

**SculptureCenter**  
**Tue Greenfort: Garbage Bay**



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### **Tue Greenfort: Garbage Bay**

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**Curated by Ruba Katrib**

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## **Tue Greenfort: Garbage Bay**

# Standing Water

## Ruba Katrib

*Long regarded as wastelands, wetlands are now recognized as important features in the landscape that provide numerous beneficial services for people and for fish and wildlife. Some of these services, or functions, include protecting and improving water quality, providing fish and wildlife habitats, storing floodwaters, and maintaining surface water flow during dry periods. These beneficial services, considered valuable to societies worldwide, are the result of the inherent and unique natural characteristics of wetlands.*

United States Environmental Protection Agency

In the summer of 2011, 699 New Yorkers received fines for having standing water in their birdbaths. In a news story about the surprised city dwellers who had unwittingly violated the New York City Health Code's Article 151 (covering pest prevention and management), the paradoxes inherent in accounts of maintaining yet controlling "nature" within urban environments were near-farcical.<sup>1</sup> Residents who wanted to attract birds to their properties were also inadvertently breeding mosquitoes, which can carry disease—West Nile, in this case—and are not just a nuisance, but also a potential public health threat. Eliminating the birdbaths prevented the breeding of insects, but it also ended the visiting of birds—pitting a perceived pest against a welcomed guest. (Meanwhile, twenty miles away in Jamaica Bay, mosquitoes continue to breed freely, becoming food for fish, which become food for birds, which become amusement for human onlookers.)

This situation allegorizes humans' complicated relationship to the cycles and events of "nature." Living in the "Anthropocene era," we have enough information to understand the enormity of our impact on the environment of the planet, and, by extension, on ourselves. The birdbath story speaks to our many efforts to control, manage, and administer whatever surrounds us. It recalls Heidegger's description of how the Rhine was utilized and regulated to become not just a river, but a source of energy: "What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station."<sup>2</sup> The utilization of the river by a hydraulic plant dramatically changes the fundamental quality of the river, turning it into material for a purpose; it becomes "standing-reserve."<sup>3</sup>

In *Garbage Bay*—Tue Greenfort's first solo exhibition in the United States—the artist takes Jamaica Bay, the wetland encompassing the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, as a starting point for considering our relationship to environments that are largely inhospitable—or ostensibly useless—to humans. Jamaica Bay is a diverse

ecosystem hosting reeds, algae, birds, mosquitoes, fish, and many other creatures. Its designation as a park in 1938 saved the bay from its fate as a dump, but its waters remained unsafe for bathing due to the damage already done. In the 1950s, the bay's health was restored by Herbert Johnson, a horticulturist and employee of the Parks Department, who essentially redesigned the marshland.<sup>4</sup> The reconstructed wetland quickly attracted birdwatchers, and the numbers of species sighted spiked, an indication of the ecosystem's recovery (albeit partial—some birds did not make a comeback due to environmental pollutants such as DDT).<sup>5</sup>

Neighboring an expanded JFK International Airport, the bay is now home to numerous plants and animals, a new research institute, and additional preservation initiatives. Attention to these efforts was heightened when the wetland was recognized post-Sandy as a natural flood barrier protecting New York City from surging waters. For a number of reasons, then, Jamaica Bay offers many possibilities for metaphor. It exemplifies all the swamps, marshlands, and other spots that are not considered particularly attractive or inviting for humans. The idea of *usefulness* factors largely in the value attributed to natural landscapes—whether directly servicing humans or simply providing enjoyment. When usefulness is not obvious, economic value is often created via green capitalist endeavors, such as the US Wetland Banking system initiated in the wake of the environmental movements of the 1960s and '70s. Once the significance of biodiversity was recognized, such efforts saved wetlands from their conversion into "wastelands." The wetland credit system, which ensured that when one bog was bulldozed another was preserved, created an exchange value. As geographer Neil Smith explains: "In this case the commodity produced is, in the most immediate sense, the restored or conserved wetland, and its worth rests precisely in the fact that it cannot be productively consumed. In Marxist terms, the entire process produces a new economic scarcity, namely of mitigable wetlands, where none existed previously."<sup>6</sup>

