that arguments from these three sections of community art are also secondarily processed, intertextually woven with arguments past. Secondary processing also takes certain elements out of the material. I have to make the choices here to leave other forms of artistic engagement behind. The stones of community art, relational aesthetics, and activist art are strong enough to hold this structure.

how relationships occur and manifest in context. I prefer to use the term commune. Cob is an artistic practice that creates a space of commune.

To commune is to be in a state of intimate, heightened sensitivity and receptivity, as with one's surroundings.²¹⁰ Commune is both a verb and a noun. As a verb, to commune is the act of coming together. To commune is to create through aesthetic practice a state of intimate and heightened receptivity. To commune is to collaborate, to work together, in a joint intellectual effort.²¹¹ As a noun, commune is a material space, defined through and by spatial, geographical, and interpersonal relations. The space of commune offers a heightened awareness of the features of each potential definitional space. Materially, the space of commune created through cob building heightens a person's artistic, creative, political and social sensibilities.²¹²

I use storied examples from my cob building experiences and juxtapose these experiences with the underlying definitions of community art to complexify this discussion. First, I articulate how cob building is a community art based on *doing*. Second, I start to put the pieces of stone together to demonstrate how cob building operates as a relational aesthetic. Cob building is based on relationships, social, cultural, and contextual intersubjectivity. Finally, I interrogate the actions of activist art within the context of cob building. These material and theoretical foundations allow for and substantiate the argument that this community art offers its participants a space to commune. Materially and geographically, a commune is a local space. Rather than defining community based on social or political boundaries or identity similarities, I

²¹⁰ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

²¹¹ *American Heritage Dictionary*

²¹² Following Douglas Blandy and Elizabeth Hoffman in "Toward an Art Education of Place," *Studies in Art Education* 35 (1993): 22-33, I speculate on relationships among art, art education, and the environment. A space of commune is similar to their idea that art education is a place in which art educators and students can imagine new relations among art, community, and the environment. A space of commune also reflects environmental concerns that are globally relevant and personally embodied.

argue a space of commune is based on creating, the act of working together. It is a form of community art in the *doing*.

Digging the Outlines of Community: Community Art as Doing

Within a space of commune, cob building is an enriching aesthetic practice. Contesting the ideology that greatness lies in the artists' object is the understanding that art exists within context and within a systemic web of meanings. John Dewey, in his article *The Crisis of Culture*, finds that the status or social importance of the artist depends upon and is a measurement of the state of its culture.²¹³ From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, cob building is a form of art that creates and responds to its social relationships, cultures, and contexts.²¹⁴ Rather than focusing solely on the art object, the artist as genius, or the price tag we can place on art and its objects, I understand cob building as a space of commune through the act of doing, creating, and making. The space of commune was created within Mini-City.

Mini-City: Summer 2006

The teens straggle in from their morning discussion with Ellie. We sit at the picnic bench waiting for the rest of the teens to arrive. Louis and Katy are the last to join us. I call to Louis, "Can you grab everyone's journals from the conference room?" He turns on his heels without even a word or a nod. He's back in a few minutes with the pile of notebooks. It's hard to get excited about a cob building day at 8 a.m. It gets hard for

²¹³ John Dewey, "The Crisis in Culture," *New Republic* 62 (1930): 123-126.

²¹⁴ According to Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1988), we are taught to understand and critique art as product, object, separated from the everyday experience. She states, "What we are taught is how to appreciate the greatness of the artist and the quality of art objects. This ideology is contested by the argument that we should be studying the totality of social relation which form the conditions of the production and consumption of objects designated in that process as art" (5). I argue throughout this chapter that cob building, as an art practice, is associated with the latter ideology.

me to wake up this early every morning and prepare for a strenuous day of labor. I sympathize with everyone's sluggish movements.

Tim and I believe in the act of intention journaling. This process was described in Chapter One, Building. At the beginning of each day, we gather together and ask the cobbers to think about where they are in the building process, how they are feeling that day, how much more they have to accomplish. We set goals and think of a few words that may frame the day for each other. Tim looks around the picnic table and says, "We are about to start digging in the ground to begin building our foundation. We are basically starting out cob process together. I want you to think about a few words that might motivate us throughout the day. You can write anything you want. This is your time to write and think about yourself in this process."

We sit for a while. I chew the end of my pen. I look around and rather than focusing on my intentions, I take notes on how the teens react to this process because I am excited about their reactions.

[The committee: Aren't you taking notes because, as the writer/researcher/artist/cobber, you want to understand the teens' reactions to the process?]

Louis rolls his eyes but then looks straight ahead to concentrate. Mario and David are both scribbling in their notebooks. Katy writes one word and then stops. Tim is furiously writing in his book. After around ten minutes of this silence, the teens are getting antsy. They are throwing funny looks back and forth and giggling. Tim is still writing. I nudge him and he looks up. "Oh! OK! So what have you all written as your intentions for this day? I was hoping we could each share what we have. Does anyone want to go first?" Tim looks over the table at Louis.

Louis begrudgingly nods and says, "I wrote the word motivation because you said it earlier and I think we need to be motivated to get this work done."

"That's great Louis! You are exactly right. We do need motivation to get through the day." Tim's voice is excited. We go through other words like strength, help, cooperation, and energy.

I look at my watch and realize that we are taking a lot of time to talk about the process rather than actually work on the process of building the foundation. I say, “We do need lots of energy to get this work done and I think we should get that energy going!”

Tim stands up and screams, “Let’s do it!” The teens laugh at his enthusiasm. He continues, “Go grab a shovel!” The teens walk slowly over to the pile of shovels. There aren’t enough for all of them. Some of the teens have to share and wait for their turn. They argue about who gets to dig first. Tim asks them to stand in the building’s shape. They are so spread out.

“I don’t think that we can build this much in the span of a summer,” Tim says to me. Tim sounds worried.

I break in, “Ok. Everyone, let’s think about this. Are you sure you are going to be able to build a structure this big?” They think about it and take a step in.

Tim says, “The larger you make this space the more work you will have to do.” They take another step in. I ask Tiffany to walk the radius of the space. She counts twenty steps across. “Mario, do you want to count steps the other way?” I ask.

“Yeah. OK.” He counts eighteen steps. We figure the measurements are about even since his feet are bigger than hers. After we measure the space, the teens seem excited about building. They are laughing about shovels, foot sizes, and things I can’t make out. All I know is that I want to keep this level of energy up. It feels great to hear them laughing.

“Ok. Good. Let’s start digging!” I say jumping the gun just a little. I look over at Tim. He scratches his head and walks closer to me so the teenagers won’t hear us.

“I don’t know how we are going to build a structure this big. Really. We are going to need a lot of cob,” he says seriously.

My eyes widen. “Whoops. I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment.”

Tim smiles and says, “I think we can do it. Heck, I know we can do it.” His voice gains more energy. “I think the kids are happy, so that makes me happy. I may just have to come back in a few weeks to help you finish up the project. And that is fine with me!”

“Ah. This ground is too tough!” I hear one of them yell. I see Lia struggling with the shovel. “I’ve never used this before!” I am startled by this remark. I walk over to Lia.

“You mean that you have never used a shovel before?”

“No,” she says with disdain in her voice. “Look at my nails. Do you really think I would mess these up?” She is only scraping the surface of the ground. Her shovel partner, Jed, is trying to take over. I stop him.

“Lia, you can do it. Use your weight against the shovel. Push the shovel deeper into the ground.” I try and demonstrate how to do it. She tries again. She digs further into the ground (see fig. 70).



Fig. 70. Breaking ground

I am proud that Lia doesn’t give up. I also want her to figure it out without someone taking over. I think it can help her establish her own personal foundations. She

is a woman with agency. She can complete her task successfully. I see this struggle with all of the teens. Most of them haven't used a shovel before, nor does it seem as though they expected this task to be so difficult.

"There are so many roots down here!" Most of the teens are struggling with the shovels. Tim and I cheer them on. We also dig in the ground. I use my shovel blade to help them chop up the roots to make their shoveling a little easier. Even with all of us working together, digging proves to be a difficult task. Sweat pours down our backs. We work, take water breaks, and work again.

For lunch, I go to the Cuban sandwich shop and get sandwiches. When I get back, the teens are thankful. Mario says, "Yo, Miss J. Thanks! This means so much. You want me to give you a few bucks?" Today, I decline their offer to pay for lunch. But on other days, I ask them to pay for their food. I can't afford to pay for each of them each day. We sit on the picnic bench near the site. We unwrap the sandwiches and take a long rest. The Florida sun can really drain you. After our lunch and glasses of watered-down gatorade, we begin working again. In total, we work for seven hours. We get the hole for the foundation dug.

At around 3:30 p.m., Tim calls us over to our digging site. "Take a seat in the house and we are going to talk about this beautiful day," Tim says with pride. We all take a seat and pull out our writing journals. We talk about the daily intentions and facing the challenge of the day. The teens are so proud of their work. Tim says, "Take a moment to reflect on what we have just done."

Mike jumps in and says, "Clap it up!" He starts to clap and we all follow in rhythm. I laugh and join in. Clapping becomes a ritual. "Clap it up" becomes part of our daily routine. I can still hear it now as I write these words.

Tim speaks again after the clapping has settled. "All of us, together, have carved out this shape, the outline of a heart. Can you see how beautiful this is?"

He stands up and swings his arms open. He walks the outline and says, "Did you know you were making the shape of the heart? I can't even begin to tell you how beautiful this is. This outline is where we will lay the foundation for the cob house."

They clap it up again. I ask, “What words from your intention journals do you think really helped you throughout this day?”

Lia says, “We definitely needed strength because those roots were really tough to get through.”

I smile at her and say, “Yes, we did. And I am proud of your personal strength.”

Louis says, “We needed to cooperate because we helped each other get through those roots.”

Tim says, “That is just so perfect, isn’t it? We need each other. Anything else?”

Katy says, “We definitely needed energy and motivation because I got really tired at the end. And without motivation I don’t think I woulda’ made it.

To close the intentions session I say, “I am so proud of all of you. It took a lot of effort to get us here. Because you worked so hard today, we can lay the stone tomorrow. Great work everybody!” After the teens leave, Tim and I take a moment to look at the space. We walk the outline of the heart and realize how amazing it is. I feel so proud. We silently sit together in this space. I feel exhausted and at peace.

I sit on the ground in the middle of the heart shaped outline of the cob building. Tim is meditating across from me. I close my eyes and think about how this building, and more specifically how these actions today, are what make a community. These aesthetic actions create a space of commune as both noun and verb. We commune through our acts of labor. We dig in the ground. We shape the outline of the building and struggle with the shovels. We help each other cut through roots. Through the act of doing we created these spaces of commune.

Digging Foundations: Creating Commune Through Doing

It is the neighborhood or the community participatory spirit that is unique to community arts. John Dewey believed that the Great Community is not solely about association. While people may be physically connected or proximate, there may still be a

lack of community.²¹⁵ As I explored in Chapter Four, Land, I feel this disconnect in my own neighborhood. Community building is not necessarily going to happen in a small academic circle, on the neighborhood block, or anywhere for that matter. A space of commune is created when the members of a group come together through action.

Like John Dewey's vision of the Great Community, cob building rests upon "an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action."²¹⁶ Concrete action generates a space of commune for those involved in the process.²¹⁷ Ron Scapp, in a dialogue with bell hooks in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, states, "The building of trust through a process of concrete action, along with cultivating the values of courage and civility, combined with commitment to community is needed if we are to find unity within diversity."²¹⁸ Ron Scapp and John Dewey's vision of community and community building speaks to a sense of appreciation, a level of cultivating commitment and courage and building trust through concrete action.

As I write, I am brought back to the first digging day at Mini-City. I close my eyes and imagine myself sitting inside that heart-shaped outline. This first day of digging—of concrete action—materializes John Dewey and Ron Scapp's theories for me. I can see the teens working so hard to get the task done, together. I can hear our laughter. I can feel our frustrations as we wrestle with the tough ground. I can hear the words from

²¹⁵ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow, 1927).

²¹⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* 154.

²¹⁷ Seana S. Lowe, "Creating Community: Art for Community Development," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29 (2000): 363 states, "It is a working model based on relations between people and on social creativity rather than on self-expression, and it is characterized by co-operation. It is community-based, often relating to marginalized groups. It is socially engaged, interactive and aimed at another, less anonymous public than those implicated by larger art institutions. New genre public art is about creative participation in a process."

²¹⁸ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 112.

our intentions journal prompt: Motivation, cooperation, and energy. I can see and feel how these elements were present during this day. I do believe that through concrete action, we built a space to commune.

[The community: We have asked you politely before. We are going to ask you again, who are we to you?]

[The artist: We choose you, community. We want to help you.]²¹⁹

[The community: Don't you think you should ask us if we need help from you? How does your work help us?]

[The committee: I think it is imperative to start unpacking the term community and the artist's relationship to community art. You've used John Dewey's notions of community but there are a lot of theorists who have argued that his vision is idealist and utopist. He claims that through community involvement we can create the Great Community. I wonder about the practical realities here as well. I am sure there are a multitude of times when cob building didn't create a sense of commune but instead, interrogated and complicated your definitions of and feelings about working within particular communities.]

