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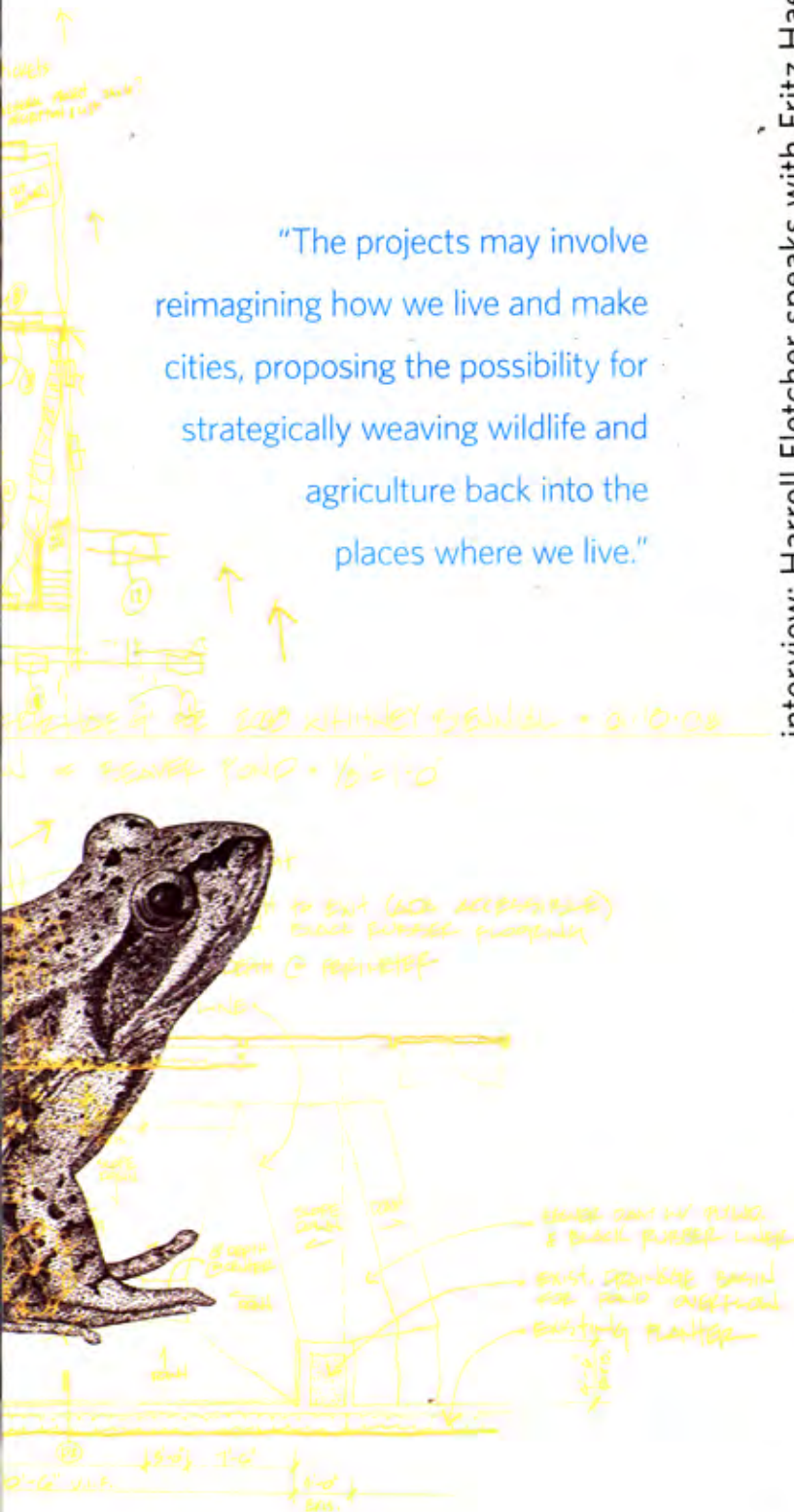
magazine



the
contemporary
art
issue



ORLO: 15 YEARS STRONG



"The projects may involve reimagining how we live and make cities, proposing the possibility for strategically weaving wildlife and agriculture back into the places where we live."

interview: Harrell Fletcher speaks with Fritz Haeg

ESTATE PLANNING



HF Did you have any pet animals when you were growing up? If so, can you tell me about them?

FH I was obsessed with my fish tank and made weekly trips to the aquarium store. Floating fish were not uncommon. I had to secretly flush them when my youngest brother and sister weren't around; that really traumatized them. I think I had a chameleon for about a month before it escaped in the house never to be seen again. We had a dog named "Touser"—a big golden retriever that wasn't properly socialized. Out of a big litter from a farm, my parents picked the one dog hiding in the corner (not a good sign). He was always a problem, running away, and when they finally decided to pack him off back to the farm, it took us a week before we realized. One night at dinner: "Kids, have you noticed anything different around here?"

