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The Mineral Delivery Route

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THE MINERAL DELIVERY ROUTE

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B.F.A., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2009

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado
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The Mineral Delivery Route
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ABSTRACT

Aaron Treher, *The Mineral Delivery Route*

M.F.A., Department of Art and Art History

Thesis directed by Professor Richard Saxton

Mineral Delivery Route, is a multidisciplinary visual arts project that examines boundaries of culture, community, and nature through false-front structures, barns, and suburban houses. This thesis is a derivation of three years of research, investigating the formal and conceptual overlap of people and animals. Through my artistic practice I examine the perspective of barn swallows through the spaces they utilize for nest building.

Unlike other animals which find their habitats in trees, shrubs, grass, or rocks, barn swallows use man-made architecture exclusively; defying the binary of man-made and natural habitats. Their perspective places no hierarchical boundaries between people or animals, urban or rural, culture and ecology, or pest and native species. For barn swallows, the world is a continuum of materials, forms, and spatial relationships. Human architecture offers shelter, stability, and little competition from other wild animals.

My methodological approach involves a formal and conceptual investigation of avian habitats as they relate to barn swallows specifically, and their relationship to the human built environment. As mentioned previously, barn swallows build nests on barns but nest in a vast variety of structures, both agricultural and beyond. Their nesting habits make them a unique subject to draw from for an arts practice. Drawing, documentation, material studies, and construction of sculptures all play a part in examining the overlap of habitats and cultural spaces. Additionally, this thesis maps artists, ecologists and art theorists that help in building an understanding of the built environment, architecture, ecology, and culture as elements of the continuum and habitats of barn swallows.

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I. Introduction

This writing, entitled *The Mineral Delivery Route*, supplements the MFA exhibition at the University of Colorado Boulder Art Museum where I exhibited *The Aviary*. Childhood experiences have laid the groundwork for the way I have come to know barn swallows a unique audience for art. This paper carefully maps the conceptual, historical, and practical relationships in my graduate work and arts practice, which examines the relationship of barn swallows and their nesting space in the built environment. The perspective of the barn swallow characterizes man-made and natural as a continuum, where architecture, culture, landscape, and ecology exist without hierarchy.

II. Arts Practice Based in Ecology

The Mineral Delivery Route

Albert Ocker, my grandfather, delivered mineral additives for soil monthly to Mennonite and Amish farmers throughout the south central region of Pennsylvania. I came to think of this as the mineral delivery route. During one of the deliveries we came to one particular farm that has been lodged in my memory.

The house is not painted and there are no power lines. The yard—overflowing with plants, flowers and animals. My surroundings were unfamiliar to the Pennsylvania I grew up with. Farm buildings flank both sides of the modest house. Everything about the farm is unembellished. Two wires span the distance from the house to the barns, attached to wooden poles. Hanging from the wires, about every five feet, are white gourds. Each pole is crowned with a large birdhouse about ten feet from the ground. It is only later that I learned that these

were purple martin houses.

Purple Martins are a migratory species whose summer range includes most of the continental United States east of the Rocky Mountains. They live with people in tiny raised white houses.¹ Purple martin houses are commonly found throughout the Pennsylvania Dutch culture. Upkeep of the birdhouses, their placement on the top of polls, and the careful construction used to make the purple martin house themselves, are all parts of a commonly practiced method of controlling pests in the garden. In addition to being functional props, these martin houses provide a strong visual component within the vernacular landscape.

This symbiotic relationship, as strange as it may seem, is the only way the purple martin species survives. It was through ruminating on past experiences, that I began my awareness of the complexity of how people and animals are interconnected. From there, I started an investigation into the barn swallow and how they too, framed the world as a unified whole.

Art Practices Based and Barn Swallows

What relation do barn swallows have to purple martins? They are both in the same Hirundinidae family. The barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) is a migratory bird species found throughout the world as different subspecies. Most peculiar is their nesting habits, as they almost exclusively nest on human infrastructure in both urban and rural areas. Due to loss of agricultural infrastructure and other factors, barn swallow populations in North America declined 46% from 1966 to 2014.² In response to declining habitats and the demolition of suitable nest sites, public policy in Canada now requires that barn swallow nesting structures are constructed and placed in

¹ Kaufman, Kenn. *Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.

² USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. 2014. [North American Breeding Bird Survey 1966–2014 Analysis](#).

areas to attract and hopefully increase breeding populations.³ These structures often resemble small barns and are connected to folk art traditions that benefit barn swallow colonies. In many ways barn swallow nesting boxes function like purple martin houses. However barn swallow nesting boxes replace human dwellings and work buildings that are inaccessible, demolished, or dilapidated.

Cultures along the migratory path of barn swallows regard the birds in different ways. In China they are a token of good luck. For European sailors, a swallow tattoo signifies a safe return.⁴ The Lakota Sioux view them as helpers of the god of lightning.⁵ In ecclesiastical architecture, the swallow is a symbol of rebirth.⁶ Ancient Egyptians viewed swallows as messengers of the sun god.⁷ In each of the above cases we see barn swallows serving a role in the culture of a people, exhibiting a long standing relationship between people and barn swallows. In recent history however, attitudes towards barn swallows shifted from one of cultural relevance to categorization as pests. Pest control companies in the western US offer swallow nest removal services.

For a variety of species, including barn swallows, the manmade environment (barns, bridges, street lights, cities etc), have become an integral part of their ecology and habitat. Spaces where people and animals overlap bridges our understanding of how ecological systems are interconnected with people, culture and history. *Animals: Documents of Contemporary Art*,⁸ examines how artists and art theorists negotiate the overlap of people and animals. Furthermore,

³ McGarry, Kathryn. "Alter a Structure (Habitat for Barn Swallow)." *Government of Ontario*, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, 28 June 2013, www.ontario.ca/page/alter-structure-habitat-barn-swallow.

⁴ Brown, Charles R. and Mary B. Brown. 1999. Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), version 2.0. In *The Birds of North America* (P. G. Rodewald, editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bna.452>

⁵ Hassrick, Royal B. *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society*. vol. 72., University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1988.

⁶ Evans, E. P. 1. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture*. , United States, 1896, pp. 149.

⁷ Collins, B., and B Collins. *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. Leiden, NETHERLANDS: BRILL, 2002.

⁸ Ramos, Filipa. *animals*. Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA;London, 2016.

it is a call for artists to create projects that bring an understanding to the relationship between people and animals. Mark Dion, a pioneer of this type of work, examines the overlap of man and nature.

In the project *Concrete Jungle* (1993)... the artist took on the kind of animals we typically find in cities, specifically the so-called r-selected species—cockroaches, rats, pigeons, etc. Through their unusual survival skills, their rapid rate of reproduction, and their ability to occupy environments where the ecological balance is already disturbed by human activity, such species become a threat to biological diversity, and at the same time can also be carriers of disease.⁹

Dion is well known for depicting the kinds of animals that one might find in cities and other ecosystems disturbed by people (see Figure 1). I understand my work similar to Dion's, where instances of human and animal overlap can create an understanding about man-made and natural. Rather than pointing to these spaces for understanding, my work investigates the potential benefits of man-made structures for animals. Nesting spaces of barn swallows are one overlap where man-made objects can benefit nonhuman organisms.

⁹ Den. Mark Dion. Forlaget Press, 2012, pp 102.



Figure 1.

Emergency Relocation Box

Emergency Relocation Box, (October 2016, University of Colorado), (see Figure 2) is a play on the narrative of nesting boxes in Canada. I built *Emergency Relocation Box* just outside of a construction site. This work investigated the formal possibilities of barn swallow nesting boxes as public art. My use of color and forms created a relationship with a nearby construction site. While the hollow form and metal surrounding the object may have led the viewer to see this work as a container, *Emergency Relocation Box* marked the first time that I saw a relationship between barn swallows, purple martins and an arts practice. Within this work I had come to a realization: man-made objects could be habitats and the focus of an arts practice.



