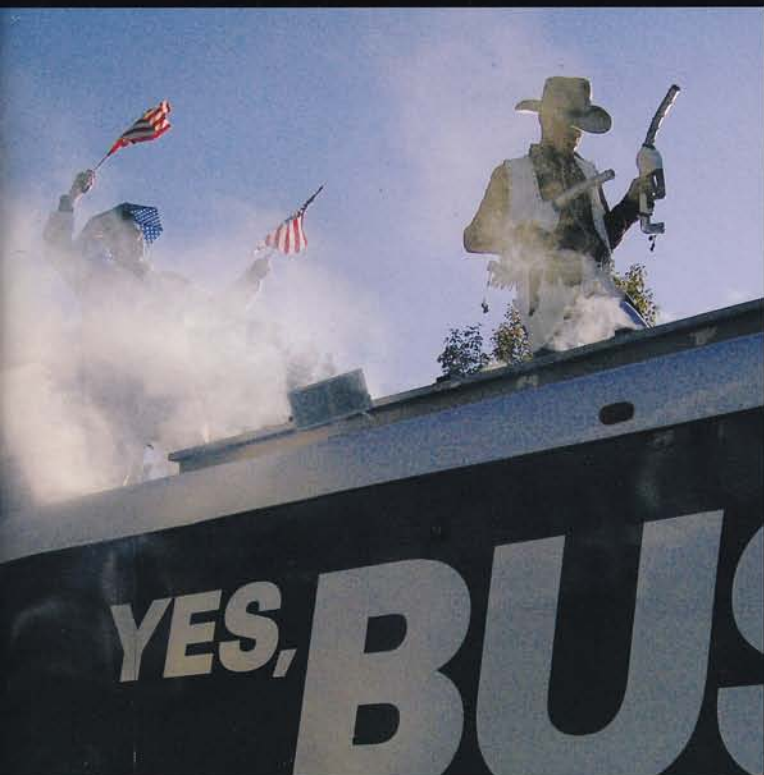


# REED

SUMMER 2008

## THE POLITICS ISSUE

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH AIDES, ADVISERS, ADVOCATES, AND PROVOCATEURS



## CANYON MEETS ARTIST

By Stephanie Snyder '91

Last March, I traveled to New York City for the opening of the 2008 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Established by museum founder Gloria Vanderbilt Whitney in 1905, the Biennial (it was an annual then) is organized by a revolving selection of Whitney curators, and possesses a well-deserved reputation as the country's most comprehensive, definitive survey of American art, both established and emerging.

The Whitney Biennial is *always* controversial and is predictably trounced by at least several prominent art critics. This was my first time at the Biennial's VIP pre-opening; I was the guest of Henriette Huldish, one of the exhibition's two curators, who had visited Portland one year earlier as part of her cross-country survey of American art. Huldish and other Whitney curators travel the country for at least a year, engaging hundreds of artists in studio visits, conversing with local curators, and eventually selecting the work of 80 to 100 lucky artists to participate in the Biennial.

I had one particular reason for attending the opening: it included the work of Los Angeles artist Fritz Haeg, who comes to Reed's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery this August for a month-long residency. While living on a Johnson Creek "kibbutz" owned by a crew of Reed alumni, Haeg will create and exhibit a new manifestation of his Animal Estates project for the exhibition *suddenly*, which will be on view at the Cooley (and points beyond), August 26–October 5.

Haeg inaugurated Animal Estates at the Whitney Biennial. Animal Estates in turn evolved from the artist's Edible Estates project, in which Haeg worked with individual homeowners and other communities (such as a London Council Estate) to transform lawns and disused parks into beautiful—and permanent—edible gardens. Though site-specific like Edible Estates, Haeg's new work, Animal Estates, explores the history of vanishing and vanished



animal species—life forms impossible to grow but possible to rescue, if done with knowledge and care.

For the Whitney, Haeg investigated animals that have historically thrived on Manhattan Island (both before and after European settlement), and installed 12 related animal dwellings at the museum. Each of these homes was artfully crafted and ready for occupation. For example, on a concrete beam protruding from the edifice of Marcel Breuer's stark facade, Haeg constructed a life-size bald eagle roost; in the museum courtyard he installed gourd houses for purple martins. The other 10 species Haeg invited back to the neighborhood were barn owl, wood duck, big brown bat, mason bee, opossum, Northern flying squirrel, bobcat, Eastern tiger salamander, Eastern mud turtle, and beaver. The nests, dens, and other dwellings remained empty for the duration of the exhibit.