HF So how about your early experiences with non-pet animals? Did you like zoos? Any encounters with wild animals? Did you like nature documentaries?

FH I'm glad you asked about that! When I was 13 I spent every day of the summer at the Minnesota Zoo as a part of a zoology summer school program. I was obsessed with the zoo. We were supposed to select one animal to study for a few weeks, spending time observing them and taking notes on their behavior. For some reason, I selected the humans. I spent time wandering around the zoo and looking at the people looking at the animals. I think the people seemed goofy in comparison to the rather dignified animals. I used to love going to the zoo, but I can't go anymore because I just find them so depressing.

HF Do you think that humans are intrinsically more valuable than other animals, or do humans just assume that they are because they are humans and are self-absorbed?

FH It seems to me that we humans tend to draw a very strict boundary between ourselves and “nature,” as if we were not a part of it. The very fact that we even have a separate word for nature says a lot about who we are. I am interested in coming to terms with our essential participation with the animals and plants around us. The basic instinct of any organism is to survive at all costs, but what happens when one organism has the power to eradicate everything on the planet? We are simultaneously more powerful and more dependent than ever, and this interests me very much.

HF Can you describe your projects Edible and Animal Estates, and what motivated you to create them?

FH The projects are meditations on our relationships to plants and animals. They may also involve reimagining how we live and make cities, proposing the possibility for strategically weaving wildlife and agriculture back into the places where we live. My interests in gardening and wildlife go back to my childhood, so there wasn't a conscious decision to make work that deals with these topics; it is what I am naturally drawn to. The work that I am most excited about occurs at some moment when deeply personal interests happen to vibrate with a particular moment of mainstream societal thought, the collective unconscious. My original motivation with Edible Estates was to create a project that bridged audiences, red and blue, middle-America and the coasts, focused on how we are all living today. My first impulse was to do something in the geographic center of the U.S., as a symbolic gesture, and only later did I select the front lawn as the site, and an edible garden as the medium.

HF For those readers who might not know, Edible Estates involved turning people's front yards into high-density kitchen gardens, and Animal Estates is your current project, which creates constructed habitats for wild animals in urban settings. Are those accurate descriptions?

“A lot of museums now have education departments, but in many ways you take care of all that with your projects. It's as if you were creating your own sub-exhibition to the larger exhibition.”

Would you like to elaborate? How important to you is it that each of these projects actually functions, that is, provides a substantial amount of food in the case of Edible Estates, or fills a real need for missing animal habitat in the case of Animal Estates?

FH Those are pretty good descriptions; the basic ideas of the projects are really simple and easy to communicate, which I think is important. For the first Edible Estates project, commissioned for a group show at the Salina Art Center, it was July, quite late in the season to be planting. At first, I thought I would just make the proposal as a concept, and not even plant an actual garden. But to her credit, the curator, Stacy Switzer, really encouraged me to find a way to get it planted in town. Establishing fully functioning gardens as working prototypes has, of course, become the central focus of the project now. It is very important for me that they are set up to do well, with a good plan, healthy compost, adequate irrigation and estate owners that are experienced gardeners. Animal Estates is quite different. The project always considers the homes that may be made for native animals in the city,



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ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF FRITZ HAEG
FROM LEFT: BEAVER POND PLAN
2008, WHITNEY ANIMAL PLAN 2008;
ANIMAL ESTATES SEAL 6.0, UTRECHT;
THE NETHERLANDS 2008; TOWER
FROM ANIMAL ESTATES 5.0, COOLEY
GALLERY, REED COLLEGE, PORTLAND,
OR 2008; EAGLE NEST FROM ANIMAL
ESTATES 1.0, WHITNEY MUSEUM, NEW
YORK, NY 2008.

Estate Planning, continued

but sometimes it focuses more on those constructions that people are already making. The project manifests itself in wildly different ways in each city I go to, depending on the resources, venue and local community. In New York, there was movement and choreography by local dancers; in Portland there is a headquarters with a reading library and a tower for seven local species. I'm in the Netherlands now, working on the sixth edition of the project. I was really impressed by the five animal experts that are consulting on the project here, so we are making a documentary about them. This edition of the project has ended up being more about these five people than the animals themselves, which you never even see in the video.

HF That sounds amazing. I look forward to seeing the documentary. That brings up another question. I think the public typically thinks of artists working in studios, making objects that can be shown and sold in galleries, and generally working alone creating work that is based more on their imaginations than on specific, real-life subjects, collaborators and experiences. Your work seems to function very differently from that concept. I'm biased because I, too, work in a post-studio fashion and have just started an MFA program in art and social practice at Portland State University that encourages student artists to work in collaboration with society. But I'm curious to hear your thoughts on these topics, and why you operate in the way that you do.

