

**Postscript to “The Materialization of Nature”****Preface**

This postscript to my critical theory papers which surveyed the *materialization of nature* based on (art)historic developments and the subsequent collapse of distinctions between the topical approach to nature within contemporary artistic practices, emphasizing initial notions of nondualist and contra-anthropocentric, philosophical tendencies (in both critical theory and contemporary artwork), is not just meant to be a conclusion of my current research. It is neither the paper’s purpose to adapt or defend possible revisions to the current status quo of my practice. This essay should rather be considered an effort to present my investigation by culling the critical importance of environmentalism and naturalism based on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s alternative approach toward ecological theories in perspective with poststructuralist philosophy. An essential purpose of the text is to provide further information about my inspiration, while formulating theoretical foundations for both ongoing theoretical and studio projects. This paper will introduce some of the completed works, draw conclusions from my current studio practice within the context of my studies and highlight how the results in the studio relate to discussed topics by looking back at the readings of this semester. This final paper is intentionally meant to lead us off the previously pursued path of a strictly art-historical and art-critical research. It will not discuss the works of other artists (I trust that prior introductions and discussions of artists and their work, as well as my selection of gallery/show reviews, and the compilation of my running bibliography present a leitmotif regarding my personal interest). Instead, I will present an advance toward a philosophical perception of nature and related topics by means of an alternative – perhaps experimental – investigation into my increasing interest in the correlation of ecological and environmental topics that informed my studio practice during this semester.

## 1 - Defining (Non-)Borders: From Geophilosophy to Milieu Aesthetics

Let's start with a rather expected conclusion: the expression *naturalism* can rarely be found within the poststructuralist perspective. If we come across the term it is usually presented within the context of antagonistic scrutiny and distinguished by contemptuousness, primarily because naturalism is understood as a forthright accompaniment to *essentialism* and therefore referring to a predetermined perception of – and with it the strict stratification into – groups of “natures”. Through their development of a philosophical perspective that subliminally promotes a version of naturalism compatible with the critiques of essentialism and dualism<sup>1</sup>, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, however, demonstrate to be significant exceptions to this general poststructuralist attitude toward naturalism. Thus, we can assume that Deleuze and Guattari support a notion of naturalism that emphasizes the complex interconnections between human and nonhuman modes of life by persistently accentuating the importance of human interaction with the larger natural world, allowing them to picture naturalism as part of a greater, environmental philosophy. This insight is essential to understand Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of *geophilosophy*, a concept intended to relate philosophical topics and rationales to the earth in order to establish a perception of

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are many versions and definitions of naturalism with contrasting ideological backgrounds approaching the thematic from an ontological (*the metaphysical notion concerned with the nature of being*) to an epistemological (*the theory of knowledge and differentiation between justified belief and opinion*) or methodological (*the systematic scrutiny in areas of study and activity*) point of view, Deleuze's interpretation of naturalism seems to be closely related to American naturalism, rooted in pragmatism (*assessment of theories according to their success in relation to practical application*) and empiricism (*all knowledge is derived from sense experience*), as described by Patrick Hayden in: Hydrogenate, Bernd (Author, Editor) – *An (Un)Likely Alliance: Thinking Environment(s) with Deleuze/Guattari*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing; new edition (January 12, 2008) p.24. Due to its complexity, it is virtually impossible to discuss the different nuances and notions of the naturalistic concept. It is, however, crucial to point out that American naturalism – heavily influenced by Aristotle's, Spinoza's and Darwin's (mis)conceptions of nature – can be characterized as a perspective that refuses the dualism and transcendentalism of traditional metaphysics, in favor for the viewpoint that humans and cultures belong within a larger natural reality that cannot be overridden by an extra-natural essence (spiritual entity/god). Or as Hayden describes, “this position of American naturalism denies that there is an independent supernatural realm having ontological priority over whatever comes into being”. [Ibid. p.24-25] This is a familiar concept when we take a look back at my research over the span of this semester; it is the framework of a structure that tries to identify the idea and interpretation of nature systems.

