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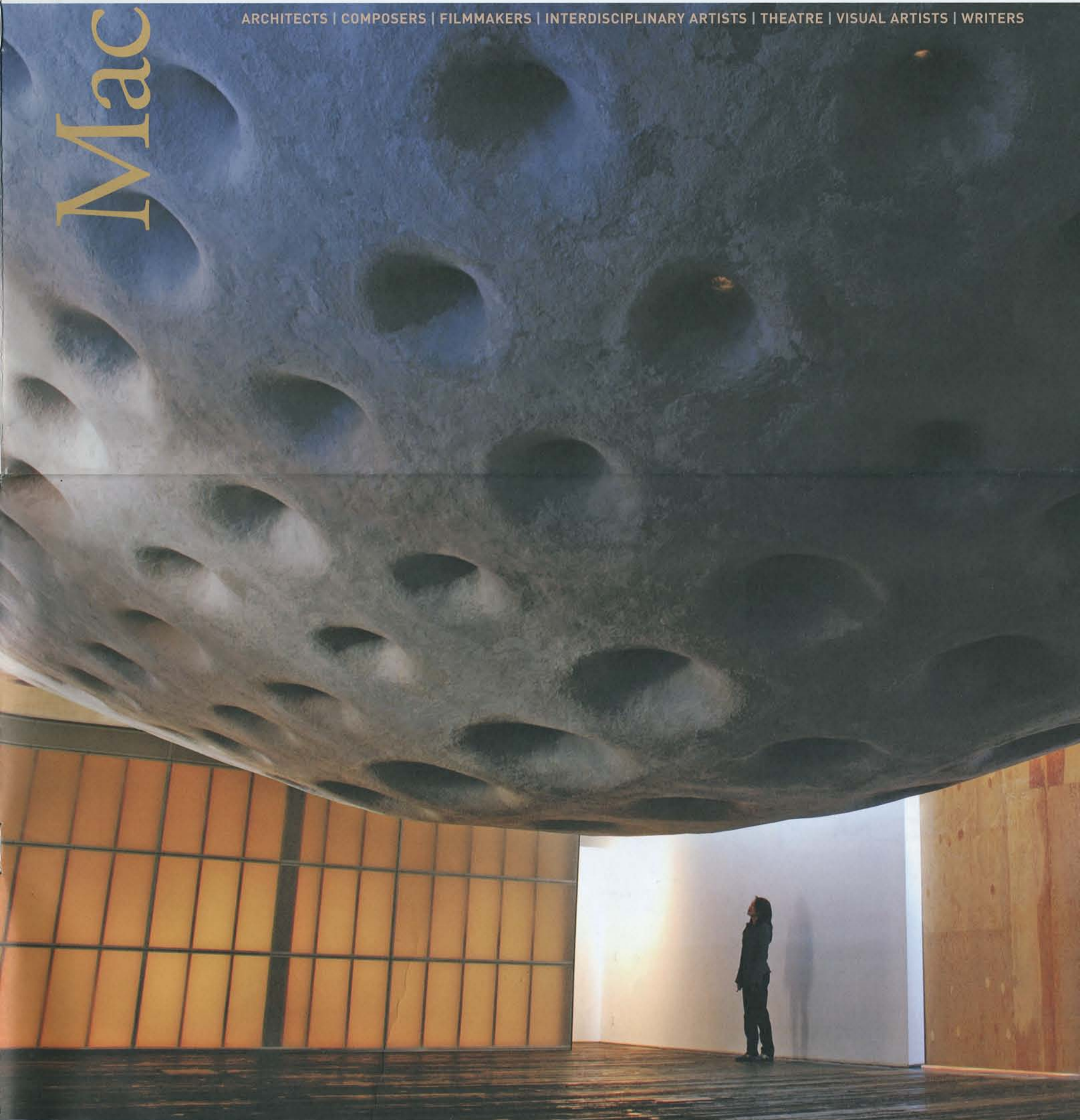
FREEDOM TO CREATE

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The MacDowell Colony
100 High Street Peterborough, NH 03458-2485

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GREEN STATE

Artist **Fritz Haeg** (top, right) and various stages of his nationwide ecological art project, *Edible Estates*.