In order to articulate how cob operates as relational aesthetics, I move through definitions of community art and write storied examples of how cob as a form of commune materializes in praxis. First, using the definitions of community art, I articulate how relational aesthetics are based, not solely on geographic location, but on relationships developed at the site. While trying to erect a temporary space of commune at the Qualitative Research Conference, our visions of community were imbued with layers of disconnect and conflict. The conference also provided an example of a perceived divide, in this case, between academic attendees and the members of the Oyster

²¹⁹ Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage* (January 1995): 5-11 argues that there is a potential for appropriation of community for the artist's personal agenda. There is potential for artists to claim authority and to speak for the community in order to forward their personal gain as well as their professional goals.

Bay community. Second, I work through the layers of activist art. How does an activist agenda shift our definitions and goals of commune? Working from a storied example of guerilla cobbing, I unpack the intentions of commune. Finally, I revisit relational aesthetics as the primary frame to unpack the failures and successes of cob building as a tool to create commune.

Commune: Negotiating Definitions, Institutions, and Identities

Drawing from the vision of current research, community art is transformational and can impact individual and collective identities.²²⁰ Community arts research has demonstrated how art can be transformative,²²¹ spark changes in individual identity,²²² and address community problems.²²³ Community art is a form of public art as characterized by its collaborative and inclusive nature. Within community art, artists and non-artists create together.²²⁴ Yet, there are distinctions and divisions within these claims. Here, the artist is separated from the community member. The community member benefits from the artist's instruction. This erects a border between the community member and the artist, which creates a perceived authority figure and a power-over hierarchy. These claims also set up a vision that there is a problem-ridden community and that art making will save it. How do we define artist and non-artist? How do we make the

²²⁰ According to Alan Kay in "Art and Community Development: The Role the Arts Have in Regenerating Communities," *Community Development Journal* 35 (2000): 423, "The arts have an important role to play in the regeneration of areas whose residents are disadvantaged economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally. The arts have a particular role to play in: encouraging people into training and development; supporting volunteers and participants in personal developments; improving the image of an area; social cohesion and active citizenship; local people recognizing their own cultural identity; and improving the quality of lives through individual and collective creativity."

²²¹ Seana S. Lowe, "The Art of Community Transformation," *Education and Urban Society* 33 (2001): 457-471.

²²² Lowe, *Creating Community: Art for Community Development* 357-386.

²²³ Kay 414-424.

²²⁴ Lowe, *Creating Community: Art for Community Development* 357.

distinction between artist and community member? I am considering the rhetoric of community. What is community?²²⁵ How do we talk about process rather than a product without assuming that community art is transformational for the community?²²⁶

I use the following story to exemplify and question the problematic definitions of community and community art. When I define community as a space of commune materialized by our actions, I ignore the other multivariate positionalities and identity based reasons people define themselves as a community.²²⁷ If I focus on identity politics as the basis for working with and thereby creating a sense of commune, then I rely on what some argue is a typical, essentializing process in community-based art.²²⁸ From a feminist poststructuralist position, I want to uncover how, as subjects, we give meaning to material social relations. Through these material social relationships, cob creates

²²⁵ John Dewey, *Individualism—Old and New* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1930) 81 states, “Since individuality is a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world and of showing a preferential bias in response to these impacts, it develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions; it is no more complete in itself than is a painter’s tube of paint without relation to the canvas.” Individuality is developed from a person interacting with others. It is made visible and distinct after a person has been a part of a community. From these communicative interactions, a person begins to develop a sense of self, of difference, and of individuality.

²²⁶ Kester 6 questions “The rhetoric of community artists who position themselves as the vehicle for an unmediated expressivity on the part of a given community.” He points to the way in which community artists who address social problems in their work overemphasize empowerment, individual agency, and individual transformation as a measure of their project’s success.

²²⁷ Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, (New York: Routledge, 1990) 301, argues that the ideal of community is a dream that “expresses a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort.” This ideal “privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view.”

²²⁸ Kwon 149 argues, “Difference understood accordingly as variety of social and cultural categories is an underlying presumption of community-based art today, which seeks to become over more inclusive of this variety at the expense of a rigorous and self-critical examination of the primary force that seems to define the field—the *idealized specter* of community.” Ultimately, who are the artists, spectators, collaborators, and communities? How does community art include and speak with varying people, within specific contexts without using the term community art as a blanket for their own artistic gain?

commune.²²⁹ Within the context of this academic conference, the questions surrounding the definition of community extend into how the scholars attending this conference are also a community and how they contribute to the spaces of cob building within this context.

As articulated in Chapter Two, *Sketching Voices*, and Chapter Six, *Practical Realities*, within the context of the Qualitative Research Conference, we were given an unconventional eight-hour slot of time to build a mobile cob oven with local members of the Oyster Bay community and the conference attendees. We hoped that this oven would eventually find a home in a communal space off-campus to be used by the community. The conference focused on alternative concepts of research, ethics, and science. The conference theme and presenters sought to entertain new ways of decolonizing traditional methodologies and trouble performative, feminist, indigenous, queer, democratic, and participatory forms of critical and ethical inquiry. How perfect for cob building, I thought, as I crafted my proposal. Cob is an unconventional arts-based form of critical inquiry. The proposal was accepted. Our conference organizers contacted me. In our conversations over email, they were willing to engage in this alternative form of inquiry.

Rather than talk about ideas, we could use a form of action and arts-based commune to bring people together in the act of doing.²³⁰ We could use this forum to connect people from the conference to the larger Oyster Bay community. As stated in Chapter Five, *Scavenge*, we exchanged emails with people in the Oyster Bay community

²²⁹ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 26.

²³⁰ When I imagined participating in this conference I imagined a group of people from the conference community as well as members of the larger Oyster Bay community, non-affiliates of the University, connecting through the process of cob building. I imagined, however utopic, that in the act of doing we would celebrate the promise June K. Mcfee in *Preparation for Art* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970) 340-341, sees in art education. She understands art education as a process through which people discover, recognize and celebrate community values. Art education prepares citizens to participate within a democratic state. She imagines community as fluid and ever evolving. Art education is also a dynamic source of personal identity within a shared environment.

interested in natural building. They responded and said they would participate. They offered help, scavenging for local materials and finding a home for the cob oven. The conference organizers found a space on campus to build our mobile cob oven. It all sounded so promising.

I unpack here the limits and failures of community art within the context of an academic conference. It felt, at the end of the day, that this was art for our sake, not for a larger community of people, not for the conference goers, but for us, the few panel participants that came to the building site to help us stomp in the cob. In some ways, we did create a small space of commune within the larger academic conference. In others, the practical realities of the institutional and academic contexts prompted me to rethink my definition of commune.

[The artist: How does this fit with a/r/tography?]

[The committee: I have been wondering the same thing.]

As stated before, cob is a form of arts-based research. I concentrate in this chapter on the argument that a/r/tographical research is living inquiry. I contextualize cob in the discussions of community art and commune to argue that cob, as a creation of commune, is a form of a/r/tographical living inquiry.

Community: Art for Our Sake

It is 7:00 a.m. Sarah and Lynn get up early to get the materials from Don's studio and bring them to site underneath the Gateway. Heidi and I make a run to Kinko's to make copies of the handouts to be given to the conference goers. We make fifty copies. We arrive at the site, park the rental car on the side street, and walk towards the gateway. I look around. It is a large concrete space and no one is here. It feels empty. Our building space is quite far from the buildings where the conference is being held. Atop the large

brick structure reads: Learning & Labor (see fig. 71). These words seem so fitting for our community project. We are going to build with local materials using our own labor.

Cob building is about creating kinesthetic, theoretical, and communicative knowledge through the process of creation and through our artistic labors.²³¹



Fig. 71. The Gateway

²³¹ Kay 423 argues, “The creative energies of local individuals can greatly enhance our culture and encourage more and more people to take an active role in community development.” Creative energies are transmuted and connected through cob building. Designating and taking active roles in community art and cob building takes reliance upon members of a community. It takes trust and communication to build with cob. There are levels of knowledge that happen at the cob building site. This knowledge intersects theoretical positions, kinesthetic creations, and communicative knowledge.

I stare at this gigantic gateway and hope that these words, learning and labor, will materialize here today. I close my eyes and give myself a minute to center myself in this space. I try and visualize connection and stillness, creation and community art. The sound of buckets scraping against Lynn's truck bed rattles my eyes open. Lynn and Sarah have arrived with the scavenged materials. It is 7:30 a.m.

I walk over to help Heidi, Lynn, and Sarah pull the materials out of Lynn's truck. We haul the bags of sand, buckets of clay, water buckets, and metal base for the oven. We set up our camp with our materials underneath the arch. It seems appropriate that we cob right here, underneath the gateway of learning and labor (see fig. 72).



Fig. 72. Hauling materials

Over coffee and the morning paper, Lynn, Sarah, Heidi, and I laugh at our early arrival. The panel slot has us starting at 9:00 a.m. and ending at 5:00 p.m. Conference attendees are probably just getting to their first Friday morning panel or resting until the 10:00 a.m. panel. I know I would be taking my time to get up in the morning. I take a smooth sip of the creamed coffee. I say, "No one will come this early. It isn't going to

take eight hours to build the oven. I want to wait for people from the conference to show up. So, let's not start for a little bit." We sit on the grass and rest our legs. My body pulses from hauling the heavy bags. I am aware of my bones, my skin, and my body in this moment.

Sarah is wandering the space. She stops, laughs and points to the water that curves in and out of this space and says, "This is ridiculous. It's supposed to be a river but it's a concrete sidewalk painted blue." We all laugh with her. It's cool, maybe even brisk outside. I want the sun to warm me. When we move our muscles clobbering, we will feel warm enough. I take this moment to ingest the chilly wind and the sun's teasing tickle of warmth. I look at the people around me and I feel blessed.

It is 9:00 a.m. and our panel has officially begun. I get up from the grass to move the materials around. I try and position the bags of sand and the tarps so that it looks organized for the people that show up to participate. I am organizing the supplies. This is so silly. I can worry about the conference goes later. I am sure that the members of the local community will show up. Some of them said they would be here, when we spoke to them over email.

At around 10:00 a.m., we decide to get started. I have high hopes that people from the conference or the local community might show up. "If we build it, they might come," I joke with intense undertones of anxiety in my voice. I am anxious because I want the academic community to come and be a part of this project. I am anxious because I know Sarah will most likely scold me in some fashion because I didn't work hard enough to bring the conference goes here. I am anxious that all of our scavenging has been done in vain.

[The committee: Be clear as to why you are trying to blend these communities. I wonder what your overall purpose was with this panel? Is the format of academic conferences conducive to these types of endeavors? Do

you really think the Oyster Bay local community wanted to connect with this conference? Did you even ask? Who was this act of commune for, exactly?]²³²

[The cobbler: Cob building can be for everyone. It is the act of building that creates community.]

[The artist: It is also for the final product. The oven is a functional piece of art that can be used bring multiple communities together. The oven is a functional art product. Communities can bake bread and eat together as a form of commune. The product is just as important as the process. I am still concerned about a/r/tography.]

At 10:30 a.m., there are still no conference goers. We start first with the sand. We pile it on high, round, and deep. We think about the future shape of the oven. While we mold the sand with our hands, we laugh and talk. We are interacting with one another, intersecting subject positions, and creating together. We are communing through doing. We are listening softly, telling stories, joking around. We think about the layers that will be added to the pile of sand and take into account its height, width and overall shape. We really want this to work. We are developing a sense of commune. Four sets of hands shape and mold the structure. The sand is what creates the overall shape of the oven. When the cob on the outside layer is almost dry, we will pull out the sand and the oven will be hollow.

We slow down the process because we are getting a lot accomplished in a short amount of time. We take another break to lie out on the grass. I look to Sarah and say, “No conference goers.”

She shrugs and says, “I knew this would happen.”

²³² Kay 423 states, “Art projects are most effective when they are owned by the local community.” In the case of our work in Oyster Bay, I do not believe that we could define the local community. We wanted to blend the academic community with the local Oyster Bay community but I realize now the levels of essentialism here. Why can’t each person that was involved in this process be defined as a community member because of the set of actions surrounding cob building? Perhaps community is an elusive term and communing materializes the space of commune through the action of creating art.

“I think it’s because they don’t know where this site is located,” I say.

“When you organized this panel with the conference planners did you ask them to put us close to the conference buildings?” she asks accusingly. I shrink inside myself. She makes me feel small.

“I did. I spoke with them about all of these particulars. This was the only place that we were allowed to build on the campus. They tried to find an appropriate space for our building. I don’t think they wanted us to be so far away. They even asked Heidi to make an announcement at the keynote address. I think the institutional boundaries limited our options,” I say frustrated with her and her assumption that I didn’t try to make this conference panel work.

[The committee: Can you expand on these institutional boundaries? They seem important here.]

To be sure, as an academic and an artist, my relationship to the academic institution will map and mark how this community art project unfolds.²³³ The Qualitative Research Conference has been an important component in my academic career. It is a space to connect with other scholars around interpretive and qualitative research. However, the institutional markers of this conference are traditional. For instance, the panels are set up for talking about research. Normally, there is a chair who introduces each member of the panel. Each participant has fifteen minutes to talk about his or her paper and/or abstract of his or her research. A respondent briefly responds to the work and then the floor is open for questions. We are scholars talking about our work and that

²³³ Kwon 7 creates a typology of four communities that typically unfold in community-based collaborations. These communities are community of mythic unity; sited communities; temporary invented communities; and ongoing invented communities. “For instance, while one community type might require extensive artist and/or institutional involvement, another type remains self-sufficient in overseeing the development of its own project. Further, each category defines a different role for the artist, posing, in turn, alternative renditions of the collaborative relationship. These variations indicate the extent to which the very concept of “community” remains highly ambiguous and problematic in public art today.”

is important. Some scholars talk about community building and working with communities outside of the academy within these fifteen-minute paper presentations. In the context of academic conferences, some academics speak about, not with the community.