ecological perspectives grounded in symbiotic relationships. In their collaborative works Deleuze and Guattari proclaim that geophilosophy is an attempt to formulate a mode of thinking in association with the diversity and multiplicity of the continuous genesis of an ever-fluctuating natural reality. This is a conception with a radically naturalistic *and* ecological orientation, because by means of *deterritorialization* it seeks to abolish the traditional dichotomy that separates humankind (subject) and nature (object). “Whether physical, psychological, or social,” Deleuze and Guattari write in their last collaborative work *What is Philosophy?*, “deterritorialization is relative insofar as it concerns the historical relationship of the earth with the territories that take shape and pass away on it, its geological relationship with eras and catastrophes, its astronomical relationship with the cosmos and the stellar system of which it is a part. But deterritorialization is absolute when the earth passes into the pure plane of immanence of a Being-thought, of a Nature-thought of infinite diagrammatic movements. Thinking consists in stretching out a plane of immanence that absorbs the earth [...]”<sup>2</sup> Evidently, the interaction of the human and nonhuman is emphasized in terms of immanence and relationality within the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of deterritorialization. To specify this particular concept of relationality Deleuze and Guattari often refer to the concept of *milieu*, a term associated with the ancient Greek word *oikos* (οἶκος), from which the common *eco* – and consequently *ecology* - originates<sup>3</sup>. It is the duo’s word of choice to signify all that is involved in the interactions between compounds, elements, energy, and organisms - from the molecular to the material level: *au milieu* (French: “from the middle”) diverse forms of *milieux* develop when molecular composites and elements are systematized around the margin of a membrane to form a unique *unity of composition*<sup>4</sup>. “We have seen elsewhere how all kinds of milieus, each defined by a component, slide in relation to one another,

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Félix – *What is Philosophy? (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)*. Columbia University Press, revised edition (April 15, 1996). p.88

<sup>3</sup> The ancient Greek term οἶκος (oikos) is a multipurpose word which can mean *family, house, household, vicinity, habitat, environment* or *milieu*. It is the basis for the word *Ecology* (composed of: οἶκος [oikos] = “environment etc.” + λογία [logia] = “study”), describing the branch of science investigating the relationships of organisms with their environment as well as with each other.

<sup>4</sup> “*unity of composition*” is a phrase that can be found throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, defined on p.502 as “[relating] to formal traits common to all of the forms or codes of a stratum, and to substantial elements, materials common to all of the stratum's substances or milieus.”

over one another. . . . Thus, the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to refer to the coherence of living things and their environment, a closer look at the connection of ecology and milieu is necessary: the typical milieu Deleuze and Guattari describe is an idiosyncratic container, a discrete multiplicity. It is habitat and channel for ecological contact and confrontation, thus abstractly based on direct observation of ubiquitous nature structures and systems relating to environmental diversity. A complete milieu is comprised of relational exchanges of several sub-milieus such as climate, atmosphere, location, geography, population, strata, information, microbiological aggregates, and many others who together form a rhizomatic network of interconnectivity. Open to transformation due to its mutable and elastic singularity, each particular milieu possesses a relative rather than absolute stability which consequently will affect each submilieu and supermilieu if exposed to modification. Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophical approach to the complexity of a natural interconnectivity is therefore indicative for our conception of systems and *systems aesthetics*. I attempted to introduce this notion of systems contingent upon each other in my first essay of this semester by presenting Hans Haake’s reflection on the subject of interconnectivity<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently

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<sup>5</sup> *Of the Refrain. In the dark, at home, toward the world—Milieus and rhythm—The placard and the territory—Expression as style: rhythmic faces, melodic landscapes—Bird song—Territoriality, assemblages, and interassemblages—The territory and the earth, the Natal—The problem of consistency—Machinic assemblage and abstract machine—Classicism and milieus—Romanticism, the territory, the earth, and the people—Modern art and the cosmos—Form and substance, forces and material—Music and refrains; the great and the small refrain.* In: Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Felix – *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press; 2 edition (December 21, 1987). p.313

<sup>6</sup> In my first essay, I quoted Hans Hake regarding systems aesthetics: “A “sculpture” that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reaches beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as “system” of interdependent processes. These processes evolve without the viewer’s empathy. He becomes a witness. A system is not imagined, it is real.” – in: Lippard, Lucy R. – *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. University of California Press; Reprint edition, 1997. p.38