Figure 2.

Suburban Swallow House

Suburban Swallow House, (August 2017, Broomfield, Colorado), (see Figure 3) is designed to take the context of man-made habitats one step further, by creating housing opportunities for barn swallows in a suburban development or subdivision. Barn swallows were historically welcome on man-made structures. They now find their nesting space limited in places like subdivisions and other urban areas where they are seen as pests. This is due to their mud nests causing property damage. Subdivisions were first created by William Levitt who was a military engineer. During World War II, Levitt was tasked with constructing mobile military complexes which require extensive organization and planning.¹⁰ It was through this context that Levitt turned large tracts of land into pre-planned communities, much like the ones that cover the American landscape we know today. These first communities are located in New York and Pennsylvania and are named Levittown. These spaces were built to better the lives of their

¹⁰ Kimmel, Chad M. "Community in History: Exploring the Infancy of America's 'most Perfectly Planned Community,' Levittown, Pennsylvania." *Sociological Viewpoints*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2010, pp. 37-51.

human occupants. Their sheer scale, use of yard space and impermeability is all designed to create a sterile living space for humans.¹¹

As seen in Figure 3, *Suburban Swallow House* explores how built environments designed to support people can be useful to nonhuman organisms. This work comments on how barn swallows might live alongside sterile suburban homes. Formally, the design is based on a typical suburban house but lacks windows or doors and is raised three feet above the ground. Visually, the form references new construction in subdivisions that are often cheaply and quickly constructed. Made entirely from untreated plywood and 2x4 lumber, the work is placed in a dirt lot adjacent to other newly constructed buildings. Current residents of the subdivision are led to the conclusion that a new resident with different expectations of architecture would be joining their community.

From *Suburban Swallow House*, I found that my practice could create an understanding about the built environment and how people interact with ecology. The work also references bird houses, bird baths, or bird feeders which are commonly welcomed in yards or on porches. Animals that might visit those spaces are often just visitors. But if an animal's use of a human space threatens a person's well being or property value, that animal is labeled a pest.¹² Swallow colonies fall into the pest category due to the threat of an individual's socioeconomic wellbeing. In most cases removing an animal from a person's home is not detrimental to its health. But for barn swallows, that can mean the difference between life and death. This work creates an understanding of the spaces we occupy through the perspective of barn swallows.

¹¹ Alexander, Christopher, Hans Joachim Neis, and Maggie Moore Alexander. *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth: A Struggle Between Two World-Systems*. OUP USA, 2012. pp. 2-12.

¹² Hassan, Ahdia, and Anthony Ricciardi. "Are Non-Native Species More Likely to Become Pests? Influence of Biogeographic Origin on the Impacts of Freshwater Organisms." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2014, pp. 218–223. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43187770.



Figure 3.

II. Reimagining Nature

Barn Swallows and the Continuum

The first time I really sat down and observed a barn swallow colony was a perspective-changing experience. The location was the Konza Prairie just outside of Manhattan, Kansas in the summer of 2017. A colony had established themselves in a memorial at the prairies' entrance (see Figure 4)

Swooping high and fast, flipping through the air, the swallows seemed to swarm the structure as I approached. Some remain vigilantly perched, watching my every move. A few strayed from the shelter of the roof like structure and swooped toward my direction. As I approached the interior of the space, I was surprised to see fifteen or more nests. Most peculiar of all was their behavior. As I stood underneath the largest concentration of nests to the western facing side, I saw eight individuals had assembled on the sidewalk behind me, pretending to be dead. As I approached they flew away in the opposite direction of the structure, understanding

my presence as a threat.



Figure 4 and Figure 5.