When I organized this panel, I thought that bringing an interactive installation piece to the conference would interactively engage the academy and local Oyster Bay community members in cob as a form of community art. I thought we could erect a temporary space of commune.²³⁴ So far, we haven't seen anyone from the local community or from outside our small group of panel participants. Oh wait! I see Drew, Chris, and Sylvia. Thank goodness. Our first conference goers have arrived!

“Wow. That was a long walk. Do you realize how far away this is from the actual conference building?” Drew laughs as he hugs me.

“This is cool!” Chris hugs me too. We take a quick photograph and Drew and Chris are off to the next panel. They know they have to walk a long way back.

Sylvia stays to help with the process. On the grass, we talk about the next step. We have to cover the sand and then begin to cob.

“Shoot,” Sarah says. “We don't have a plastic bag to put over the sand so it doesn't stick to the cob when we begin to layer it on.

“What about newspaper?” Lynn says. “That might work.” I don't remember where the newspaper came from or who went to go get it. Did I get it when I got coffee this morning? I really have no idea. I do remember feeling relieved that we could get to the next step in the process. We layer wet newspaper over the sand to protect the cob

²³⁴ Kwon 126 defines a temporary invented community as “one in which a community group or organization is newly constituted and rendered operational through the coordination of the art work itself. Also quite prevalent in current community-based practices, such an approach imagines the art work in large part as the effort involved in forming such a community group around a set of collective activities and/or communal events as defined by the artist.”

structure when we hollow it out (see fig. 73). The oven is taking great shape. I take a step back to grab the camera.

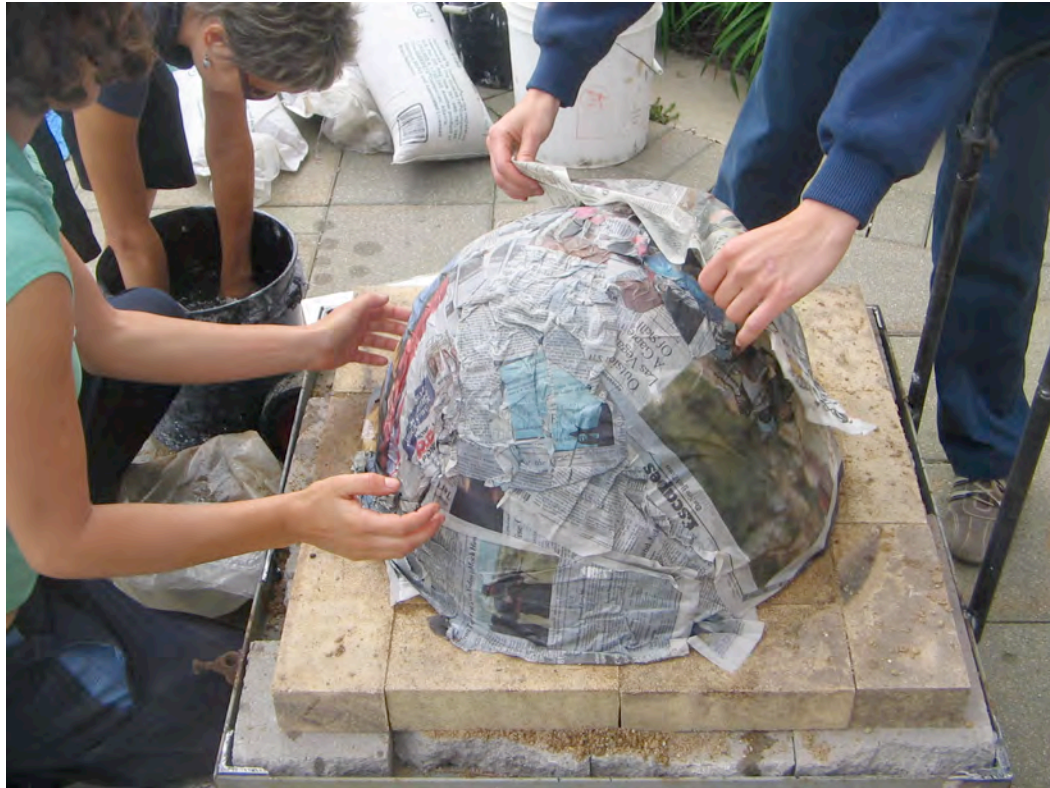


Fig. 73. Newspaper layer

[The documentarian: Thank goodness. We need more pictures, more documentation of this process.]

[The cobbler: It is beautiful.]

As we mask the sand with wet newspaper, a man with long hair rides up on his bicycle. He is Mike, the man that will eventually provide a home for the oven and bake organic breads with it. We have high hopes for the oven. We want it to last. We want it to be used for baking. Mike joins the conversation easily. There is nothing intrusive about him. He is easy on the eyes and the heart. We all laugh about silly pirate jokes. We talk politics as we begin to mix the cob. We discuss the way in which our society limits our

ability to love. We speak in depth about relationships, gay rights, and community gardens. The six of us create and respond to our present social situation. The social situation is what makes cobbing a process, a commune, and a complex negotiation of positionings and contexts.

I realize that our temporary commune is created through action, through this set of tasks. We are building something together. I am proud of this work. Even though I am slightly disappointed by the number of people at this site, we are building together. I am proud that with we are creating commune underneath this gateway. We have formed a temporary space of commune around this activity, even if this temporary commune doesn't look quite the way I imagined it to look. Community is about the arts-based process, the people I am with, and the interesting and complex relationships I have with each of them. We are present with each other in a unique way.²³⁵ Community is defined through the act of doing. Community is a verb, not a noun. Community is creation.

[The artist: Building community through cob is a/r/tographical living inquiry.]

These interactions at the cob building site create community. A community is not a simple organization of people nor solely grounded within our location. Community isn't based upon similar identities or social positions. A community is a space of commune. Relational aesthetics helps to define a space of commune because commune is made up of the complex negotiations of differing perspectives and people.

Relational Aesthetics: Because We Are Here, Together

Community art does not occur in a bubble but in a bundle of complex relationships. "Art becomes irrelevant to everyday life when cut off from its intimate

²³⁵ Lowe, *Creating Community* 364 states, "It is in the neighborhood or the community participatory spirit that is unique to community arts. The role of the . . . artist is to engage the individual or group in the process of art, and to stir something within the individual about his individual or collective being."

social connection.”²³⁶ Art as experience ties art making within and around social relationships and characterizes one component of community art.²³⁷ Throughout our interactions at the Qualitative Research Conference, we were engaged in a practice similar to what Nicolas Bourriaud has termed relational aesthetics. Relational aesthetics is "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."²³⁸ Relational aesthetics creates encounters between art and its viewers, which create communities between viewers. Viewers are brought together in participation, in interacting with the work of art. The artwork and its relationship to the viewers exists as a possibility, a perhaps, a moment of hope for an encountering.²³⁹ Relational aesthetics creates intersubjective encounters between the viewer and the artist. Intersubjective relationships and encounters with the art work can happen on many levels. It can take place in the actual production, the process of cob building. It can occur in the viewer’s encountering with the work.

For example, the cob oven we built in Oyster Bay works on all three of these levels of intersubjectivity. First, as an intersubjective relationship, a space of commune, as created through cob building, recognizes that the participants are the audience *and* creators of the cob structure. Sarah, Lynn, Heidi, Tim, and I didn’t lose our subject positions within the space of commune at the academic conference. What was happening was and is an intense identity negotiation. The tension I felt with Sarah was based upon our working and personal relationship. We were constantly negotiating our subject positions. For example, I am a communication scholar. Sarah works within fine arts. I

²³⁶ Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, *Creativity, Communication, and Cultural Value* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004) 42.

²³⁷ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934).

²³⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon-Quetigny: Les Presses du Réel, 2002) 113.

²³⁹ Bourriaud 17-18.

wanted to show her that my academic discipline, as materialized at the Qualitative Research Conference, is receptive to cob building as a form of arts-based research. These identity negotiations are not shrouded under the umbrella of community, but are highlighted and worked out in the process of creating with cob. A space of commune allows for and accounts for these negotiations.

Second, intersubjectivity happens in the actual process of cob building. Relational aesthetics stresses community and communal negotiations. Cob building, as a form of relational aesthetics, negotiates the complexity of subject positionings during the collaborative art making process. The basic material for relational aesthetics is human relation.²⁴⁰ Cob building stresses social exchange, interactions, and communication processes. When building with cob, we have to take the time to listen to each other's ideas because we depend on each other. We have to listen to the way bodies get tired and people get frustrated. Cob, as relational aesthetics, works through these negotiations in order to create a space of commune. The work is process-oriented rather than object-oriented and it is aimed at affecting the lives of the people that participate in the project, not only communicating with removed or separate audiences through an art object. Moreover, they are "artworks as social practice to the relations and interrelations—the performances of everyday life and culture in which they are embedded."²⁴¹

[The artist: Art creates objects that are interactive. The product isn't final. It also interacts with an audience. Objects are cultural agents.]

Third, when the process is finished, the functional oven creates an ongoing dialogue with those who interact with the oven. The product functions to bake breads and pizzas. It can also create complex dialogues about cob as a feasible building material. For

²⁴⁰ Bourriaud 114.

²⁴¹ Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 24.

example, when people see the oven, or taste the bread that is baked within it, they may ask questions about this functional art product. It creates an opportunity to talk about sustainable building and cob as an artistic material.

Each of these intersections is what Nicholas Bourriaud describes as a bundle of relations within the world. The complexity of this bundle of relations within the space of cob building not only speaks to the actual relationships of the people at the cob site but also to the way cob building ultimately reacts and speaks to the larger community, those who walk into the cob house after it is completed, sit on a cob bench, or use a cob oven. The building, the bench, and the cob oven offer function that stretches past the object and reframes relationality with the final product. Artworks live within a social world. The process of cob building creates its own bundle of relations. The product of cob building also creates and gives rise to other relations. The artwork does not demonstrate or frame a solitary process. It exists in relation to the context, social situation, and to the creators and users of the functional artwork. While building with cob, we physically and socially engage with one another and through these actions we restructure the spaces of commune.

Stomping the cob, rolling tarps, picking up piles of cob and moving them from one location to another, lifting concrete stones, and digging in the ground create a different type of ideology that is based upon the negotiations between cooperation and conflict, relationality and silences, and play and labor. Cooperation and conflict are components of commune. Cob is about working through the interactions that create commune. When people come together from varying positionalities and varying lenses, the interactions are sometimes sticky. These sticky interactions, like the tense feelings that arise when Sarah and I don't agree, or when, as in examples from cob building in Mini-City or the Walton School, we hadn't gotten as far as the building process as we wanted, demonstrate the labyrinthine relationships and contextual elements of cob building. In all of these contexts, cobbers relate through labor and play. Cob building is a physical and kinesthetic place to engage in local activism about environmental justice

through art making. Cob can also fail in its attempts at activating communities, or ultimately bringing people together in the spaces of commune.

Activist Art: Art for Whose Sake?

Cob building is a form of activist art.²⁴² Cob building communicates resistance²⁴³ to mass industrial building practices, environmental injustices, relational and identity based oppressions through the process of collaboratively building and aesthetically creating structures out of cob. Cob building is an activist art, for it is rooted in producing social change. The end result of cob building is dependent upon working with our natural economy. The land is our material. We sculpt the sand and clay. Cob building artistically addresses the way humans interact with the local material, and as stated in Chapter Four, Scavenge, local materials include people. Cob building teaches us to sculpt each other's lives and the land softly, with an ethic of sustainability in mind. Cob building teaches people how to negotiate the land, their relationship to labor, each other, through an artistic and intimate practice. Cob is an activist, communal art, and form of relational aesthetics that, like feminist poststructuralism, moves us between theory and praxis to create social change.

Capper states,

“Consequently, the feminist contribution to poststructuralist theories includes, in part, the retention of practice with the development of theory, the reinstatement of the human potential to "make a difference" in practice, and

²⁴² Deborah Barndt, *Wild Fire: Art as Activism* (Toronto, Canada: Sumach, 2006) 18 states, “Challenging narrow definitions of art and activism, we reframe art as activism. Whether the modes are verbal or non-verbal, artmaking that ignites people’s creativity, recovers repressed histories, builds community and strengthens social movements is in itself a holistic form of action.”

²⁴³ Resistance, in this instance, is a form of action that provides alternatives to mass industrialized homes. Resistance is also education about natural building processes. Cob building creates and/or enacts change concerning societal injustices and oppression rooted within the everyday local interactions at the site and through community collaboration.

the predisposition to "take a stand" in the midst of continual self-reflection."²⁴⁴

As an activist process, cob is a powerful tool. I see two moments in the day-long installation that materialize Capper's argument that a feminist poststructuralist works to reinstate the human potential and to make a difference in practice. First, cob is a local endeavor that materially and artistically intersects people. The first moment, as written about previously, is the morning movements of building a cob oven with ten dedicated people. While only a few people showed up to help us build the oven, we still created a communal space among our bodies. We brought together a small group of people to build and a space of commune for the local Oyster Bay and conference community. And to me, this is a success.