Deleuze's and Guattari's as well as Haake's outlooks advocate for my proposition that the full diversity of existence – including the plurality of art as a morphological archetype as well as the abstract notion of nature as materialized matter – is exhibited through immanent processes of change and becoming. The effects of these progressions cannot be identified on the basis of their descent from common origins (relating to Darwinism). They have to remain in flux, because creative and transformational “fabrics” are products of distinct milieux, environmental variations and transversal interactions that ultimately influence every single aspect of being and becoming. All of these connections are therefore rhizomatic. By drawing a connection to evolutionary theory, Deleuze and Guattari are also questioning our common perception of hierarchic descent as described by Darwin. In their opinion, we cannot assume that the qualities and features of current forms of organisms and habitats developed according to a progressive, hierarchical structure – thus from what we describe as primitive to the more advanced, the less intelligent to the more intelligent, the weaker to the superior, or that survival is generally a matter of developing a skillset of adaptive mechanisms. By challenging the arboreal structure of evolution Deleuze and Guattari support their concept of a fluid, rhizomatic formation within the context of ecological progression. Located at its core is the notion of a decentralized *anisotropy*<sup>7</sup> which favors the concept of symbiotic coalitions over the notion of ‘survival of the fittest’. “If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of symbioses that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Anisotropy*, a term derived from biology/medicine is described by Meriam-Webster as “[an object or (in)organic substance] exhibiting properties with different values when measured in different directions”.

<sup>8</sup> *Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible. Becoming—Three aspects of sorcery: multiplicity; the Anomalous, or the Outsider; transformations—Individuation and Haecceity: five o'clock in the evening—Longitude, latitude, and the plane of consistency—The two planes, or the two conceptions of the plane— Becoming-woman, becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular: zones of proximity—Becoming imperceptible—The secret—Majority, minority, minoritarian—The minoritarian character and dissymmetry of becoming: double becoming—Point and line, memory and becoming— Becoming and block— The opposition between punctual systems and multilineal systems—Music, painting, and becomings— The refrain— Theorems of deterritorialization continued—Becoming versus imitation.* In: Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Felix – *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press; 2 edition (December 21, 1987). p.238

At this point, after weeding through complex, cross-interlocking exchanges of ideas and concepts, we will finally approach the fundamental idea of my studio work which is inspired by these complicated philosophical correlations and observations of systems and millieux relating to materialized nature and social interaction.



Fig.1 Markus Haala – Home of the Free (Know Your Synanthrope - Part II)

*Scale model pigeon coop made from wood, flat black paint, tar paper, video-screen, plywood, rebar, 5:00min. video loop*

A role model for complex characteristics that embrace the idea of fluid interconnectivity is *synanthropy*. To connect a particular body of my recent work<sup>9</sup> to the discussion of deterritorialization and the notions of an Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of milieu, we can refer to synanthropy as a prime example for adaptiveness based on de- and reterritorialized behavioral patterns found in many organisms. In the case of my recent

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<sup>9</sup> In my second essay, I referred to this particular series as “Synanthrope System” as working title – see: page 6 of *The Materialization of Nature - Part II*. Consisting of three sculptural parts that embrace the integration of multiple mediums, the works were at this time still in progress.

work the feral pigeon (*Columba livia*) became the subject of investigation. Noah Roderick states in his book *The Being of Analogy* that “the anthropocene is steadily making its way into the lexicons of the pundit’s table and the dinner table, and with it the uncanny feeling that our closest relatives may in fact be pigeons, synanthropic creatures evolved to live on the edges of cliffs, and yet are found almost nowhere outside of the simulacra cliffs of our cities. We haven’t just colonized nature with agriculture, cement, and trash; there is no parallel movement between the nature and the artifice by which nature has been colonized.”<sup>10</sup> Even though I would not refer to the pigeon as a close relative – that statement is simply too flippant – describing the bird as an unavoidable cohabitant would be more appropriate. The adaptiveness Roderick mentions is, however, nothing else but proof of the transition of the bird’s milieu into the milieu of human civilization, enabled by osmosis and supported by the intervention of humans into the environment by means of urbanization: the rock dove, the particular bird from whom the feral pigeon originates, realized that the concrete jungle created by humans delivers the quality of a less stress-induced existence and an abundance of food, while high-rise buildings at the same time simulated their original habitat (*oikos*) in the form of artificial cliffs. An additional lack of natural predators opened the gates for an overlap in milieux leading to the migration of pigeons into the urban areas on a global scale, based on deterritorialized modulation; hence the birds entered into a symbiotic relationship with humans. It is nevertheless a unilateral symbiosis: only the pigeon benefits from the newly arranged milieu, while we remain bothered by the invasion of synthropes into the fabric of our daily life, waiting to learn more about our part within this *interspecies relationship*<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Roderick, Noah – *The Being of Analogy*. Open Humanities Press (January 1, 2016). p.23