Although Jamaica Bay was restored before the wetland initiatives in the United States, it regained its social value only when it became interesting for birders and educators: Johnson was thrilled at the idea of children learning about birds in an educational center and then observing them in real life.<sup>7</sup> By just doing what wetlands do to create rich ecosystems, Jamaica Bay was vulnerable to human disregard and thus destruction. To guard against encroaching interests, it required the designation of official wildlife refuge, the establishment of university-affiliated research institutes and recreation sites (for birdwatching and kayaking), a program of activities (children's storytelling and a lantern tour), a website, and other strategies for legitimization.

Jamaica Bay, like much of nature that has not been completely paved over, is at constant risk of what Michel Serres calls "appropriation through pollution." The wealthy—individuals, corporations, and nations—dump where the poor live, in places they themselves can mostly avoid. Serres attributes this expansion of pollution less to the side effects of human consumption than to greed for territory: "He who creates viscous and poisoned lakes or garish posters is making sure no one will take away the spaces he has occupied, now or after he is gone."<sup>8</sup>

Many of these ideas inform Tue Greenfort's interpretation of Jamaica Bay and the water systems, animals, and narratives that circulate around its marshland. As a wildlife refuge, the site is under national control. As with the birdbaths, legal entities seek to reconcile public needs with protection of the bay in determining rules and policies, and these interests can often be at odds. Trying to find the "best" solution for all parties is the essence of compromise, but is "nature" really much of a negotiator? Greenfort looks at this paradox with a series of sculptures, images, and videos that use aspects of the bay as metaphors of control and consumption. By extracting and adapting essential elements such as water flow or horseshoe crabs, Greenfort submits the stuff of Jamaica Bay to close examination while also orchestrating it in accordance, and in discordance, with human investment.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Barlow, *The Forests and Wetlands of New York City* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 114–15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Neil Smith, "Nature as Accumulation Strategy," 3, <http://spatialperspectiveswalkinggroup.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/nature-as-accumulation-strategy.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Barlow, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Serres, *Malfaisance: Appropriation through Pollution?*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 42.

<sup>1</sup> Sam Roberts, "Water in Your Birdbath? That Will Be \$300," *New York Times*, April 23, 2012, A13.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, 16–17.

# It ain't easy being green

## Adam Kleinman

True story. Just the other day, a man tried to get me to sign what appeared to be a petition. I was sucked in when he said, “Hey there, got a minute for the environment?” Considering that I was in the process of writing this text on issues surrounding conservation, I would be a rank hypocrite if I didn't at least hear him out.

Brandishing charts and graphs comparing the advantages of the reduced emissions obtained by using wind and solar power over burning fossil fuels, the “activist” harped: “We're trying to get ConEd [my energy provider] to offer clients the option of using power from wind and solar sources only. These alternative energies would cost you only two dollars more per month, and you'd get an air quality that would be the equivalent of having 980 new trees filtering the atmosphere.”

A sense of scale, obviously, is a useful device to communicate ideas; however, the rhetoric of an abstract rate of return sounded more like a credit card pitch than anything else. Coily, I replied: “Why not just plant 980 trees? But sure, I'll sign your form.”

I purposefully left a few fields blank (those calling for my Social Security and ConEd account numbers), and was startled when the man came to my door later that night looking to fill them. Did he really climb five flights of stairs for this? Puzzled, I looked at the form again; turns out it wasn't a petition at all, but a Residential Electricity Sales Agreement for a company called Green Mountain Energy. Shocked, I asked, “Are you doing this for the cause, or for the money?” He mumbled, “Both.” After a precursory chide about misrepresentation, I asked again: “Don't you see a conflict in mixing capitalism with ecology?” He shrugged his shoulders, and I closed the door.