[The cobber: It *is* a success!]

[The committee: Activist art may not be beneficial for all people. Who is this activist art for?]

The second moment is when part of the group decided to build a cob bench on University property without permission and without thinking of who this cob structure might impact in the long run.

The cob bench was an impromptu idea created by Tim and Sarah. Don and Mike followed. I was half-heartedly a part of this building process.

[The cobber: It didn't fail. It was beautiful. It taught us so much about each other and the process.]

This failure prompts me to dig deeper into the purpose, possibilities, and impact community art can have on a sense of commune. When does community art speak to the desires of the local community? I look back at this second moment of the Qualitative

²⁴⁴ Colleen A. Capper, "Multiparadigm Perspectives of Administration: Informing Theory and Practice," in *Proceedings: Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, (1992) 18.

Research Conference as a teaching tool for future work with cob and community art practices. As community and activist art, cob building created a sense of commune in the morning building session. In the afternoon, building a cob bench without the permission of the institution that let us build in the first place, prompted me to question the intentions of each cob building project and our awareness of the institutions in which we build. The institutions are, as articulated in Chapter Four, Land, part of the land. From my own subject position, our sense of commune was torn apart.

The Afternoon Phase of Building: Without Permission

Lynn and I drive to pick up Tim from the bus station. Sarah asked him to be a part of our panel. This is my first time meeting Tim. He is traveling from Chicago to come and help us with cob. He runs a non-profit organization that builds cob with disadvantaged groups and through this process he teaches them about conflict resolution and self-empowerment. He has been working with cob for several years. In the car, he shares his celery with Lynn and me. He is a man with a lot of energy and a soft face. His blue eyes grab attention but it is his mostly high-pitched voice and his erratic energy that spark my interest.

We return to the space. Our intended goal for the conference, finishing a portable cob oven, is complete. The oven is drying underneath the gateway. Tim buzzes around and gathers materials like scrap stone and pieces of concrete. I don't really understand why. He keeps inspecting the space around us. He scurries like a rat, talking to the construction workers who are building a new administration office next to the Gateway. He asks for and receives some pieces of concrete. I see him checking out the space in the corner of the grassy area. He comes over and asks Sarah, "Do you want to build a small, discrete bench? I think this site is perfect." His voice is so excited. My stomach drops.

In my email conversations with the conference planners, I was told that everything constructed had to be temporary and portable. We were asked by the institution to be respectful and clean up after ourselves. And here we are, moving cob into a different framework.

Tim walks around the site and says quickly, “This concrete river is just so ridiculous. Wouldn’t a cob bench fit perfectly here? I mean, think about it. It would be so interesting juxtaposed with these other concrete benches. We could teach people about sustainable practices through the cob bench. When people stumble upon it, they will ask questions. They might even think about the cob! We can leave our mark!”

“I love that idea!” Sarah says.

I watch as Sarah and Tim collaborate.

I think, “Leave our mark?” Now, the intentions seem different. This statement about sustainable practices seems interesting to me, but we haven’t received permission to build on the University’s grounds. Sarah and Tim don’t seem to care.

[The committee: Is making a statement a component of building commune through activist art? Is it relational aesthetics?]

Not on my terms. I can see your point. The cob bench creates a statement. The bench as activist art does create relationships with people that encounter the cob bench. The cob bench can also negatively impact people who encounter it. The University hires people to work there. How can we forget those who work as groundskeepers or maintenance workers who would have to clean up our mess? How can we forget the people that let us be a part of the conference? A guerrilla cob bench is not part of our goal.

Building this bench might damage our relationship with the academic institution and the conference organizers who have kindly shared their space with us. I want permission from the community and in this context the community includes the institution. Within the context of an academic conference, on the University campus, there are institutional rules and regulations that impact our work. The situation of this art

making, the contexts within which cob building occurs, and ultimately what commune means in these specific terms all impact our understanding of community.²⁴⁵

But in the same moment the intentions seem charged with love for the process. Tim looks over at me, but doesn't ask me what I think. He looks back at Sarah. She smiles and turns to talk to Don.

He says quickly, "I want to build it so we can leave something for the community."

[The community: For whom? Which community?]

It feels as though they want to build the cob bench for themselves. I see it as a terrible political move. I don't want to damage any relationship that we might have with the conference or the organizers. I don't feel comfortable doing it. I am thinking about the people that will have to come and take this bench apart. This isn't a statement about sustainability. It is about a desire to create an art object and have people say it is beautiful.

[The artist: No, it's about the process as well. How can you think I am so self-concerned? Aren't you concerned about your own career?]

[The cobber: It is also about the bench. People will see it. They will think about it. Maybe it will start to seep in that cob is a material that can work. Maybe they will think about the concrete river, the faux reproduction of nature.]

²⁴⁵ Linda Nochlin in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 158 states, ". . . art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, influenced by previous artists, and more vaguely and superficially, by social forces, but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast." The total situation of this artwork needs to be considered, especially in terms of activist art. We are working within the academic conference. There are institutional rules that are integral elements of this social structure.

[The community: What if we are the ones that have to clean it up?]

What confuses me here is how this action might forward artistic or communal sensibilities. Are we thinking about the community? Which community? Why didn't I just say no and walk away? Why did I stand near them when they created this so-called activist art? The tarps are set up. This cob mix is a darker color than that used to build the oven. I am on the outside. I walk away from the action. I clean up the site where we were building the oven. I try and organize the piles of leftover straw and scrape the cement to remove the cob remnants. I might be making up for the action happening a few yards away. Sarah comes to speak with me. "What is the matter?"

"I just don't think this is right, Sarah. We do not have permission. The conference organizers told me over email that we had to make everything temporary. If this was a conference in your discipline, I am sure you would actually care about how this might impact the other people involved. You would have thought this through," I say angrily.

"Jeanine, how can this beautiful bench hurt anyone? I bet the conference organizers will actually like it," she says.

I throw my hands up in the air and turn back to cleaning up the site. She turns away from me and walks back to Tim, Don, and Mike. A few minutes later, I walk back to the cob building site. I am torn by my desire to be part of this action and my sensitivity about the institutional rules. They are laughing and talking.

[The cobbler: Do you feel left out? I know I sure would. Why don't you just join them? Cob will wash away in the rain anyway because there isn't any lime around. It is still temporary and nature will get rid of it for you.]

They seem to feel a sense of commune (see fig. 74). I feel angry. I am now an outsider. I have a feeling that others watching this process feel a little angry too.



Fig. 74. Guerilla cobbing

Sylvia has her tape recorder with her. She leans in to get what we are saying on tape. She knows this is interesting information for our paper on “building community” through cob building.²⁴⁶

Sarah does the cob dance on top of the tarp. Her feet are in line with Tim’s feet. They talk and walk in circles. Sarah is smiling. She says in a happy, high voice, “This is like socialist moshing.”

Sylvia leans the tape recorder in and asks, “So what made you guys decide to go ahead and start this project?” I am weary.

²⁴⁶ Sylvia, David, and I were writing a paper for an advanced qualitative methods course. This paper was a collaborative attempt to unpack how arts-based research is an important component in qualitative research and within the specific context of this conference. We focused the paper on cob building as a form of arts-based research. Sylvia was there to try and take fieldnotes and gather information for this paper.

I break in and say, “Well, Tim kinda had a vision.”

Sarah interrupts what I am saying and laughs out the words, “Guerrilla Cobbing!”

Tim follows up for Sylvia’s recording. “The oven is fine. It’s portable, mobile. It’s great, but cob is about...really about community. And the cob oven will be in a great safe home but we’re trying to actually get more of a sense of connection with the earth and cob and community.” He moves a bucket of water closer to the dry clay and pours water on top of it.

[The committee: This sounds like he missed out on building the cob oven and wanted to be involved somehow.]

[The documentarian: Well, these are his words, taken from Sylvia’s recording.]

[The cobber: What Tim just said resonates with me. Cob creates community.]

Tim continues, “Personally, I wouldn’t have felt satisfied with just the oven that gets taken away. I want to leave something. It’s like a business card to a certain extent, but for anarchists. You could cut off the word anarchist from that if you wanted to.” He leans down and picks up a pile of cob and starts to mold it onto the concrete blocks he has scavenged. I can tell Sylvia is enjoying this information. She is interested in this process as material for our paper and her ideas about community activism. She is a critical thinker. She is also one to tear into people and their ideas. Right now, I agree with her. None of this feels good. I am sitting on a concrete block watching them dance in the cob. I am torn and my stomach hurts. Sarah isn’t talking to me.

As soon as this first batch is mixed, I look over and see one of the conference organizers arriving on a bike. He puts his feet in the cob. He doesn’t say anything about what we are doing, nor do we tell him. Tim keeps bringing the cob from the tarp and applying it to the concrete blocks. They work around him. The conference organizer takes part in the cobbing on the tarp. No one explains the cob bench to the conference organizer. I wonder if he questions what we are doing here. It doesn’t seem that way. He seems excited to get his feet dirty.

After the conference organizer leaves, Sarah, Tim, Mike, and Don continue to build the bench. They laugh together. The layers of cob are caked on their feet. After several hours, the bench is finally built (see fig. 75). It is beautiful. It is. For one moment, as I stare at the interesting use of recycled materials, the glass bottles pushed into the cob, I forget my anger or that this form of activist art is an act of appropriation for the artists' personal gain.²⁴⁷



Fig. 75. Cob bench

²⁴⁷ Kester 5-11 argues that there is a potential for appropriation of community for the artist's personal agenda. There is potential for the artist to claim the authority and to speak for "the community" in order to forward his or her personal gain as well as his or her professional goals.

There are three things happening here that help me to engage in the idea of commune. First, we created, through the act of doing, a sense of commune. We engaged in relational aesthetics as we negotiated subject positions, identities, and ideas about how the cob bench and cob oven should stand in relation to the rest of the community and space. The bench was constructed by a group of people that came together to create a temporary space of commune.

Second, community and activist art, as a space of commune, has to consider the institutions within which they are working. As a relational and activist artist, I understand Tim's desire to want to offer the cob bench as a space to question primary processed materials as opposed to secondary processed materials. He wanted to juxtapose the cob bench with the concrete river. I can understand his desire to have people wonder about cob. But I did not agree with the cob bench. Ignoring the institutional boundaries and borders of the campus environment marked this art negatively for me. It wasn't our land. We shouldn't have built on it without permission.

Finally, institutions, like the Qualitative Research Conference and the University, are comprised of people that make commune happen. Earth Work was invited to participate in this conference. We were collaborating with the conference organizers. The organizers were a part of this commune but they weren't included in the decision making process that sculpted the cob bench. The activist movements that constructed the cob bench also tore my understanding of Earth Work apart.

Reforming Our Sense of Commune: Sculpting Hidden Statues

The day after building the cob bench is a nightmare. I look at Sarah and say, "We have to take the bench down. Sylvia spoke with the conference organizer in the hall between panels and he wasn't happy. He said that he would call her room and leave a message if we were allowed to keep the bench on University grounds."

"Did he actually say to take it down? Has he called back?" Sarah asks harshly.

"I didn't speak with him directly. Sylvia did and she said he wasn't happy about it. I am going to believe her. I want to take down the bench," I say. We walk out of the

main conference building to the rental car. We bicker. We argue. We scream at each other. I tell her she is selfish.

“Great,” I say snidely. “This is really positive communication. This is a great cobber’s orientation towards conflict and its resolution.”

I want to get rid of the bench before we insult the conference organizer and tarnish our reputation and the process of cob itself. I want to break down the bench and act responsibly. I want to respect the people who let us participate in the academic setting and the people who may have to clean up our cob mess after we leave. We all have personal agendas. However, when a work is created, it is difficult to let that work go.

[The artist: I know it is difficult to release the work. We just worked so hard on it. The cob bench offers another a/r/topographical from of release. Breathe and release the work.]

[The cobber: The process is also important. I think we should let the bench go. I would rather be kind to each other than keep this conflict going.]

Sarah turns to me with anger in her eyes, “I want to wait to speak to him about it. I don’t think we should make this type of decision until we find him and make sure. But you make the final decision, Jeanine.” I turn my back to her and walk inside the conference building. I call Sylvia in her room to make sure that the conference organizer hasn’t called her. He hasn’t. I think this whole thing is pretty silly. Why should we burden him with this? As the conference organizer, he is already burdened. I am not being listened to, but I am not budging. I want to make the bench go away. I walk back to where Sarah and Tim are standing near the rented neon.

“I just talked to Sylvia and she repeated what she said earlier. She said he has not called, so I take that as his way of saying that he wants us to get rid of it. I want to take it down. If this was your discipline, you might have more respect for his wishes. This is my reputation on the line. We are going to take the bench down and this is my final decision.” My voice is both stern and quivering. I do not drop my gaze.

She questions my decision, again. “I think you are wrong. Did you talk to him in person? I am sure if we just explained it to him, he would be happy about it. It is beautiful.”

I get huffy. “Why can’t you just be ok with my final decision? You asked me to make this decision. I have and you are still not listening to me.”

She gets in the car. “Fine. Let’s just take it down.”