<sup>11</sup> The human part within this particular interspecies relationship is – due to the absence of standards - subject to relativity, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explains, “interspecies relations draw evolution back into history because they depend on the contingencies of encounter. They do not form an internally self-replicating system. Instead, interspecies encounters are always events, “things that happen”, the units of history. Events can lead to relatively stable situations, but they cannot be counted on in the way self-replicating units can; they are always framed by contingency and time. History plays havoc with scalability. The only way to create scalability is to repress change and encounter. If they can’t be repressed, the whole relation across scales must be rethought.” In: Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt – *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press; Reprint edition (September 19, 2017). p.142

As shown in Fig.1, my work *Home of the Free (Know Your Synanthrope - Part II)* is a visualization of this synanthropic adaption, inspired by observations of pigeons during many visits to New York this semester. The installation is a scale model pigeon coop sculpted from memory after the very same pigeon homes I remember from childhood, presented on a stand made from construction leftovers sourced from a NY construction site. Instead of experiencing living birds, we are exposed to a video loop of pigeons feeding on discarded bread next to a food stand in the streets nearby Times Square. People shouting at each other in foreign language while the birds, unimpressed by the disruptions of passengers and cars, are minding only their own business. Their new home has become a prison of choice for the former symbol of freedom, which does not even seem to care about its rearranged habitat situation. The birds are absorbed into their new milieu due to total deterritorialization. It is obviously not an "a bird in a gilded cage" situation, but rather the opposite of this expression.



Fig.2 Markus Haala – The Tragedy of Representation (Know Your Synanthrope - Part I)

*Antique German pigeon print, museum glass, conservation mat board, industrial grade plywood frame, anti-bird spikes*

Neither just a frame, nor an unusual object/sculpture *The Tragedy of Representation (Know Your Synanthrope – Part I)* depicted in Fig.2 is a hybrid, supposed to present itself to the viewer in the form of a framed, antique German illustration depicting *Haustauben* (German: “*pet pigeons*”). The ambiguity is of course an aspired factor to accentuate the highly ambiguous nature of our relationship with the pigeon as livestock, device, pet, and pest. The idea to investigate the contradictory nature of the human-pigeon-liaison is rooted in my first semester’s investigation of the area where I grew up<sup>12</sup>, which generated questions about the biased nature of representation versus our swayed perception of the real. The contrariness is represented in this assemblage by the use of materials: expensive, conservational elements such as museum glass or pH-neutral conservation mat board and dry-mounting stand in stark contrast to the highly processed, manufactured plywood structure as well as the repelling anti-bird spikes. As a compound, these materials mimic a frame to represent the antique print: we love our pet pigeons, but we don’t want their relatives close to us, let alone on top of our roofs or on the sidewalks of cities.

## **2 – Simulated Environments:**

### **At the Junction of the Real and the Synthetic**

In my second paper of this term I discussed the diorama and its quality as an “artificial mini-ecosphere presented as a compact container of ephemeral knowledge”, which is able to establish “an ideal of environmental representation” by “insinuating its truth [of nature representation] onto the viewer”<sup>13</sup>. By considering the works of Roxy Paine and Mark Dion, both artists who use the diorama for their individual artistic expression within their field of interest and research, I attempted to connect the artists’ investigation into

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<sup>12</sup> On p.6-7 of *The Naturalization of Nature (Part II)* I reflect on the importance of the pigeon as staple for social life in postwar Germany which inspired my research: “The idea to investigate the synanthropic nature of pigeons (rock dove – or rock pigeon – *Columba Livia*) came to me while I was researching the area where I grew up, which lead to discoveries about the importance of the pigeon for the social community of miners/workers in Germany. The pigeon – also referred to as the “poor man’s (race)horse” – was a staple of social life in postwar Germany.”

<sup>13</sup> *The Materialization of Nature (Part II)*. p.12



socioeconomic as well as sociopolitical predispositions and justifications toward the exploitation of nature (Dion), and the psychological, constructed realities of universal habitats (Paine) to their exemplary use of dioramic representation. A keyword within this context is *universal habitat*, because the diorama itself simulates a habitat (again, a connotation of *oikos*) for universal, representative and educational purposes. My perception of the artists' approach to dioramic representation in combination with the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of milieu led to the idea of creating a device, that replicates the idea of a diorama, while at the same time strives to dismiss parts of the disingenuousness the diorama commonly inheres – at last dioramic content is always a form of condensed and collocated pseudo-milieux. I referred to the idea in my writing as “Garden System”<sup>14</sup>. The main part of this installation is the so-called *Habitat Pod*.