For these birds, architecture represents the possibility of safety. They prefer porous materials and what seems to be open but protected eaves, raised platforms or nooks for attaching their mud nests to a structure. Mud used for nests is easily adhered to the open pores of concrete, wood, stone, etc. Their selection of architectural spaces makes these birds most interesting. Most animals seem to prefer habitats in the traditional sense: raising their young in trees, dens, grasslands, cliff sides, wetlands, etc. Still others animals might frequent human spaces, although not exclusively. From the swallows perspective, architecture is a habitat. This inserts architecture into a continuum of forms, materials, and spatial relations that have the necessary elements for successful nest building. Where we see historic structures and cultural spaces designed for people, they see a continuum of spaces without a hierarchy of man-made or natural. In this way *humans* can learn about their own spaces as a part of a continuum. Components of infinite possibilities and interactions between organisms. This continuum allows people to understand their spaces as potential habitats, bringing a similar awareness to our built environments as we might have for a nature preserve.

An arts practice rooted in understanding the perspective of barn swallows also calls for a greater understanding about the interaction of culture and ecology. Ecology, the study of interactions among organisms and their environment, is often perceived to be exclusive of people and focused on the “natural world”. Similarly, culture is commonly viewed as the historical and social norms of humans and thought of as exclusive of nonhumans. Furthermore, nature is often associated with the outdoors, referencing forests, grasslands, birds, bugs, elk, moose, warblers, etc. Nato Thompson examines the relationship between animals and humans in *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom*. Thompson looks specifically into the way people view themselves as something other than animal.

We are surely a kind of animal. Yet we are also repulsed by the thought that we might be merely animals, and have spent an enormous amount of time and intellectual energy convincing ourselves that we are something different. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that all of Western morality has been effort to curb, even to deny, our animal nature—what Plato called ‘the wild beast in us’⁵ the same can be said of religious doctrine, philosophical speculation, political thought and biological classification: all have been enlisted in the effort to make the case that we are something more, better and higher than the animal kingdom.¹³

Thompson describes the lengths that people have gone to, in order to place themselves as something other than animal. For Thompson, nature is used as a designation that serves to create dialectical relationship between man and nature. What nature *is*, is tied to a Anglo-Western cultural definition where it is used to describe things outside of human logic,

¹³ Thompson, Nato, and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom*. MIT Press, 2005, pp. 18.

rule, and order.¹⁴ The barn swallow's need for space to nest on architecture is superseded by people's need to preserve their property value. As mentioned above, that often means that swallows are framed as pests. Here, the very idea of *nature* is at odds with the way that birds perceive the world as an interconnected whole. For them, there is only survival. Where we see a building for people, birds see nesting spaces unencumbered by competitors and predators.

A Cultural Approach to Habitat

Understanding the overlap of human and nonhuman as a continuum may not be culturally relevant to anglo-Western perspectives, but there is progress being made. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, author of *Prismatic Ecology Ecotheory Beyond Green*, examines the shortcomings of ecology on its own, to describe the world of human and nonhuman.

The mixed spaces where the separation of nature and culture are impossible to maintain... nonhuman things do not thereby vanish into a swirl of primordial possibility, as if nothing possessed integrity. Instead the human and the nonhuman are granted the ability to forge multiple connections, to sustain (or break) transformative relations, to bring about the new thing, to create, to vanish, to surprise.¹⁵

Here Cohen lays out a case for a series of essays which redefine typical ideas of ecology; arguing the separation of culture from nature is impossible to maintain. He acknowledges the ability of

¹⁴ White, Hayden. "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea." In *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, edited by Edward Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak, pp. 3-38. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972, pp. 32.

¹⁵ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Prismatic Ecology Ecotheory Beyond Green*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013, pp. xxii-xxv.

ecology, or the nonhuman, to affect the world—creating a need for the investigation into the overlap of culture and ecology. Cohen refers to this overlap as cultural ecology.

Cultural ecology creates a space to engage with and interpret the interaction of culture and ecology. From the swallow's perspective, the continuum also includes cultural spaces. These spaces can be further understood through the cultural landscape and built environment.

Landscape is most commonly associated with natural land masses. But the concept is actually an invention of European culture. Landscape often implies a separation between urban spaces and natural spaces.¹⁶ J.B. Jackson, author of *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, expands the definition of landscape.