To encounter the presence—or, rather, the absence—of these quintessentially American animals in the context of a major American art museum was disarming, if not vexing. Not simply because Haeg's project resembled so little of what we commonly understand as art, but also because amidst the intellectual and aesthetic utopia of the Biennial, Haeg's unpretentious call to action brought a lucid, well informed discussion of the fragile state of the planet's ecologies into an ordinarily theoretical universe—the universe of academic art criticism. For me, and others I know, it was like having cold water thrown in your face.

Haeg is a masterful communicator, and this quality shines through his

### Part of the exhibition *suddenly*

Douglas F. Cooley  
Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College  
August 26–October 5, 2008

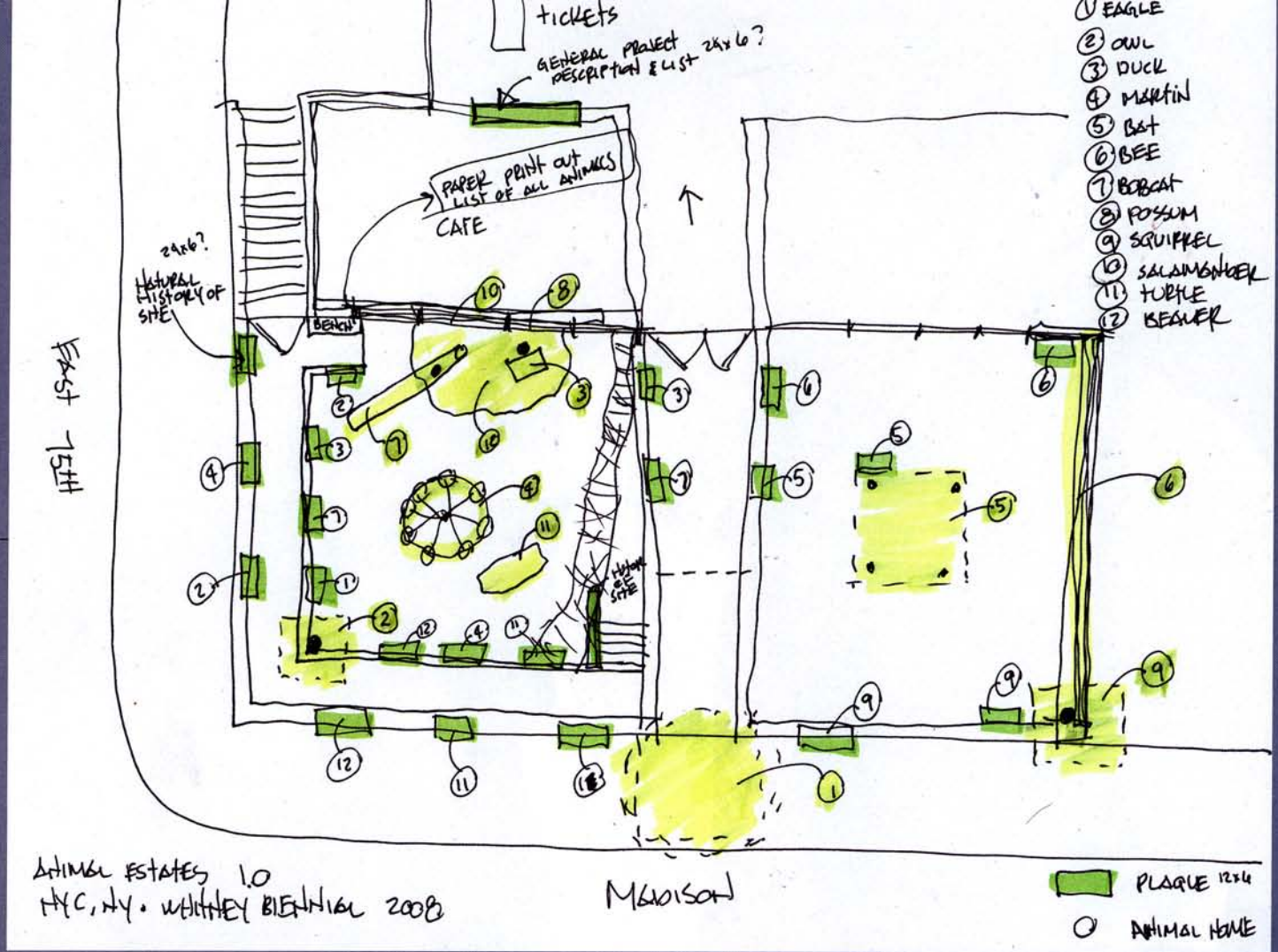
Pomona College Museum of Art  
January 24–April 27, 2009