Fig. 3 Markus Haala - Habitat Pod (Configuration I)

Fiberglass, MDF, full-spectrum light, water pumps, heating element, fan, silicone hoses, bucket, selection of ruderal weeds from Lowell, MA

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.14



Fig. 4 Markus Haala - Habitat Pod (Configuration II)

Installation with added stainless steel stand and frame for print  
(currently in progress)

*Habitat Pod* [Fig.3] was designed to contain natural systems (plants) within an artificial system (an enclosed growing environment) while being fully dependent on internal and external support systems (from the inner wiring to the external power grid), configured to mimic natural day cycles. All plants are sourced from my garden, an ample area for social gatherings during the summer and a relinquished domain in the winter, a place where many members of our community usually grow vegetables and herbs. However, the plants in the pod are the kind of weeds we would normally try to get rid of: the unwanted,

ruderal and mostly *r*-selected<sup>15</sup> plants we willingly regard as nuisances and inferior, useless occupants of space.

At the intersection of artificial replication (by simulating natural cycles involving organisms with the ability to copy) and representation (by presenting the plants in the form of an “as

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<sup>15</sup> The theory of *r*-selection implies that a high growth rate helps organisms to inhabit quickly and exploit ecological niches, such as ruderal areas or regions heavily impacted by human intervention. *r*-selected organisms produce many offspring or seeds, each of which would typically have a relatively low probability to survive, which, in contrast, is compensated by mass. A typical *r*-selected organism is the Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*).

is” installation) the concept of *Habitat Pod* appropriates and imitates the mimetic qualities of the diorama. However, due to a state of constant flux – after all we are dealing with living plants, not with their simulations – a failure within one of the many interconnected systems would threaten the stability of the contained ecosystem. Finally, the provided resources will eventually run out, leaving us with the necessity to contemplate the validity of the pseudo-simulated millieux. None of these systems contained within *Habitat Pod* can function just on their own – interconnectivity and a healthy balance is crucial to form a habitat and to establish the continuity of becoming. Hinting at our ambiguous relationship with nature, the device itself is made from fiberglass and epoxy resin to communicate a sense of absolute disconnection on a material level, signified by synthesis. “We cannot think nature without taking account to ourselves that our idea of nature is impregnated with artifacts”<sup>16</sup>, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in his course notes on Nature – and *Habitat Pod* is just that, an artifact that embraces its synthetic, inorganic character as a necessity to facilitate organic growth in order to let us explore how we turn nature into a commodity.

An important thought that inspired me to build *Habitat Pod* and create the pieces surveying synanthropy was the critique of our desire to create, replicate and exemplify reality. The motivation to pursue these activities has undoubtedly lead parts of our global civilization into a new era where the inventions and commodities of (bio)technology, as well as the proceeding advance toward an artificial intelligence and virtual reality driven lifestyle, confront us with the challenge of distinguishing the simulated from the real, based on commonsensical conclusions; the boundaries are increasingly blurring and limitations of possibilities are vanishing. But in reality, each and every intervention by humans into our ecosystem – even by means of the least sophisticated (“primitive”) processes – has played a part in the development of this dichotomy. We can ignore the idea but evading the ambiguous structure of being and becoming is impossible: exemplary items that we typically consider as “natural” like plywood, glass, metal, paper

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<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice – *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Northwestern University Press (2003). p.86



or cotton are actually the products of a lengthy process of inventive developments resulting in manufacturing procedures, which involve an ability of cultivation and the willingness to adapt. It is comparable to the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of deterritorialization and milieu: in order to replicate, create and invent a thorough detachment from – and a formal, temporary dismissal of – established cultural practices, including societal and dogmatic mentalities, is necessary without neglecting the history of previous advances; those instead need to be absorbed, through osmosis, into the next stage of becoming, subsequently resulting in materialization of basic components. Ultimately, all of the conclusions based on findings over the span of this semester illustrate the complex status of the great dichotomies able “to shape our culture [and] our perception of nature [...] determined not only by the art-nature duality but also by the other ancient divide between nature and society”<sup>17</sup>, as Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, professor of history at the Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, aptly analyzes the current state of hybridization of natural structures. The materialization of nature has thus always been at the core of human progression. The subsequent transition into the visual arts was always preassigned. It only required a catalyst in form of a philosophical rethinking and the motivation to approach the idea of nature from non-linear, non-hierarchical but instead interwoven, rhizomatic positions.



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<sup>17</sup> Bensaude-Vincent, Bernadette – *Reconfiguring Nature Through Syntheses: From Plastics to Biomimetics*. In: Bensaude-Vincent, Bernadette / Newman, William R. (Editors) - *The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity*. The MIT Press (October 19, 2007). p.308