In the contemporary world it is by recognizing this similarity of purpose that we will eventually formulate a new definition of *landscape*: a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence... in our modern use of the word it means that which underscores not only our identity and presence, but also our history.¹⁷

Jackson argues much more is happening in landscape than naturally occurring landforms. Instead pointing to man-modified or man-made spaces, also called the built environment. Human land also means people are depositing traces of their customs, traditions and material use into the earth. In this way culture is embedded in the land, as the cultural landscape.

Today the trace of people on the earth is more evident as we dominate large swaths of space across the United States. Pierce Lewis, in *Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some*

¹⁶Kühne O., Antrop M. (2015) Concepts of Landscape. In: Bruns D., Kühne O., Schönwald A., Theile S. (eds) *Landscape Culture - Culturing Landscapes. RaumFragen: Stadt – Region – Landschaft (Stadt – Region – Landschaft)*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden

¹⁷ Jackson, John B., and Yale University Press. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984, pp. 8.

Guides for Reading the American Scene, writes about reading the American landscape and offers tips for understanding its relation to culture: “It is important to think of everything that we can see when we go outdoors... the fact remains that nearly every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by humankind somehow at some point.”¹⁸ Lewis supports his view of interpreting the American landscape through culture, stating the fact that almost every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by people. This is further supported by what geoscientists call the Anthropocene, which means the age of humans.¹⁹ This name has come about because people are considered to be one of the main impacts on global climate and environment. Barn swallows further define this narrative in the way that they have adapted architecture as a habitat, illustrating extensive interaction between people and the land.

The interaction of people and land can be understood as the survival of people in a place. Similarly, animals thrive in niches resulting from years of evolutionary adaptation. James L. Gould and Carol Grant Gould, authors of *Animal Architecture: Building and the Evolution of Architecture*, examine animal architecture through a wide spectrum of animals.²⁰ They define a niche as the means of a species to survive in a competitive world. They also examine humanity’s means of survival through use of tools and weapons. People can and do thrive in any space through these means, learning and adapting to different circumstances. Our niche involves developing a means of surviving specific circumstances, learning and adapting to use material objects that aid in our survival. Over time these methods and techniques of surviving see continued success and are passed down to younger generations as customs and traditions. Daniel G. Bates and Judith Tucker, in *Human Ecology, Contemporary Research and Practice*, use the

¹⁸ Lewis, Pierce K. *Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene*. Oxford UP, 1979, pp. 1.

¹⁹ Davis, Heather M., and E. Turpin. *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Open Humanities Press, London, 2015.

²⁰ Gould, James L., and Carol G. Gould. *Animal Architects: Building and the Evolution of Intelligence*. Basic Books, New York, 2007, pp. 2-3.

approach of human ecology in the sciences as a way to understand the interconnectedness of organisms.

Human distinctiveness becomes strikingly evident when we look at the habitats and niches that our species occupies... Most species are limited to a few habitats and a relatively narrow niche. By contrast, humans occupy an exceptionally broad culturally constructed niche and consequently live in an extremely wide range of habitats. Human niches can be rapidly transformed, thereby changing a myriad of other interspecific relationships. Indeed, there are very few habitats where human beings have not found a way to thrive, and judging from the archaeological record, all bear witness to change in human habits and behavior.²¹

Bates and Tucker explain how humans occupy any habitat through culturally constructed niches. Built environments also change rapidly, affecting other organisms that humans are interconnected with. Just as culture often refers to customary beliefs and social forms of a particular set of people, culturally constructed niches can be thought of as the built environment of people in specific habitats. Tracing the way people are integrated with the land in which they thrive. For animals, built environments are nothing different than the rest of the world. Homes, barns, bridges, street lights, etc. all become habitable spaces under the right circumstances. The continuum confronts this notion, calling attention to all spaces to be treated as potential habitats. My art practice uses this context by layering history, culture, and habitats together as they exist in the built environment.

²¹ Bates, Daniel G., and Judith Tucker. *Human Ecology: Contemporary Research and Practice*. Springer, London;New York;, 2010, pp. 6.