FOR CALIFORNIAN ARCHITECT and visual artist **Fritz Haeg**, election years have now become anniversaries to trace his own national campaign. “I was visiting Australia in 2005, right after the red-state/blue-state election,” he explains, “and I asked myself what did I want to do? I had this desire to do something that took on all of America, not just the cultural areas of New York and Los Angeles. And that’s how I happened to find myself in Salinas, Kansas.”

Salinas, Kansas, is the geographic center of the United States, and it was here where Haeg began his series, *Edible Estates*, now three years old. *Edible Estates* is a curious blend of Haeg’s background, incorporating the precision of the architect with the wild abandon of the guerilla artist, while adhering to a social conscience that, front lawn by front lawn, enlists a national audience. “The project proposes the replacement of the domestic lawn with a highly productive, edible, organic garden landscape,” the artist writes. In reinventing the American lawn — an institution deeply embedded in our national psyche, he claims — and making

“I received about 20 e-mails,” he reports, “and we’ll probably look at seven of those.” His fifth project, a large apartment complex of student housing, opened in March in Austin, Texas.

Edible Estates does beg a cynic’s question: Why dis the good ole-fashioned front lawn? It is, after all, a repository for those nostalgic and possibly nationalistic memories, so invoked by movie and television cliché (summer barbecues, neighborhood baseball games). But as it turns out, these notions are themselves flawed. The two-stroke mowers that groom our lawns, for instance, greatly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. The pesticides and herbicides that treat unwanted plants and create that enviable green are not only dangerous themselves, but are also washed into our water supply with sprinklers and hoses — that water itself being a waste. Haeg goes on to point out the larger problems inherent in turning away from our own backyard for food and instead to the supermarket, where fruits and vegetables are routinely engineered and chemically treated for appearance, uniformity, and ease of transport. He cites a startling fact: “The

EDIBLE ESTATES INCORPORATES THE PRECISION OF THE ARCHITECT WITH THE WILD ABANDON OF THE GUERRILLA ARTIST ... IT PROPOSES THE REPLACEMENT OF THE DOMESTIC LAWN WITH AN EDIBLE LANDSCAPE ...

it a source of food, *Edible Estates* also confronts concepts of energy conservation, the local food movement, landscape water use, public green space, suburban sprawl, even public art and its community. “Coming out of a depression and two World Wars, our elders had every right to celebrate the comforts and conveniences of industrial progress. [But] this is an optimism we have lost for the moment, as we are coming to terms with the limit of our resources and land. Before we spread out further, how do we want to occupy the space we have already claimed?”

Salinas was the prototype for *Edible Estates*, but Haeg has since taken the show on the road. Three more lawns were transformed into gardens in California, New Jersey, and England, and each has ranged in style, scope, and, of course, edibles. Haeg says it is important to him to keenly understand the local environment before planning the ingredients and design of the garden. He wants the work to be sustainable, both for the residents and the garden itself. Currently, he is in Baltimore vetting candidates for his sixth transformation.

produce in the average American dinner is trucked 1,500 miles to reach our plates.” All this, he says, creates a “detachment from the source of our food [which] breeds a careless attitude toward our role as custodians of the land that feeds us.” In becoming gardeners, he argues, we will reconsider our connection to the land. And that is a reconsideration that is personal, political, and to Haeg’s mind, overdue.

Edible Estates is a grand vision but a workable one, too. Haeg has called his national campaign “a relatively small and modest intervention on our streets,” but it is this intervention that not only demonstrates how the world of ideas provokes art but, more importantly, the way art informs the world of ideas.

In addition to his work at Fritz Haeg Studio, Fritz Haeg has taught at CalArts, Parsons, and the University of Southern California. He has exhibited work at London’s Tate Modern, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Mass MOCA, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, among others. His new, ongoing series, Animal Estates, debuted at the Whitney Biennial in March. For more information on the artist, Edible Estates, and how to get involved, visit his Web site: www.fritzhaeg.com.