We spend the entire day moving the cob bench. We break it down and then hide pieces of it in the bushes because Sarah and Tim don’t want to throw it in the dumpster. They are so attached to this work. As I said in Chapter Three, *Desire*, I think letting go of the product is part of the process of arts-based research. As an a/r/tographical example of living inquiry, the release is part of survival. Breaking down the bench could be just as important as constructing it. These movements are all part of the cob process. Another part of the cob process, as form of arts-based research and relational aesthetics, is for us to try and reconvene and to make amends. This pain and anger doesn’t feel good. I have to release my anger towards Sarah and Tim.

Within the space of breaking down the bench, we attempt to create a new space of commune. We try through conversation, silence, and then in another layer of artistic creation, to regroup ourselves. We carry the pieces of the cob bench into the hidden space of the bushes next to a brick wall. It seems like an attempt to create lasting memories even if no one can see it. The bushes hide every aspect of the cob bench. The cob bench isn’t about making a statement or leaving a business card anymore. Resculpting also changed the purpose of the cob bench. The purpose is to try and reconcile our conflict, to create a space of commune through reconciling our relationships.

We duck in between the branches and try to reform the pieces into a new structure. All of our hands are here. I am here because I feel a sense of obligation to the work. After all, cob is about community building. I am still angry, but find this process is emotionally cleansing. We make small figures out of cob to symbolize each person that contributed to the process.

Tim apologizes to me softly. “I am sorry that we weren’t listening to you.”

“I am sorry that we couldn’t come to an agreement. I just don’t understand why you didn’t step in earlier and tell us to stop?” Sarah says as she tries to apologize. Her words are more like justifications than apologies or trying to see my perspective. Her words don’t feel good. My anger, again, is palpable. We are hunched over in the fucking bushes just to appease the ego.²⁴⁸ I need to release my anger. I still do.

This specific community artwork reframes how we understand and articulate spaces of commune. I compare the two diverse spaces of commune created in the span of just one day. In the beginning of the day, I held onto the ideas of community art that cultivate so many positive components of collective building. I believe the artist is supposed to engage the individual or group in the process of art and to stir something within the individual about his or her individual or collective being. The artist collaborates in community art. As an activist, the beginning movements of the day seemed to create, however small, a space of commune. While just a few of us were there, we created a functional oven that can be used after the process is finished. Cob is an activist act in many senses. The oven is functional. Mike is going to use it to bake bread. It is now part of an ongoing conversation about sustainable and environmental practices. In this early morning space of commune, we focused our energy and intentions on the people that surrounded us. We also focused on the task at hand. Cob building offers this space of commune, all the while creating an activist art.

While I have been an activist for most of my life, what scares me is aggressive and impulsive behavior in the name of activism. It is important to think about the impact

²⁴⁸ I understand the term ego as comparable to what Kester discusses in *Afterimage*. He argues that some community artists are comparable to delegates who claim the authority to speak for the community in order to empower themselves personally and professionally. This bench was not for any particular member of a sited or specific community, but was designed to leave an artist’s mark on the University’s campus. This activist gesture wasn’t even clearly articulated. I am still confused as to how the bench would speak back to the larger world. I can see the University campus worker having to clean up the bench. I do not see the larger articulations that happened with the local community. In these ways, this activist action was not to better the local community. It was to create for the sake of creating.

your art may have on the larger community. For whom is the art created? How do our actions impact the lives of others? In the afternoon building session in Oyster Bay, we didn't listen to each other. We didn't think about the people who would have to clean the bench up. The afternoon was comprised of several artists, creating for their sake. The afternoon cob building created commune through our artistic action. Cob building did work in the sense that it created a space for all of these emotional, institutional, and theoretical negotiations. Cob building, in all of its successes and failures, creates a space for us to commune. These spaces of commune, through cob building, help to uncover the complexities in community art. In Chapter One, Building, I walk through how to build material foundations for a cob structure. A cob structure needs a strong, solid, unwavering foundation. The stones need to stay firmly in place. Working within the theoretical and definitional spaces of commune, the foundation is a shifting, moving support system. In the next section of this chapter, I go back to Mini-City, to begin putting the theoretical pieces together.

Commune: Laying the Stone for Community Art

The process of laying the stone is like solving a giant jigsaw puzzle. Each stone can fit together if we think of them in alternate ways, try them in different places, move them around, flip them, turn them, find stones that make the most sense in a given spot.

[The committee: Doesn't this relate to poststructural thought and again to your work in Chapter Five, the concepts of the scavenger and the bricoleur?]²⁴⁹

As a scavenger, I am gathering and piecing the theoretical and material stones of commune together.

²⁴⁹ Poststructuralists realize the irony in writing as using concepts from past arguments. Jacques Derrida in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern UP, 1988) 7-9, wrote, "There is nothing outside of text." When he says text he refers to entire systems of culture, of interrelated and constructed sets of inscribed power. "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten."

Tim calls for the teens' attention and says, "Laying the foundation is a really important part of this project. And it's really cool because when you take a piece and you put in like this," he moves a large piece of concrete on the ground. He looks around and grabs one that is closest to him. "Then you look around and you try and see what will fit and you move it like so." He makes these two pieces of concrete fit almost perfectly. His energy is palpable. He looks just as he did the first day I met him in Oyster Bay. We have since made amends. Now, I am so much more appreciative of his energy and his love for cob. "And this is how you make really cool benches and tables and such. The concrete pieces and the way we fit them together dictate the final shape of the bench. If we have a piece that looks like a moon, like this one, and then this piece that fits like this." He moves the stones around again. "Do you see how it's fitting? We now have the shape of an arc. The bench might look like an arc." He steps back and gestures towards his work.

"Get close to the stones. Get to know them. Go over to the pile and study their shapes and sizes." The teens walk over to the pile. Tim continues, "While you are fitting and building the foundation here, you have to think about and remember each of the stones in the pile over there. While you are building, you might remember that there was a great piece in the pile, so you go and grab it."

Tim runs over to the pile and grabs a big stone. "Look at this one! Isn't it just beautiful?" The boys chuckle at Tim's excitement. He just called the piece of concrete beautiful. I don't think they have ever met someone quite like Tim. I haven't either.

He slaps his hand on the concrete and says, "So you are looking at the past, to what you just laid—the present—what you are laying—and the future—how it is going to fit together with the next piece."

I am driven by Tim's words. As I write now, I am creating a future for this project as layers of the past, present, and future. I shuffle the stones comprised of past arguments and past texts of community art, relational aesthetics, and activist art.



Fig. 76. Laying the shifting stone

While I lay these stones, I am aware of their shifting nature. When I speak about theoretical foundations, I do not mean foundation in a fundamental sense. Each stone of commune works to create the slippery and negotiated definitions of commune. I understand the importance of building these foundations, laying the stone, looking at the past, present, and future (see fig. 76).

[The cobber: I still believe in the merit, the worth, and the value in cob to create change. I still believe in its power to bring people from different places, different situations together. I still believe it is empowering. Don't lose your hope or this foundation will surely crumble.]

I know the building in Mini-City still stands today, two years later. I believe that we have intersected lives and helped each one of us learn about each other. And for that I won't ever stop believing in the power of cob. This belief in the power of cob building is my own personal foundation. I fit that stone of belief right there, next to the stone of hope, which is next to the stones and intentions of every other member of this cobbing commune. Our foundation is strong.

[The committee: These stones are not easy to fit together, are they?]

Layers of the recycled concrete support this structure. Fitting the stone within the shape of the heart was a grueling process. Stone doesn't bend or move as easily as cob or reeds, fibers, clay, or straw. Stone is a solid and, in this instance, a solid part of a foundational argument. Yet, stone can be broken, chipped away, repositioned or negotiated with other stone or other elements. As I put the pieces of scavenged material together, I am a bricoleur, a builder of theory and foundation for a cob building. I realize with full disclosure and honesty that this text, however elegant, is full of holes, aporia. Aporia are contradictions, open spaces that leak past alternatives into the present order of things.²⁵⁰ Aporia is an important component when building the theoretical and material foundations of cob as relational aesthetics and space of commune. The spaces leave room for movement in the definition of commune.

First, in the space of commune, created through cob building, I find that the individual becomes part of the larger whole through concrete action. Second, relational aesthetics highlights interactions that happen during the art making process and as a bundle of relationships that happen within the process and with the final and functional product. A cob structure does not stop interacting with the world once we are finished building it. Finally, the cob process is an activist act. Those involved in the cob process are one component of the great whole, just as the structure of a cob building is one component of the larger ecosystem. A space of commune takes into account all of these layers, the intersection of the individual as part of the larger whole, the relational nature of aesthetics, and the activist possibilities of the work.

Cob works when it illuminates the complexity of what the term commune might mean. Rather than understanding commune as a space of total understanding—blank communion without conflict, interrogation, and negotiation—I argue that a space of commune takes into account layers of personal and institutional negotiations. As a

²⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford UP, 1994).

community art, relational aesthetic, and activist art, cob building creates spaces for these negotiations, however painful or empowering. Cob building focuses on the process and relationships that happen within these spaces of commune. There is also product, a functional and aesthetic product that continues to engage and reengage with its larger culture and context. In these ways, cob building also sets up future spaces to commune.

Creating an artistic space for these difficult negotiations is what makes cob building an important community art practice. Using an artistic process, such as sculpting with cob, redirects energies from the larger political or social elements and into the task at hand. From a feminist poststructural perspective, discursive structures and the material practices exist within a reciprocal relationship. The task at hand is what connects us, and gives us the tarp to share, the cob to mix together. Using a tactile and kinesthetic process as the basis for our negotiations and our commonalities shifts the focus from the spaces that separate us to the spaces that bring us together.

The moments of failed spaces of commune allow us to rethink, revision, and reorder our interpersonal relationships. These failed spaces of activist art ask us to reorder who our audience is when we are creating activist pieces of art work. As members of an activist art act, consider the impact that cob building could have on a local community without proper permission, without the voices of a community involved in the process of creating cob.

[The artist: Commune is a space of a/r/tographical living inquiry.]

I know. I'm sorry. Let me get there. Living inquiry recognizes that research and teaching are not done but are lived. Building a space of commune interweaves experiences with writing, visual, and kinesthetic texts. As a form of living inquiry, commune is not static, but it is created within each local site. Cob, as a form of arts-based research, creates this process of building commune, which is fluid, uncertain and temporal. Within the space of commune, the roles of student/teacher/cobber/artist are active processes of living deeply, of making meaning through their senses and their bodies.

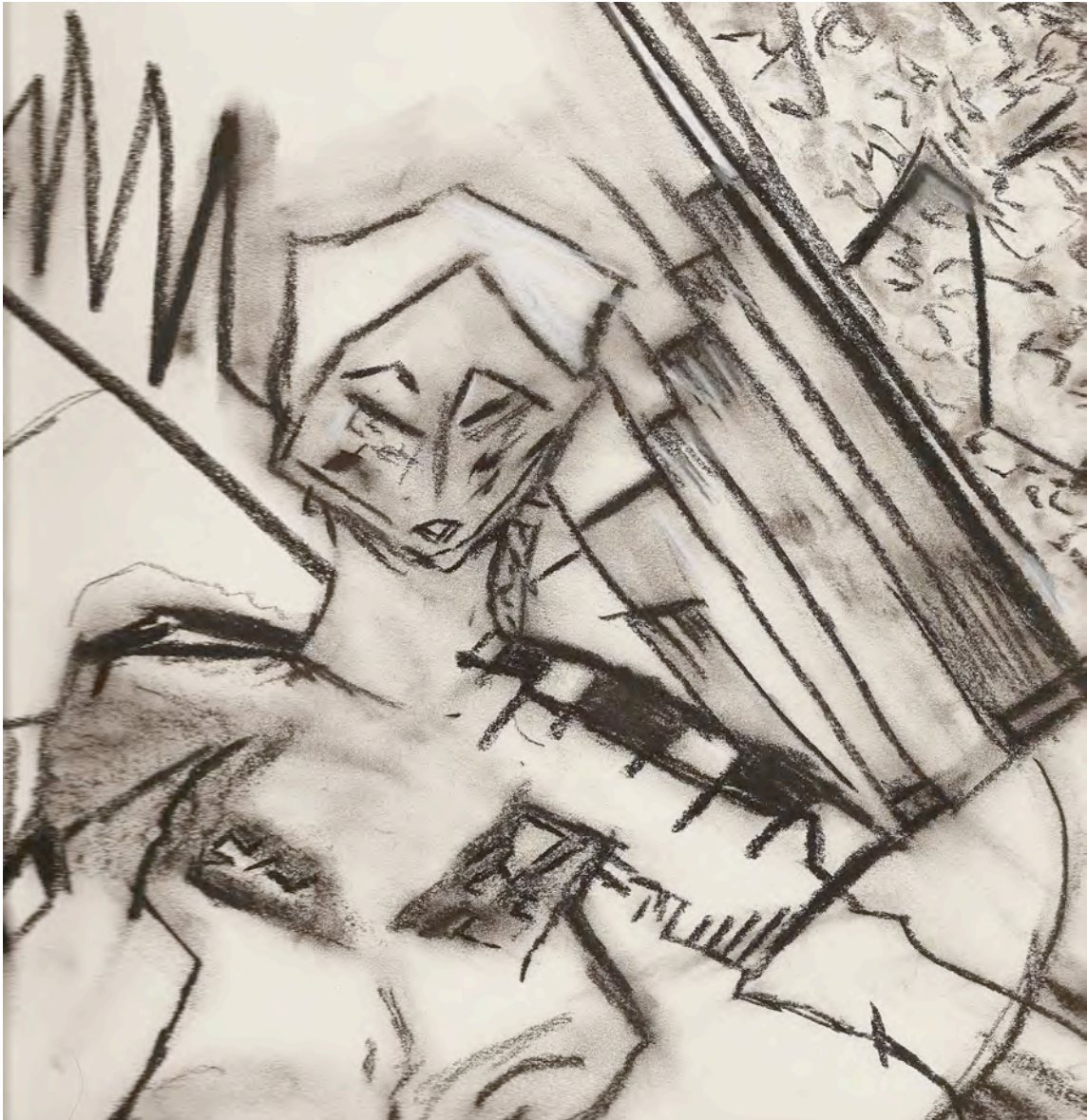


Fig. 77. The material carries me

The material carries me (see fig. 77). I wanted to draw people back to the cob building site in order to create another layer of commune to consider the layers of an embodied, arts-based, and ecologically conscious process.