III. The Continuum in Art and Ecology

The relationship between ecology and culture is discussed at length in *Nature: Documents of Contemporary Art*.²² Through this volume of essays, Jeffrey Kastner provides an overview of contemporary art theory that examine the interconnectedness of nature, people, ecology. There are a number of contemporary artists that explore similar themes that challenge the viewer to reconsider ecology or architecture. Simparch, an art collective based out of the American southwest,²³ investigates experimental architecture and technologies that are soft or slow and have a very small carbon footprint. This reevaluation allows the viewer to reconsider their own use of architecture and the way they might understand architecture and the built environment. Similarly, my work implies that architecture can be redefined as a kind of habitat; placing our cultural traditions into the same conversation as ecological studies.

New Habitat

New Habitat, (2016, University of Colorado Boulder), (see Figure 6) is designed specifically for the gallery space. Construction, functionality, and logic are derived from barn swallow nesting boxes and vernacular forms. From the onset of this project my initial interest in avian dwellings stemmed purely from my observations of the way these structures exist in the world – obviously inspired by the purple martin houses that I had known throughout my life growing up in Pennsylvania. Purple martin houses are a vernacular feature in the landscape that provide a relational point of connection. They embody an historic relationship between regional traditions, agricultural traditions, folk artists and naturalists.

²² Kastner, Jeffrey. *nature*. Whitechapel Gallery, Cambridge, Mass;London, 2012, pp. 13.

²³ Brown, Andrew. *Art & Ecology Now*. Thames & Hudson, London, 2014.

Barn swallows have a more complex but equally rich conversation. In the case of the barn swallow there is a reliance by the species on insects that swarm agricultural structures. These two elements make up their preferred habitat.²⁴ Yet, in many cases, both suitable structures for nest building and insects are disappearing. *New Habitat's* form is derived from a similar context. In Canada, barn swallow nest boxes are used in helping to replace barn swallow habitat. These structures often look like tiny barns or sheds on stilts. They were developed in response to laws enacted in Ontario, Canada to protect the bird's habitat from demolition. In these cases builders must ensure a colony's habitat is replaced before any construction begins. One way people achieve the demolition of these spaces is through building new habitat in the form of nesting boxes. The form of the building, its scale and placement, are all carefully considered methods utilized to attract a colony of barn swallows from an existing structure to a new structure.



Figure 6.

New Habitat brought traditional buildings and nesting boxes together in a gallery space. Its minimal shape, the hidden interior construction, and bird sounds emanating from the structures

²⁴ Osawa, Takeshi. "Importance of Farmland in Urbanized Areas as a Landscape Component for Barn Swallows (*Hirundo Rustica*) Nesting on Concrete Buildings." *Environmental Management*, vol. 55, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1160-1167.

interior, create an interplay between interior and exterior by placing an outdoor object indoors. The viewer may find themselves investigating relationships between the disappearance of iconic farm buildings that were once commonplace. As suggested by the work, they are replaced by modern structures that often leave little to no evidence of natural materials. They may also find themselves reflecting on some memory as the object held a strong connection to traditional building methods. Nevertheless the absence of a bird seems to resonate with the facade of the architectural form, which is painted white to reference the surface appearance of other rural vernacular barn structures from the western United States.

The viewer is left assuming something is absent. Is it the birds or the structure? Or is it both? There are many questions raised that this sculpture seems to leave unanswered. One thing that seems to be suggested is that there is a relationship between absence, birds and rural vernacular structures. There is a simple narrative at play that unfolds into the space and eventually allows the viewer to question the gallery space itself.

Finding the Continuum Inside Culture

As the work I describe expands both theoretically and visually, it becomes more difficult to explain the many references in a concise way for the viewer. But, as *New Habitat* showed, these ideas are much more accessible through objects that people understand historically and culturally. Dan Graham and Dan Peterman both use similar tactics in their artworks to comment on large theoretical systems through cultural objects.