Curated by Stephanie Snyder,  
John and Anne Hauberg Director  
and Curator, Douglas F. Cooley  
Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College

[www.reed.edu/gallery](http://www.reed.edu/gallery)  
[www.animalestates.org](http://www.animalestates.org)  
[www.thebackroompdx.com](http://www.thebackroompdx.com)

many creative occupations—he is a licensed architect, as well as a dancer, artist, and educator. He takes a compassionate approach to human error, embracing it as an opportunity for insight and reparation. In Haeg's words, "Animal Estates explores the relationship between human and animal existence, creates dwellings for animals that have been unwelcome or displaced by humans. As animal habitats dwindle daily, Animal Estates proposes the reintroduction of animals back into our cities, strip malls, garages, office parks, freeways, front yards, parking lots, skyscrapers, and neighborhoods. Animal Estates intends to provide a provocative 21st-century model for the human-animal relationship that is more intimate, visible, and thoughtful."

During the week after the Whitney opening, Haeg arranged for choreographers and dancers to interpret each animal species in the museum's galleries and corridors. One morning, while leading a tour of the exhibition with a group of students from New York's School of Visual Arts, I came across a young woman lying on the floor of the fourth-floor gallery. Slowly, she wedged her body into the corner of the room—quivering—an audible distress in her breathing. After a few minutes, exhausted by the effort, the dancer stood up, glanced in the direction of the assembled onlookers, and said quietly, "mason bee." Behind me I heard Fritz Haeg's voice say, "Thank you." The dancer proceeded to the stairwell and moved on to opossum, working her way through each animal species, finally



Plan for Fritz Haeg's *Animal Estates*, New York, New York, 2008 Whitney Biennial

making her way out to Madison Avenue and the bald eagle nest.

It was magical: a succession of modest gestures enacted with grace and precision by an exquisitely trained body. Each dance interrogated the art surrounding it, and us. While interpreting the bobcat, for instance, the dancer sensuously brushed her body against a group of cast resin sculptures. The museum guard looked over, a bit confused, but remained silent. Who could intrude on such an intimate and beautiful act?

During his time in Portland, Haeg will investigate our region, studying species now resident in Reed canyon (part of the Johnson Creek Watershed), the Tualatin Valley, the Fanno Creek Watershed, and numerous other habitats. He will install animal dwellings *in situ*, and place related documentation and research material in the Cooley Gallery.

The exhibition *suddenly* also includes artwork by Frank Heath, Marc Joseph, Michael Damm, and Zoe Crosher, and

a collection of rare maps from a local private collection. Following Reed it travels to the Pomona College Museum of Art and venues in San Francisco and Paris. There will also be a publication emanating from the exhibition that explores the environment of the *Zwischenstadt* or "in-between" city. Portland author Matthew Stadler and I conceived the project several years ago; Stadler is editing a definitive reader on the subject and organizing a symposium in Portland in early October. (The reader also serves as the exhibition catalog and will be available through the Cooley Gallery.)

As articulated by German historian Thomas Sieverts, the *Zwischenstadt* is a continuous field of human development that collapses areas of once-solid polarities (such as city and suburb, town and country) by standing "in-between" these poles. The animals that Haeg is investigating, through *suddenly* and his earlier work at the Whitney, have all been forced to adapt within the multiplicity of spaces

that constitute the *Zwischenstadt*. Each of Haeg's projects broadens these considerations on a global level.

Not surprisingly, the Whitney Biennial opening was a tony affair—beaded cocktail dresses dangling above sculpted thighs, fashionable suits, oyster-shell smiles, and lots of chitchat. Myself a Portlander, not to mention a Reed College fashion victim, I wore jeans, which, thankfully, became a conversation-starter. It was strange—the presence of power, money, and influence obscuring the artwork like a fog. And yet, there was a liberating transparency to the experience—the inner workings of the contemporary art world were all *right there*, on display; I could almost feel the species hierarchies discussed in Haeg's work bleeding into an inter-human paradigm. It felt like standing on earth's moon and studying the home planet through a telescope.