[The artist: Thank you.]

[The committee: I want more. What do you mean? Can you write and create living inquiry?]

I can. I will. I uncover a/r/tography as a form of living inquiry in the next chapter, *Movements and Moments of Survival: Embodied Blueprinting*. Creating commune through cob building proves to be a complicated task. Revisiting the space of commune conjures whispers of the past. Almost two years after we created commune at Mini-City, I went back to the site. Creatively fueled by this a/r/tographical writing about the cob process and a desire to revisit the layers of cob as a movement and moment of survival, I created an interactive performance that addressed the layers of this document, the layers of the elements of survival created through cob. I do still believe in cob's ability to create spaces of commune. I also believe in the strength and virility of the cob. What happened at the installation site was the creation of another layer of commune. Even if only for one hour, I believe the performance embodied relational aesthetics and formed commune.

This installation revisits each stage of the cob building, each stage of this dissertation to articulate how cob, as a form of arts-based research cultivates movements and moments of survival. I walk through my desires and the process of creating this a/r/tographical installation. I collect local materials and implicate my audience to participate in the cob process. I need all of them in order to complete the cob process. The audience and I figuratively walk across an institutional border. We were granted access into Mini-City for a second time. I play with the idea that cob could be mass-produced. Following the natural rules of the environment, nature is unique. To mass-produce cob houses would be quite difficult. I cob the pages of this dissertation into the cob mix to try and create a/r/tographical contiguity. After the cob batch is mixed, we used intention balls to reflect on the installation and on the cob process. In each of these moments and movements of the cob process, we co-taught and enacted survival strategies.

CHAPTER VIII

MOVEMENTS AND MOMENTS OF SURVIVAL: EMBODIED BLUEPRINTING

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

-Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*²⁵¹

Survival is a local practice. It exists, not only in our discourse, but in our everyday action. When I think about survival, especially in terms of cob building, I am reminded of Octavia E. Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower*. In this science fiction novel, the world, as the people know it, shifts and breaks, so much so that they lose their families, houses, and in some cases, their minds. We follow one survivor in her journey to live. Survival, for Lauren and the others, is the only option in this life or death situation. Lauren learns how to survive through necessity, by facing local and often times, dangerous situations. Lauren learns how to navigate each situation she encounters in order to survive. *Parable*

²⁵¹ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, 1993) 3.

of the Sower is an extreme example of a fight to survive. Yet, the novel frames the idea that we learn survival strategies through doing and creating, teaching and learning, reflecting on and articulating our developed knowledges to each other. In this final chapter, I work to show you how cob, as a form of arts-based research, creates space to learn survival strategies through doing and creating, teaching and learning, and reflecting on and articulating knowledges.

Parable of the Sower opens with the words, “All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.” Lauren shares her created knowledge about the world in her text, *Earthseed*. I repeat the words. I say them out loud. A tingle runs down my arms and hits the computer keys. Cob has certainly changed me. Just as I have shaped cob, cob has shaped me. Each person that came into contact with our projects changed the shape of cob. If but only one person wasn’t a part of the project, the shape of the cob structure would change drastically. If Sarah and I had never collaborated on the steps of the CIS building, none of this would have happened. “All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.” As part of the larger interconnected whole, our local actions impact our ecosystem. As part of the ecosystem, each action impacts the other. If everything in nature is part of a cycle, there is no end-point. There is only change and decay that feeds other life.

Cob building, a rich arts-based process, teaches people how to engage together. Cob is a form of arts-based research that creates intimate and embodied knowledges through living inquiry. In order to articulate how cob is an arts-based process, I juxtapose a/r/tographical elements, sketches, poems, photographs, and stories to help layer and intersect these two arts-based forms of inquiry. I hope the juxtaposition of these elements encourages you to pause and to respond. In the spirit of a/r/tographical engagement, I bring you back to Mini-City to take part in an installation entitled, *Embodied Blueprinting*. This installation revisits each stage of cob building and each chapter of this dissertation to articulate how cob cultivates movements and moments of survival.

Throughout this final chapter, my voice is scattered. It is written in flashes and juxtaposed with photographs and sketches. We begin with the desire to understand cob as

an arts-based process. We scavenge for materials. We enter the institution and survey the land. We attempt to use mass-industrial building plans to build with cob. We mix the pages of this dissertation into the cob. This text is the fiber that holds the clay and sand—the process—together. I try to make sense of patterns and the rhythms of cob in order to share with you these knowledges. Once the cob is mixed, we make intention balls and reflect on what we have experienced. Throughout the movement of the installation, the footnotes expand the discussion of cob as a movement and moment of survival.

[The academic: I love being in the footnotes.]

Arts-Based Research: Creating the Installation²⁵²

Creating an installation. Cob has helped me cultivate my arts-based desires. Creating an installation means there are now three layers to the arts-based research process.

cob—dissertation—installation
cob—dissertation—installation cob—dissertation—installation
cob—dissertation—installation

Each of these elements folds into the other. As part of this cycle of research they impact each other. Creating an installation that adds to, guides, complexifies, and articulates the movements of cob building as an arts-based research process. Create the installation.

²⁵² One important component of my personal survival strategy is being able to use my artistic and creative potential in my research.



Fig. 78. Step sketches

I should count the steps it takes to cob. I can think about the steps (see fig. 78).

Steps.

I want to show you the labor involved in cob building.

I have my soiled clothes, what is left of them.

I should circle the sweat stains on my shirt.

Labor and artistic creativity. Process.

Process. Keep this going.

What other elements are involved?

What did we bring to the tarp for cob building?

sand clay body straw water labor sweat
shovels wheelbarrow tarps buckets sculpting tools
mesh screen tape measure stone rubble wood
screws lime cattail

What do I bring to the studio space within these pages?

charcoal pencils paint photographs
space pad of canvas paper poems
camera
body field notebook time pain
silence tape recorder easel confusion
desire brushes keyboard
serendipity fiction

What do I want to bring to the installation?

light box sweat cob skin bruises calluses
laughter confusion process bodies land
blueprints possibility openings
(re)consideration

I can feel my body tense as I write the possibilities of engagement for the installation. I am scratching at a canvas with nails full of soot and grime. I am trying to offer the reader materials for the installation. These materials can shift and change during the arts-based process. I offer you a list of materials for cob building. I offer you a list of documentary tools. Remember, these lists can shift with context.

I have to find the cob building again. I sketch the space (see fig. 79).
[The artist: An a/r/tographical contiguity.]²⁵³



Fig. 79. Off-scale sketch of Mini-City structure

²⁵³ A/r/tographical contiguity is the layering of image and words to create a doubling of the text and images, not as separate or distinct from one another but as contiguous interaction. My sketches help me to articulate the processes of cob.

Blueprints

Blueprints are outlines of buildings that guide builders with calculated lines and forms. I want them to disappear.²⁵⁴

Cob building is a tactile, movement-based, and kinesthetic practice that relies on process. I want this installation to recreate cob's presence. In this installation, I juxtapose blueprints of a modern building with carbon rubbings of the cob process to create a/r/tographical openings.²⁵⁵

[The artist: A/r/tographical movement through openings is not an easy process. They are difficult passages, struggles into new creations, and new knowledges through a process of self-discovery.]

I use blueprints, rubbings of carbon paper on top of the original plans, because the original plan is always disappearing. It reappears as another form.

As the blueprints, carbon rubbings and charcoal sketches disappear we realize that the blueprint, the plan, will always change.

The original plan disappears as one form and reappears as another.

Cob is about process, not product. As cobbers, we listen, adapt, and move with the material's desire.

²⁵⁴ In processual work with cob, as arts-based research, we have to consider that the blueprint is only the outline, the skeleton of the work. Cob doesn't follow plans. I want to juxtapose blueprints and rubbings of carbon paper on top of the original plans, because the original plan is always disappearing. The blueprint is the outline, a skeleton of an idea and the hope for an outcome. As the blueprints, carbon rubbings and charcoal sketches disappear, we realize that the blueprint isn't the flesh of the cob building. Cob building is about process. *Survival is about moving with the process and letting the process shape you as much as you shape it.*

²⁵⁵ A/r/tographical openings allow for encounters between artists/researchers/teachers/students where meaning is co-constructed. It is a process of opening the text in order to speak back to the ideas presented in the text. Juxtaposing the modern building blueprints inside of the cob house created an opening in which to consider these forms of building practices.

Sketches

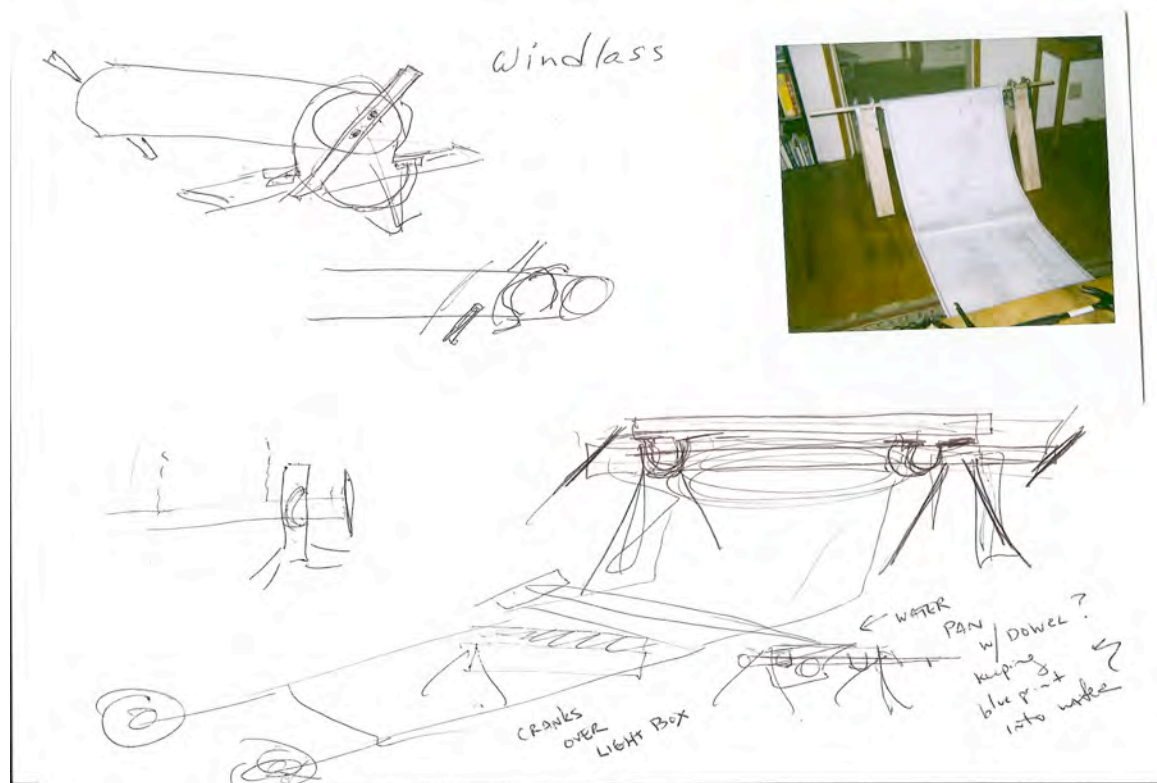


Fig. 80. First sketches of blueprint cranking system

I am developing a cranking system that exposes the prints to water, bleach, scratches of sandpaper (see fig. 80). I am a scavenger. I have to find the cranks. Figure out the system. Buy dowels.²⁵⁶ Buy an old meat grinder. I have a vision in my head for the crank system. I put the cranks, pieces of lumber, metal components that keep the

²⁵⁶ Scavengers use tech/nology to their advantage, when it is necessary. I flew to Florida to create this installation about natural building. I made this compromise but still considered the ecological impact. I created another form of technology. The crank system's fragile and rudimentary design spoke to the idea that the body is an extension of technology. The body also mediates technology. We have to turn the crank to see the blueprints. *Realizing that our bodies mediate technology and nature is an empowering act of survival.* Not only can we realize that we have agency in creating ecological change, we also begin to learn how to create these changes within our local and everyday acts.

sawhorse in place, and the modern laser printed mock-ups of houses and condo developments into a large duffel bag.

Will they survive the plane trip?