Dan Graham is well known for his post-minimalist works that examine the origins of subject object relationships in the built environment. These works pointed to an interaction of bodies in space and time as the inspiration for the visual appearance of the New Jersey suburban

housing in *Homes for America* (1971).

Homes for America contextualized and expanded Minimalist art. Graham inscribed his ‘specific objects’ (the term coined by Donald Judd in 1965) and their ‘local order’ in a precise social context ‘I wanted to show that Minimalism was related to a real social situation that could be documented.’²⁵

Here we can see Graham’s use of suburban neighborhoods of New Jersey to examine “local order,” a concept represented by minimalists through minimal geometric forms. Dan Peterman also uses a similar strategy in his work. Through cultural objects, Peterman’s practice documents and comments on the larger inner workings of systems such as recycling programs. His work simultaneously comments on those systems from many different perspectives and theoretical frameworks.²⁶ Peterman’s works often begin by using objects people can associate with in the gallery space, but expand beyond its walls. Mark Dion explains Peterman’s work in *Ecologies: Mark Dion, Peter Fend, Dan Peterman*.

Gregory Sholette, artist and critic, has described the lab as “an institutional parasite,” and in this vein he believes that both UL and Peterman’s excerpts offer useful strategies for artists who have critical activist intentions and wish to productively engage the resources and/or audiences that can be mobilized by museums and other large institutions.²⁷

²⁵ Pelzer, Birgit, et al. *Dan Graham*. Phaidon, New York;London;, 2001, pp. 38.

²⁶ Warren, Lynne. *Dan Peterman Standard Kiosk* (Chicago). University of Illinois Press, 2004.

²⁷ Dion, Mark, et al. *Ecologies: Mark Dion, Peter Fend, Dan Peterman*. David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2001.

V. The Aviary

As I have shown throughout this paper, my arts practice creates an understanding about the built environment, culture, and ecology. Barn swallows offer a unique opportunity to build sculptural objects and habitats simultaneously. Additionally, this places the birds as a kind of audience and client for the commissioning of an artwork. My thesis exhibition, entitled *The Aviary* (2018, University of Colorado), (see Figure 7) is an installation that confronts the viewer with a false-front structure and accompanying documentary image.

The documentary image depicts a colony of cliff swallows in Fort Collins, Colorado located at the Harmony Road bridge. This species is commonly mistaken for barn swallows, building similar mud nests on the sides of houses, bridges and rock walls. The image serves as a way to contextualize man-made swallow habitats inside the gallery space, creating an understanding of the structure that might only be present if it were inhabited by a barn swallow colony.

The false-front structure specifically relates to the history of man-made and natural in the western US. In historical terms, the false-front was a kind of scout for urbanization and the creation of man-made spaces in the western United States. It is not necessarily a building, but rather the facade of a building in the shape of a large flat or a tiered rectangular form. Commonly built by pioneers, homesteaders and other early settlers, these facades were indicative of the history of Western expansion to search for gold, silver, land or other opportunities. Kingston Wm. Heath examines the historical context of false-front or false-fronted structures. In *False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier*, published in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Heath explains some of the basic functions of the false-front building.

Even hopelessly under-scaled buildings (given the enormity of the natural

context) as part of a legitimate urban fabric. However, the mining camps of Montana self-consciously re-created—out of memory and necessity—an urban experience amid a rugged human and natural landscape... The linear progression of tightly packed false-front buildings that were hurriedly constructed to accommodate the miners was at once the pretense and the reality of “city”.²⁸

False front buildings, in this context, represent the desire of settlers to create an illusion of the “city”. Used to attract other people using the illusion of packed urban spaces, the false-front building constructed fictitious realities of a human world. The history of these structures illustrate the narratives at play in the history of terms like nature and landscape. They also encompass the focus of the built environment on people, as their sole purpose is to create the illusion of man-made spaces for people to pursue self interests—such as mining for gold.



Figure 7.

²⁸ Heath, Kingston Wm. “False-Front Architecture on Montana’s Urban Frontier.” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 3 (1989):, pp. 199.