Maybe I'm an idealist (or a romantic), but when it comes to preservation, I believe the act should be an end in itself, or even an unalienable right. However, this has always been a hard sell: why should resources go to saving nature when people in need could take advantage of them instead? Moreover, why should resources be spent (and lost) merely to keep other resources off-limits? Besides being counterintuitive, such sacrifice would require a kind of moral reservation, a sort of taboo, as a justification.

Such a metaphysical position lies at the heart of our modern preservationist movement—it is no accident that John Muir is often called the “patron saint,” and not the “grandfather,” of American conservation. This short editorial is not the place to chronicle the long history of theology and its relation to the social construction of nature, and, tellingly, our increasingly secular age does not seem that interested in such a worldview, in any case. Instead of metaphysics, our democratic ideals of equality, representation, and transparency require a utilitarian answer as to why lumberjacks' tax money should go to protecting national forests and the spotted owl against their, the workers', own economic interests. Shame could be used to escape the quid pro quo—there is a preponderance of evidence that we humans are responsible for the owls' demise, let alone that of a multiplicity of other species—yet the issuing of warnings of doom following extinction and other irremediable losses tend to be the most viable political recourse.

Aiding forecasts of environmental destruction, other abstract graphs and studies predict unprecedented harm to come (via hurricanes, floods, and so on) if we do not act now to curtail our role in such. Whether or not you believe this, the appeal here is not to ethics, but to personal self-interest—probably the reason why property

damage totals are trumpeted more often than death tolls, human included. The message is, if you are rational, it will behoove you to follow this advice before the option expires. The only trouble with such logic is that fear itself is irrational, a factor that might inform climate change denial; like amnesia, forgetting is a standard coping mechanism. In any case, the Cassandra approach is not working; is there a plan B?

As the adage goes, you can get more bees with honey. Since the above appeal is really toward personal self-interest, why shouldn't alternative energy be proposed as a source of wealth rather than impoverishment? After all, once we make the switch, wouldn't it be great to have an economy set up around these more sustainable means? But then I think to my (duplicitous) energy salesman . . .

Maybe my “friend” had a good idea. In his setup, the environment wins, and, as an added bonus, my friend makes some cash. Thing is, what's to stop him from finding forms of inurement that might contravene the mission of Green Mountain Energy?

Regulation can be a defense against corruption, but then again, what is the mission of Green Mountain—to make money or to save the environment, and which has precedent? Barring the arbitrary, some calculus could perform the necessary cost benefit analyses when it comes to disputes; good thing Green Mountain is already finding ways to quantify the data.

Like our imaginary trees, statistics are representations. If I, theoretically, planted the 980 specimens, the average amount of carbon they could filter matches the average reduction of carbon I would realize by using the alternative energy. This difference is called a “carbon offset.” It's a neat accounting trick, but what about those two dollars—what do they offset? Simply put, they subsidize the building of a new power infrastructure. And, on a national scale, the collection of two dollars here and there adds up. But it's not quite enough.

By way of incentive, the Kyoto Protocol offered a deal: if nations and private companies were to offset their carbon emissions, these fictional quantities could be sold on the open market as credits—which, theoretically, would subsidize future infrastructural development.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, this sounds swell; however, many “developing countries” lack the tech and capital to set up such systems, yet they still need energy. Such asymmetry opens a trap door: there is little to stop richer nations and multinational corporations from pawning off their stores of fictional “credits” in a way that fosters an artificial shortage, replete with price gouging. Sound familiar? If so, that's because the logic is not dissimilar to that governing our faltering banking system's notion of credit swapping. Likewise, these carbon credits could be manipulated so that pollution “havens” could permit the well off to “offset” overseas dumping.

But we don't need to look so far away to see how the green-capital brand might be hiding other policy failures. Forget 980 trees; let's talk about 1,000,000. New York's City Hall has currently embarked on a drive to plant one million trees throughout the city. Using the rhetoric of ecology, the New York City Parks Department has inserted a large number of trees into poorer communities, like East Harlem. The rationale: since this section of the city has the highest rates of asthma (which can be directly tied to inadequate medical services and other forms of socioeconomic exploitation), these trees are actually necessary to filter the air there. Although this should be seen as a benefit, some are skeptical of the recent interest in these neglected communities. The concern? Tree-lined streets increase property values. While this should also be a bonus, many of the residents of Harlem, like the city in general, are renters, not property owners. These value increases could raise rents, and in certain cases, lead to displacement—of the very people whose tax money subsidized the whole process.