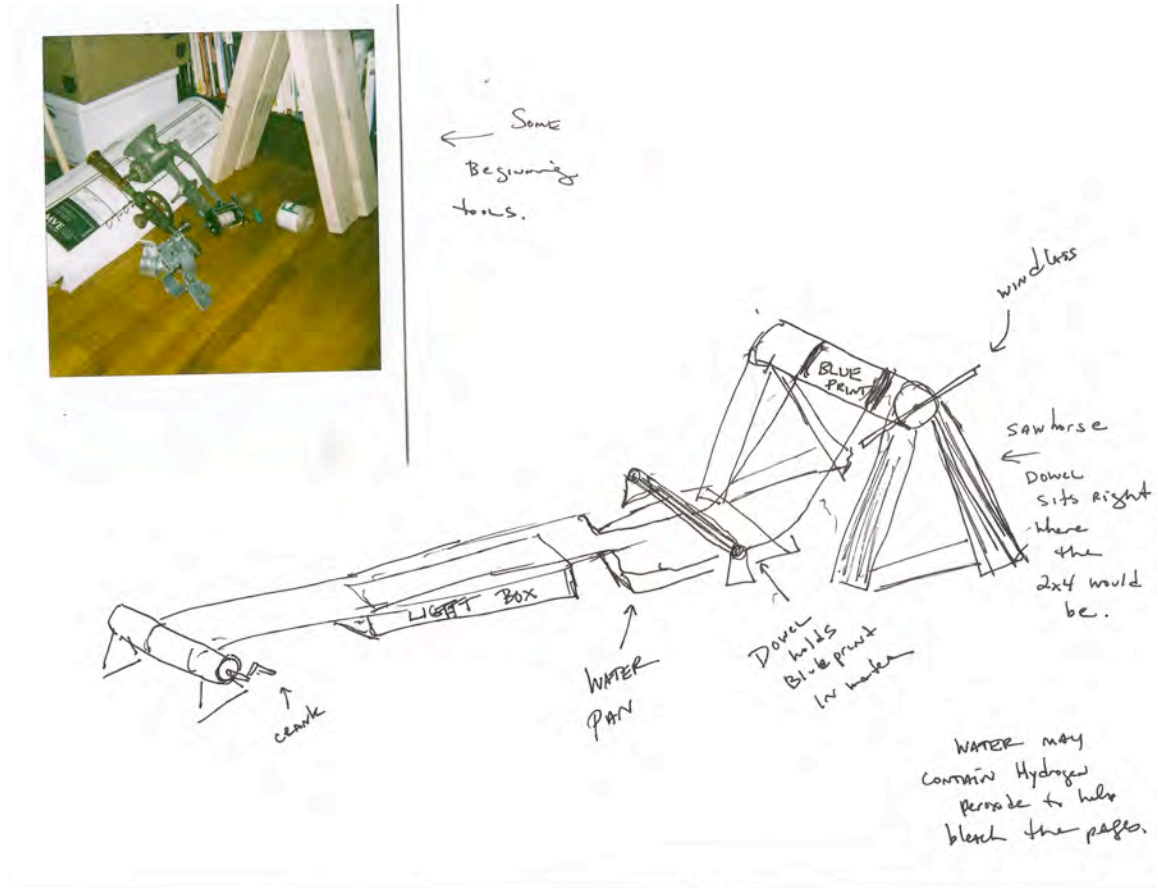


Fig. 81. Developing ideas and elements

Inside the cob house, I want to set up the juxtaposition of the blueprints and the carbon etchings of the cob process. I am still developing ideas and elements (see fig. 81).

I am missing the people. I miss hearing the voices. I am the voices.

I arrive in Florida with these sketches and a few of my installation components. I have four days to put this all together.

Construction. Attempts and trials in a driveway.

Failures. More construction and failure. I can't make the laser printing disappear. Nothing works. Instead, I have to make them break, fall

a part.

The original plans don't survive.

But this project will.²⁵⁷



Fig. 82. Blueprint crank system

I keep working. Two days later, I am satisfied. Ani and I bring the crank system into Mini-City (see fig. 82).

I set the tarp outside with the pages of this text around it.

²⁵⁷ The installation, the cob projects, and the arts-based process survive within this dissertation. The a/r/tographical elements create a space for the projects' tactile, kinesthetic, layered, embodied, and colorful survival. Creating an a/r/tographical text to argue that cob is an arts-based research project has created the space for the projects' survival. *Survival is the ability to share working knowledges about the cob project within this a/r/tographical text.*

The pages of this text are the fiber that holds the past cob building projects and the current movement of arts-based work together.

I need the fiber to hold the cob together (see fig. 83).



Fig. 83. Tarps and textual fiber²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Layering the dissertation into the cob mix creates a/r/tographical contiguity. Language and the tactile cob fuse. This fusion creates layers of knowing within this text to articulate that cob, as a form of arts-based research, is living inquiry.



Fig. 84. Digging²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Within cob building, cobbers scavenge for materials. Scavenging is not a simple task. It takes place on so many levels. Scavenging happens materially and theoretically. It happens locally. It happens outside of the cob building site.

First, I am a feminist poststructuralist scavenger. I scavenge through theories and ideas. I use what I can to my advantage. This is an important element of survival. *Articulating my position clearly, practically, and cleanly will help these ideas survive.* As an academic scavenger, I moved through layers of feminist thought. I am an ecofeminist. I believe in the spiritual realm of nature. I am not convinced that it is the most helpful as a framework for the diverse beings that take part in cob building. Postmodern feminism is helpful to deconstruct the nature/culture debate through discourse. I don't want to alienate anyone. A feminist poststructuralist lens is the most helpful here to talk about this shifting and contextual process of identity negotiation on the local level. *More so, the scavenger in feminist poststructuralist theory articulates how physically and ideologically, cob cultivates movements and moments of survival.*

I wait to see if people will help me. I don't invite them in. I wonder if they will feel compelled to enter the scavenging stage. Rosie is the first to grab a shovel (see fig. 84).

"Hey, thanks for helping me here. I needed you," I say.

"Yeah, no problem," She pushes the shovel into the ground. She shovels with precision and power.

I walk up to her and say, "We need the local materials from the ground. We need the white clay. Like this." I show her where to dig. I know where the dump truck left the clay years ago.²⁶⁰

I show her the material and she digs there. It doesn't take long to fill the small red wheelbarrow. Constance starts to break the material up and sift it with her hands (see fig. 85).



Fig. 85. Breaking ground²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Building out of cob balances between primary and secondary processed materials, which blends our definitions of nature and technology. A scavenger faces the practical realities of time and its constraints. A scavenger is trapped, and saved by capitalism's modern conveniences. A scavenger looks for and needs labor to help the projects survive. Within each of these practical realities rests a compromise. *The scavenger works within each compromise to survive.*

Cameras open. People take pictures, lots of them. I see flashes.

[The documentarian: I knew these pictures would be helpful.]

I hear chatter behind me. It is time to lead them in. It is time to transport the materials. I grab the handles of the wheelbarrow and begin to walk towards the back gate of Mini-City (see fig. 86). Flash.

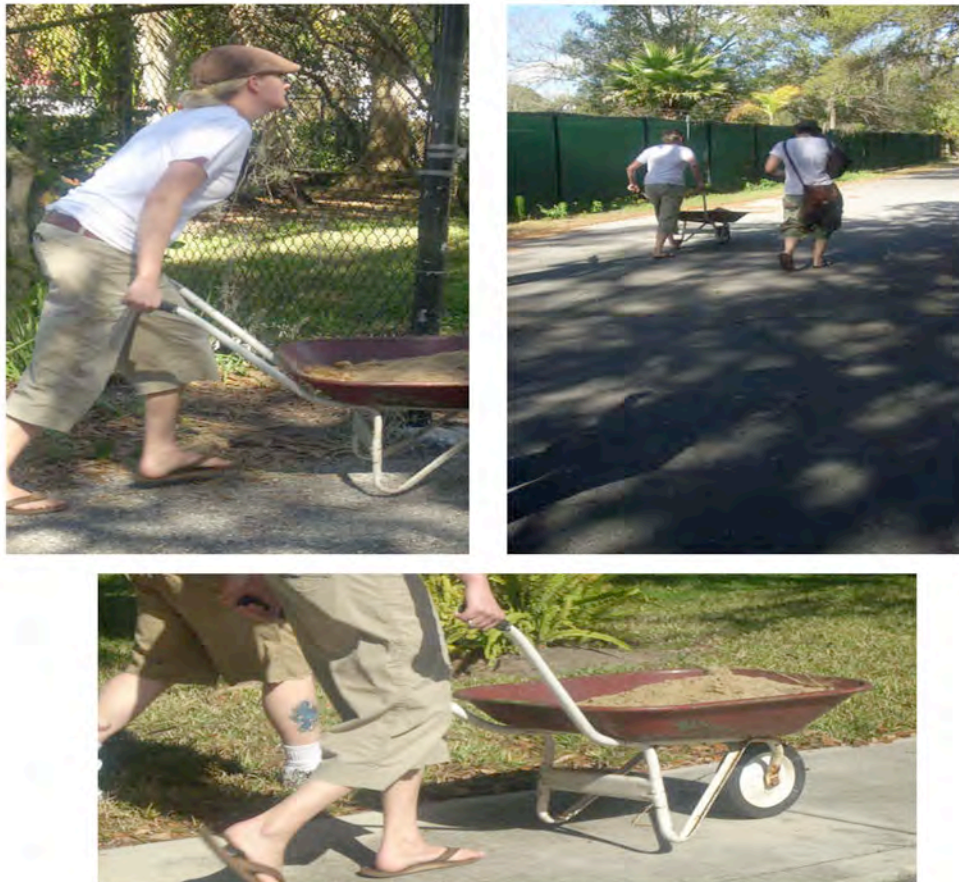


Fig. 86. Transporting materials

²⁶¹ In order to survive, we have to be aware of the land. The land can be unforgiving if we don't comprehend its elements, the possible dangers, as well as the nourishment it provides. A whole systems approach to the land helps human beings reconnect with living and non-living elements of which it's comprised. *A whole systems approach to the land creates working knowledges of the land, which cultivates survival.*



Fig. 87. (Re)Opening institutional walls²⁶²

²⁶² Land is also the institutional, social, and cultural contexts that frame these elements. If we can reconfigure one of these positions, the reconfiguration impacts the other definitions. The land that surrounds me is commodified, privatized, and situated within a capitalist corporate climate. Surveying the land, in this context, includes a working knowledge of how modern building practices function. A house is the structure of mass industrialized building practices. It is the skeleton of a home. Without a reconceptualization of the land, the houses we build are disconnected from the environment. Without an integrated understanding and appreciation of the land, a house is not a home. Integrating the land into our building consciousness, material practices, and institutional discourses creates home. Creating a home with the land sets us up for a movement towards survival. *In the most literal sense, we need to work with and within the land to survive.*

When we arrive at the gate, I turn to Rosie and say, “I am so lucky they gave me the key. We had to ask to be let into Mini-City again. Without Mini-City, we wouldn’t be here in the first place.” I reach inside the fence and pull the lock out from the inside the fence. The metal chain rattles as I insert the key and turn it. The lock pops open. I pull the chain off the fence and pull the rolling fence to the side.

Now, we can all enter Mini-City (see fig. 87). I grab the wheelbarrow. Rosie grabs the two shovels and we lead the group towards the cob house.

I hear my own steps in these flip flops, always in flip flops.

I love my feet pressed close to the ground.

Flash. I feel the sweat and repetitive act of transporting material.

I feel powerful when I fill a wheelbarrow full of materials.

Memory.

The tipped over wheelbarrow. Sophie and Lisa laughing, scraping the concrete to try and salvage the sand and clay. Flash.

When we arrive at the cob house, I turn to everyone and say, “I am so glad you are here. We have a lot of work to do. I want to build four cob houses just like this one. I need your help. I need you to figure out these plans. Without them, we can’t make exact replicas of this house. I want them in perfect rows, all exactly the same.”

They enter the cob house. I leave them inside to navigate the plans (see fig. 88).

Flash.

I know they won’t help you.²⁶³

²⁶³ Cob is a processually based practice. Looking through modern building plans won’t help with the cob process.



Fig. 88. Entering the cob house, encountering blueprints

“I’ll be outside starting the first batch of cob. Please figure them out. We don’t have a lot of time,” I say frantically.



Fig. 89. Outside cobbing pile

Flash.

I almost forgot what the cob felt like (see fig. 89).

I hear a yell from inside the house, “The blueprints are breaking. Jeanine, we have a rip in here!”

I peek my head in the doorway, “Keep trying to figure it out. I really need those plans. We have a lot of work to do.” The crank breaks. They use their hands to pull the paper to soak it and put it on the light box. They fall apart. They do not make any sense. I walk back inside. “Did you figure it out? Silence. People leave the building.

“Do you want us to bring the plans out here?”

“Yes, I need them.”

Flash. Process. Move with the

material (see fig. 90).