The Aviary plays on that context and confronts the viewer with a facade that is designed to attract people to a human centered space. The false-front is covered with a masonry material, consistent with other false front structures. Upon closer inspection the masonry material is revealed to be concrete board. However it is used most often with interior construction in homes, creating an interplay of interior and exterior. As the viewer moves to the back side of the structure a cascade of shed-roof buildings are revealed. The stark contrast between order and chaos of the precariously stacked structures references a sudden shift happening in the environment. Their haphazard orientation points the viewer away from the logic of man-made spaces. It becomes unclear as to who is being attracted to this false-front.

Hastily constructed from wood and slightly aged, these shed-roof structures reflect other early vernacular structures from the mid to late nineteenth century. Also common in the cultural landscape today, these vernacular structures are used in ranches, homes or businesses in rural and occasionally urban spaces. The viewer might find themselves exploring memories of similar structures. These structures also reference spaces where barn swallows typically build their nests. The material also relates back to the history of these buildings. “As the costs of materials fell (there were no less than three sawmills in Bannack at the end of the first year), many of the owners of these log, shed-roofed, gable-ended stores merely planed sheathing over the log facade in an attempt to upgrade their facilities (Fig. 4, type 3a).” (204) Here again the material is used as a way to signal the establishment of an urban space.

Opposing the structure and spanning through the corner of the gallery is a photo documenting the underside of a bridge. The cross section like image encompasses a concentrated number of cliff swallow nests. This image illustrates that possibility for life to be attached to man-made spaces. The image is fixed to the wall in a space that barn swallows might find a

space to nest, such as a corner or nook in an architectural space. The image represents the theoretical site where barn swallows nest. Giving the viewer a better understanding of the relationships at play in the false-front structure.

The structure, the materials used to make it, the color, and the photo together signify a series of interiors and exteriors through the interplay of a false-front building. Each questioning the boundaries of our own architectural spaces, creating a platform for contemplation and understanding of our spaces. Furthermore the playful orientation, placement of windows, and raw materials allows the viewer to understand our own spaces through the perspective of barn swallows. Here the history of the boom and bust mining operations and “Urban Frontiers”²⁹ might better represent the golden age of nest building; where numerous, perfectly constructed habitats sat waiting. The materials, shelter from the elements, and spatial arrangement allowed a species, already akin to the built environment, to proliferate.

VI. Conclusion

Through my arts practice, I explore the complexity of places people occupy as a part of a continuum. What began as an interest in my background, the spaces where the Pennsylvania Dutch live alongside Purple Martins routinely, transformed into an arts practice that investigated barn swallow nesting spaces as a way to blur the lines between man-made and natural. By showing those spaces for what they are I created sculptures that could be studied as cultural spaces and habitats simultaneously. As I continue to grow my practice, I look toward collaborative projects with galleries, ornithologists, city planners, public art coordinators, and

²⁹ Smith, Duane A. *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier*. University Press of Colorado, Niwot, Colo, 1992.

residencies. These spaces all create a potential for new histories and interpretations to be revealed through a continuum of relationships between minerals, organisms, land masses, and environments.

VII. FIGURES

1. Mark Dion, Concrete Jungle
2. Aaron Treher, Emergency Relocation Box
3. Aaron Treher, Suburban Swallow House
4. Aaron Treher, The Kwanza Barn Swallow Colony
5. Aaron Treher, The Kwanza Barn Swallow Colony
6. Aaron Treher, New Habitat
7. Aaron Treher, The Aviary

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“Sometimes they send out a mysterious call that draws the inhabitant from the territory and launches it on an irresistible voyage, like chaffinches that suddenly assemble in their millions or crayfish that set off in step on an immense pilgrimage to the bottom of the water. Sometimes they swoop down on the territory, turn it upside down, wickedly, restoring the chaos from which, with difficulty, the territory came. But if nature is like art, this is always because it combines these two living elements in every way: House and Universe, *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*, territory and deterritorialization, finite melodic compounds and the great infinite plane of composition, the small and large refrain”

-Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Percept, Affect, Concept*