Of course, trees are not to blame here, any more than wind or solar power: the more of all these the better. Nevertheless, it might be wise to look for the black the next time someone tries to sell you the “green.”



Installation view, *Tue Greenfort: Garbage Bay*, 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.



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# Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

## **Agitator-Birdbath**, 2013

Plastic lit debris, birdbath, anti-mosquito device, litter, BB gun pellets  
Dimensions variable

## **Algreen 81002 Aqua 50-Gallon Rain Water Collection and Storage System**, 2013

50-gallon plastic rainwater tank  
33 x 23 inches (83.8 x 58.2cm)

## **Canarsie Oyster 1917**, 2013

Archival image, courtesy Daniel M. Hendrick  
“Sewage led to the bay’s earliest environmental setback. In 1904, oysters caught off Inwood were linked to 21 cases of typhoid, followed 11 years later by another 27 cases from Canarsie oysters. By 1917, when this illustration was published, 50 million gallons of sewage flowed into the bay each day. Health officials closed the shellfish beds in 1921, and the practice remains banned to this day.” —Daniel M. Hendrick’s *Jamaica Bay*, 2006

## **Earth Minded Recycled Plastic Rain Barrel**, 2013

45-gallon recycled plastic rainwater tank  
33.5 x 24 inches (85 x 61cm)

## **Good Ideas Big Blue Recycled Rain Barrel**, 2013

55-gallon recycled plastic rainwater tank, oysters, glitter, acrylic  
37 x 25 inches (94 x 63.5cm)

## **Horseshoe Crab, Companion**

**Species YOUTUBE Series I**, 2013  
Video, 12:24 min.

## **I’M ONE IN A MILLION**, 2013

Free tree (Fringe Tree) from NYRP (New York Restoration Project), reflective foil, plywood, shopping cart  
Dimensions variable

## **Jamaica Bay**, 2013

15 framed C-prints  
16 x 24 inches each  
(40.6 x 61cm)

## **Sandbags**, 2013

Sandbags  
Dimensions variable

## **SANITARY LANDFILLS 1950**, 2013

Archival image, courtesy Daniel M. Hendrick  
“This 1950 map illustrates the disproportionate number of sanitary landfills at Jamaica Bay. Of the eight in use at the time in New York City, four were on the bay—Marine Park, Pennsylvania Avenue, Spring Creek, and Edgemere—and a fifth was proposed for Idlewild Park, on the northeastern shore. (Courtesy New York City Department of Sanitation).”  
—Daniel M. Hendrick’s *Jamaica Bay*, 2006

## **SculptureCenter Impluvium-**

**Ecobulk 2000**, 2013  
2 1000-liter industrial tanks  
47 x 39 x 39 inches  
(120 x 100 x 100cm)

## **Spring Creek Park (After Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt’s SWAMP, 1973)**, 2013

Video, 6:13 min.

## **That Thing Over There—A dialectic of fucking Nature**, 2013

Light bulbs, found objects from Jamaica Bay, plastic, glitter, BB gun pellets, PET pellets, paraffin, div acrylic glass, paper, photographs  
Dimensions variable

## **The Great Gateway**, 2013

Plywood, plastic, water pumps, hoses, tubes, sandbags, rainwater tanks, glitter, paraffin, BB gun pellets, PET pellets, heat lamps, rainwater  
192 x 192 x 192 inches  
(487.7 x 487.7 x 487.7cm)

## **www.neitherwastenorwater.net**,

2013–ongoing  
Water samples from Guanabara Bay: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
(22.9031,43.1706)  
Main: Frankfurt, Germany  
(50.1079,8.7127)  
Llobregat: Barcelona, Spain  
(41.33437,2.1035)

All works courtesy the artist and Johann König Gallery, Berlin

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