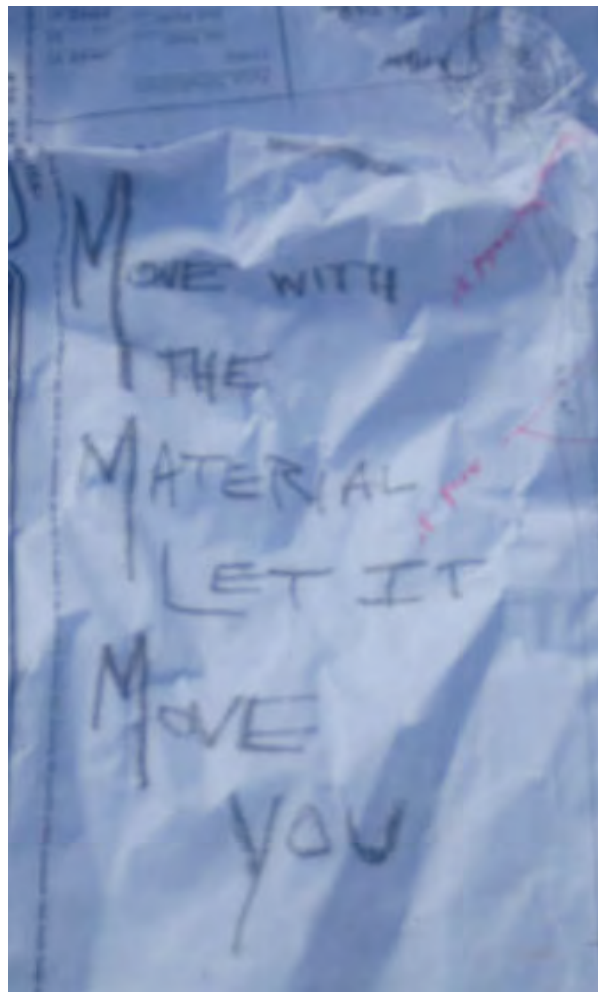


Fig. 90. Blueprint notes

Alone in the pile, I begin to count the steps out loud.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 16 27 34 46 54

I am joined. Now there are four feet. **108**.²⁶⁴

I write the numbers on the blueprints. Find the paper.

Find the steps. I can calculate the process (see fig. 91).



Fig. 91. Calculating steps

Text

“I need the fiber for the cob mix.” I walk over to the side fence where piles of hay line the edges. I pick up a handful, inspect it and say, “See, it’s hay, not straw. This will

²⁶⁴ As part of the larger interconnected whole, our local actions impact our ecosystem. As part of the ecosystem, our actions impact each other. As we step on the cob pile, we are negotiation our actions and interactions. As other feet join the cob pile, several subject positions begin to intersect. Each person within the pile, each step into the cob, has an impact on the cob mix and people at the cob building site. We are a larger whole impacting each other and the cob. *Survival is being mindful of how our present interactions affect one another.*

decompose. We need something stronger. I need these dissertation pages. They will keep this all together.” Teeth, fingers, hands. I need you to rip it for me, to make the pieces workable, meaningful. “We need the pages. We need them in here.”²⁶⁵

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12.....16.....27.....34...46.....54

I am joined again. Now there are eight feet.432.

We stomp the pages into the mix to combine theory and praxis in engaged and embodied movements of survival (see fig. 92).



Fig. 92. Text in the mix

²⁶⁵ Physically and ideologically, cob cultivates movements and moments of survival. As a form of survival, cob is a creative action as well as a discursive and ideological practice of survival. As the text dissolves in the mix, we embody the reciprocal relationship between the theory and praxis. *Embodying the reciprocal relationship between theory and praxis is a movement of survival.*

Movements

The flesh of cob building happens in the moment through embodied action.

Pull the tarp (see fig. 93). Mix the materials (see fig. 94).



Fig. 93. Tarp movements



Fig. 94. I remember the feeling

“Can we come together? After cob building sessions, we sit together and reflect on the day’s work. I would love to give everyone a chance to think about what we just went through,” I say sweetly. I am no longer so frantic.

People move to the cob pile tentatively. They begin to form cob balls (see fig. 95).



Fig. 95. Intention cob ball

I pick up some cob and begin to move it lightly in my hands. I am forming a cob ball. “So while you are making a ball out of cob, take some time to reflect on your day’s work. Bring all of your experiences and emotions here. Form your intention ball.”

²⁶⁶ Relational aesthetics frames our work with cob as a negotiation, through the interactions with each other. It also speaks to the larger interaction the artwork has with its audience. Each bundle of relationships creates the space of commune. A space of commune is both a noun and a verb. It is a local, geographical space. It is created through the act of doing. *Commune creates a space in which we learn how to survive with each other.*

Voices hush.

I hear the slap of mud against hands.²⁶⁷

We reflect in silence.



Fig. 96. The bench: Sculpting cob balls

I walk over the wooden bench (see fig. 96). I know this bench.

Flash. I am back with Teens Alive. The bench is splattered with our sweat, ketchup from our food. I feel scratches from our nails etching into the grain.

I smell Cuban sandwiches. I hear laughter. I can see them gulping down Gatorade.

I miss them.

²⁶⁷ These techniques also bring us closer together and into ourselves. The intention journals help each cobbler articulate their relationships with the land, themselves, and the people around them.

On the wooden bench, we sculpt a temporary space of commune. People settle in the silence. They move the cob from palm to palm.

I ask, “What did you get from this experience? How are you feeling? We can go around the circle so everyone can have a chance to say something about his or her own process.”

Susie speaks first, “I can go first. I just want to say thank you to all of you here and to Jeanine for creating this space. It feels really great to be with all of you, outside, and active. I really enjoyed my time today.”

Our eyes move around the circle to Rosie. “I just want to say this has been really need. I mean I think we can build a million of these cob houses if we wanted. I know concrete and cob is just as great as concrete. I think we should try it. Go cob!” Rosie laughs loudly and then looks over to Jenn.

“Well, let me just say that I would never bring my kids here to Mini-City. It is just awful in tits corporate glow,” she pats here cob ball in an interesting rhythm. Jenn continues, “But anyway, I am glad that I had the chance to come here and see the cob house again and to be a part of this experience. It reminds me of our walking practices, our walking tours. Cob has the ability to illuminate the spaces of disengagement by being really engaged and engaging. Seeing the cob house in the middle of Mini-City certainly juxtaposes capitalism and self-sufficiency.

I watch as Parker lightly touches the cob. I know she doesn’t really like to touch the cob. She seems a little put-off by the texture of cob.

“All I have to say is that I want to do this when I grow up,” Courtney says and smiles.

As we move around the circle, I listen to the layered reactions, the intense differences and meanings that this cob experience has created for each person. This local moment juxtaposes differing positionalities. These movements speak with and within the

larger institutional, discursive, and ideological concerns that map our individual survival techniques.²⁶⁸

Scattered Flashes

I see this performance in scattered flashes.

I know this place in the moment and in the remnants of an experience.²⁶⁹ The moments of the installation reflect the layers of building with cob and of building this document. A/r/tographical practice reminds us that cob is a form of living inquiry. It is about being present with the land, each other, and our own intentions.

The cob building is weathered and sturdy (see fig. 97).

²⁶⁸ Cob is a great forum to juxtapose differing positionalities or colliding subject positions. I am the artist, committee member, academic, reader, writer, community member, and cobbler. We all are. These subject positions speak with and within the larger institutional, discursive, and ideological concerns that frame and map our survival tactics. I also argue that without a vision of ecological change, material changes cannot happen. *Cob materializes, articulates, and offers a vision for survival.*

²⁶⁹ Building with cob takes practice. Survival is a learning process. Cob building is a material and theoretical practice. In the most literal sense, cob building cultivates moments of survival because it teaches us the necessary skills to provide shelter. It also allows us to learn how to scavenge for materials, to work within and outside the corporate, capitalist climate. Cob building teaches us how to compromise and to create spaces of community. *Cob building teaches survival strategies through the act of doing, of creating, and collaborating.*

Braidotti argues we need to create becomings, or sustainable shifts for the future. I believe that cob reweaves a pre-industrial, past technology to realign the land as part of our conceptual and material frames. Following Braidotti's call for scholars and activists to focus on sustainability, cob building creates spaces of engagement to reengage with the land and reweave old technologies into our consciousness and desire for a sustainable future. *Cob building creates movements and moments of survival by helping humans focus on the technological past, within the present moment, to create survival spaces for a sustainable future.*

Movements and moments of survival through cob building follow Sandoval's proposal for a differential consciousness that happens from within the system. Cob creates spaces to navigate institutional, political, and social terrains as well as illuminating and taking a part the discursive structures guide and frame our lived experiences. Each person, being, living and non-living entity impacts the ecological cycle. If people work towards equity and justice at the local level, they can impact the larger ecological whole. *Survival depends on maintaining ecological balance.*

Physically and ideologically, cob cultivates movements and moments of survival. As a form of survival, cob is a creative action as well as a discursive and ideological practice of survival. Cob is artistic, ecologically aware, communal, and a consciousness-raising practice. Strategies for material change and the articulation of an environmental consciousness exist within a reciprocal relationship. *Learning to survive is to be able to envision, articulate, and to materialize proposals for new consciousness and ways of living in terms of environmental, social, relational, and political change.*

Flash.

Bulldozers will be here soon.

Release.



Fig. 97. One last glimpse of the cob building

AFTERWORD

I was watching a show on BBC about how the brain functions. The brain responds to embodied action. For example, when you learn to ride a bike, your brain begins to create new synapse pathways for this new body movement. When you learn to pick up a spoon, you learn about the spoon as a tool. You learn about the weight of each material that fills the spoon. Is it heavy or light? How do you hold the spoon to get the food into your mouth? The spoon creates learning beyond the spoon. Once the food gets to your mouth, you learn about texture and taste. As you move through these motions, you are creating new synapse pathways in your brain. The mind and body work together to create mindful action. While watching this television program, I kept thinking about how cob creates these shifts and changes within our bodies and our minds. Cob cultivates mindful actions. Being mindful while you are moving your body through the world is a skill. It takes great effort to listen and reflect deeply while creating. This project afforded me the opportunity to reconsider my position as an artist/scholar/teacher/student/cobber. I took the embodied risk to try new things and to renegotiate my body in spaces of cob building. Social change needs these differential body movements to allow reflection and consideration. Social change is cultivated through mindful action.

Sandoval argues from a meta-theoretical perspective that we need to learn how to navigate sociopolitical, cultural, and personal territories in order to further social movements and differential modes of consciousness. Reading Sandoval, I wonder: How do we navigate these territories? What, exactly do we *do*? As helpful and inspirational as I find Sandoval's words, the text doesn't offer food for me to taste or the spoon for me to hold. Cob offers a material terrain that I can walk on, feel with my feet, and pick up with my hands. This is why I love cobbing. This is how I believe cob can change the world. Cob offers an engaged, embodied practice that can cultivate mindful action. Cob has

retrained my body and my consciousness. I did not know before cob that the yellow of bulldozers meant that there was recycled material available for my own cob building projects. Before cob, I did not know that I could effectively and artistically work with the land. I know that most of the people I worked with, while cobbing, had never touched the material before. Like me, they didn't know that sand, clay, and straw are a practical, viable, and workable material to build structures. Like me, they live in territories where handmade homes are not a way of living outside of mass industrial, cultural, and political structures, at least not in the ways that we do in the US. Here, where we are, cob creates an interesting and counter-cultural, if not revolutionary, terrain to navigate and to create movements of Sandoval's differential consciousness. This happens through a mindful relationship with the body's actions and movements.

Cultivating mindful action happens in three cyclical steps. First, I act. Cob has retrained my own relationship with my body through local action. When I am in the moment, I lift shovels of dirt. I step in these materials to create cob. I learn the cob process. I am not thinking or theorizing about the process, I am doing.

Next, I reconsider. I have reconsidered how to move in the world through each personal conflict, through anxiety, fear, and each push to keep trying. These reconsiderings create mindful action. Because of the repetition of cob building, when I begin to cob again, I am more aware of the present interaction. I have reconsidered each developing relationship and how my actions have an effect on the rest of the process. Each day I reconsider, I reflect back upon the process of cob. What I want most, now, is to get back to the cob process and try a new strategy and to attempt mindful action.

And I work everyday towards mindful action, which combines reflection and action. But like cob, mindful action is a skill. We need each of these movements in order to create change, and the change we create is local, and perhaps, small. But like cob, change is incremental and part of a larger cycle of creation, transformation, and decay. These local changes are not as visible, quantifiable, or as obviously narrated and known as I want them to be. Or as you want them to be. It hasn't been so clear for me, as the author of this text and as a cobber, to articulate what is actually happening in each

moment. Faith in these cob projects cultivates my desire to take embodied risks through new tactile engagements. Faith in change is necessary. Faith implies a leap—from doing to knowing. From body to mind and back. Faith in cob, as a tool to learn, teach, and cultivate change, is necessary. Without this faith, I wouldn't have engaged in these risks. No cobber would.

I also believe, with all of my being, that opportunities to encounter options outside of our normal practices create social change. Because of cob, I move within the world in a different way than I did before. I still have my own negotiations and processes to work through and consider, but the point is, that now, I actually consider these negotiations. Mindfully and with my body and my heart.

Tactile, engaged, and embodied risks to try something outside of my own comfortable terrain allow me to theorize about change. That said, I am quite sure that in a few days, I will have a different vantage point, a new learning, and new insights, and different questions, all of which will shift the writing I have done in these pages. I will navigate the terrain again, doing, reading, writing, and recreating. This is the beauty of processual work. This is how I understand my work as a cobber, creator, and scholar. These actual, tactile, and habitual actions are what create change, first on the local level and then in the reconsiderations of discursive and ideological negotiations.

I have taken risks, felt the impact of when a cob moment feels like a failure, and then re-theorized and started again with a new understanding of the process. When I shut this computer down and send this document off to the printer, I will reconsider these actions, this document, and cob as a material for social change again and again. I have also learned how to embrace the writing process and then release the work into the larger universe. And each day, I look for another terrain for exposure, attempts, and creations.

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