FH Most of my work is now commissioned by museums and art institutions, and yet I hold onto the label of "art" very loosely. The work is supported by, and comes out of, the community of contemporary art, but that is just its source. That community is too insular and not very interesting in and of itself. It is just one of many arenas that I want to engage, or be involved in, with my work. There is design, architecture, activism, literature, the sciences, dance, film, food, gardening, environmentalism, animal studies, etc. I like the idea that each can see the work as relevant to their conversation without being fully able to classify it. As for the audience, I am interested in just two categories with my work: (1) my immediate community of friends and peers, with projects like Sundown Salon, (2) the general public with projects like Edible Estates, which is often discussed in the mainstream press with no reference to ART. So to answer your question, I suppose I am interested in an art practice that leaves the insular and solitary spaces of the gallery and studio so far behind that its identification as art becomes barely tenable for those in the general public (or even the "art world") who experience it. People may be engaged in a dialogue by a work that they are not able to categorize. This was not an original goal but it's an observation of the way that I have been working lately—which of course may also change or evolve at any time!

HF I hear you. Are there any particular things you learned about urban wild animals while working on your project in Portland? The other night I was coming home and a whole family of raccoons came walking out from under a neighbor's car. I did an artist's residency in Marin years ago where there were a lot of raccoons (among many other animals). One day, another resident walked into the house where he was staying to find that he'd left a back door open, and his kitchen had been raided. He looked into the bathroom, and there was a group of raccoons washing his food in the toilet and eating it. He said they looked up at him for a moment and then just went back to what they were doing. It took some work to get them out of there.

FH I love that image of the raccoons! They are examples of animals that thrive in human-dominated environments. With plenty of food and no predators, their populations get out of control. So I won't be making any Raccoon Estates. The most interesting thing I have learned about while working on the Portland Animal Estates is the vital role of the dead tree in the lives of most wildlife in the Pacific Northwest.



"In New York, there was movement and choreography by local dancers; in Portland there is a headquarters with a reading library, and a tower for seven local species."



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF FRITZ HAEG
 FROM LEFT: BEAVER POND PLAN 2008,
 WHITNEY ANIMAL PLAN 2008,
 ANIMAL ESTATES SEAL 5.0,
 SAN FRANCISCO, CA 2008; EDIBLE
 ESTATES GARDEN PANOGRAPH, SAN
 FRANCISCO, CA 2008.

Also known as a "snag," it accommodates cavity-nesting animals and many others in different ways. As a matter of fact, a dead tree supports and hosts many more species than a live one. For Portland I have designed and built a 14-foot-tall tower with units for seven different native species, everything from a chimney for swifts to a hibernaculum for snakes at the base of the tower (see page 26). Many of my past Estates have been more like ready-mades, simple animal homes that you build with instructions from the Web. This edition is much more architectural and sculptural. I'm then campaigning to have others in Portland build their interpretations of a snag as a home for animals on their property. We'll post any submitted images of structures in the Animal Estates headquarters in the gallery. "Build a Better Snag!" is the slogan.

HF For this year's Whitney Biennial you made a series of habitat structures that were presented in the museum's courtyard area. Can you talk a little about that project? Did it attract any animals?

FH This was the first edition of the Animal Estates project, the most visible parts of which were the homes for 12 animals installed in the front sculpture court of the Whitney Museum. This included a 10-foot diameter bald eagle's nest on top of the entry canopy and a designed beaver dam for the

courtyard. The project also had many other components, including a series of weekly "Guided Estate Tours" led by local animal experts or performers, a series of movement scores inspired by each of the 12 animals performed at the museum and the Park Avenue Armory (by the 12 dancers that wrote them), a collection of postcards (with each of the movement scores writ-

the world of contemporary art. A lot of museums now have education departments, but in many ways you take care of all that with your projects. It's as if you were creating your own sub-exhibition to the larger exhibition, complete with event series, printed

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ten on the back and images of a male model striking one of the poses in various rooms in the museum) for sale in the bookstore, and an animal musical workshop for kids. The 12 animals used to live on the site of the museum 400 years ago, when European settlers first arrived. The landscape ecologist Eric Sanderson of the Mannahatta Project provided much of the inspiration for this. He helped identify which animals previously lived on that site.

HF What a great lineup of stuff. I think it is interesting that you were able to use the platform of the show to pull off so many related events and projects. You seem really to be bringing educational elements into

material, educational components, etc. I think that is a great approach, and I hope your example rubs off on other artists. Any last thoughts before we conclude the interview?

FH I am very interested in education as a creative act. How we as a society view, organize and implement education says a lot about who we are and what we value. I know that is something that you have been thinking about too...

Thanks, Harrell! □