The Militant Gardener

A Thesis

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By

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Abstract

Art actions, objects, writing, documents and installations are the forms used to examine human nature through the lenses of ecological crises and militancy. The artwork attempts to sharpen the viewer’s awareness of social mechanics of our species and challenge the viewer to consider solutions to seemingly intractable disputes that mesh well with our nature. The inherently dangerous nature of many of the works makes them impossible for an audience to experience directly in a gallery. The desire to present them as living works of art in a gallery, in contrast to documentation of a past event, required a re-examination of the relationship between the object and its documentation. I have come to the conclusion that all of the ephemera – videos, writing, flyers, performances – create a world for the art object and allow for communication between the world of the art object and our world.
This is dedicated to Sharon for her undying support and brutal honesty.
Vita

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Militant Gardener Manifesto

Figure 1.1: *The Militant Gardener*, logo.
We humans are a tribal species. Merriam-Webster gives two definitions for tribalism, “1: tribal consciousness and loyalty; especially : exaltation of the tribe above other groups. 2: strong in-group loyalty.”[2] Modern examples of tribalism and its effects may be found at all levels of society. From the loyalty we feel toward our families and friends to cheering for our favorite sports team; from heated political debate to the bigotry and violence of one religion or ethnic group toward another. We tend to exalt our social group above others. Even as I write this I cannot help but feel that the social group that identifies with my views is wiser than those who oppose them. We dehumanize our adversaries and can be capable of deep cruelty and even murder.

As our species has created ever more advanced technology we have become just as sophisticated in our ability to save or prolong the lives of those with whom we identify as we are in the ability to end the lives of our enemies. Our species has an equal capacity to create and destroy. Our religions and social contracts teach us not to kill, yet our nations send us off to war. We are all capable, in the right conditions, of the most humbling expressions of love and the most brutal acts imaginable. The love we have for those we identify as self arouses the desire to protect them from harm.

We do not just have the capacity to create and destroy we also enjoy doing both. Fireworks have been popular since their inception. We have festivals devoted to burning or destroying all manner of effigies. We are fascinated by natural disasters, by the demolition of buildings, and by films of atom bomb tests.

As we mature as individuals some of us come to find human beings, outside of the groups we consider to be ours, are not any less than us, have no less right to live, and
are in fact still a part of our group. Some of us continue to extend this consideration to animals and thus refrain from killing and consuming them. We become peacemakers. To this end we often suppress our destructive self. We suppress the one that marvels at the beauty of an atomic explosion. The one who loves to shoot guns and burn things without reason.

Creation and destruction is the whole of the universe. Particles come together and move apart. Things arise and cease. We are born and we die. Our consciousness is of this world, it is wired not only to observe the processes of creation and destruction, but to actively participate in the process. Fighting our nature is fruitless, only through accepting and understanding the process can we transcend it and find balance.

When we suppress one half it often arises in service to the other half. Countless hours of creative thought have been in service to destruction. Conversely, it is easy to care so deeply for those you see suffering needlessly, or for the right for all things to live free from cruelty, that you might kill in an attempt to stop those who cause suffering. In both cases the imbalance leads violence against others which is unconscionable.

For too long we who are devoted to peace, social justice, and sustainability have let the war hawks have all the fun (the testing is fun, not the resulting murders). Their toys are tanks, guns, and bombs. Ours are civil disobedience, essays and shovels; none of which explode. It is time to adopt their means! Just not their ends. This is not a call for revolution, or violence, or terrorism. This is a call to let our destructive half fully express itself in union with our creative half in a way which does no harm.

We must fold the technologies of war into our practices of peace, but we must find ways to use them which do no harm.
We must welcome our destructive self and provide a healthy space for it to live in balance with our creative self. We must convert our internal swords into ploughshares.

So how do we do this? How may we be destructive and creative in a balanced way and do no harm?

As the Militant Gardener I have been developing rapid seed propagation technologies to increase biodiversity with native wildflower seeds. By adopting and subverting the technologies of war I have been reclaiming my destructive side and bringing it into balance with my creative side. These creations and experiments are but one possible manifestation of this practice. I encourage you to embrace your destructive side in a creative way which does no harm as well. If you choose to work with things that are inherently dangerous, take all the necessary precautions to ensure that you do yourself no harm.

1.2 Introduction

Who is this Militant Gardener? The Militant Gardener was initially conceived as a character who took the militant language used by guerrilla gardeners and environmentalists to the extreme. It was meant as a critique of activists for using language that serves to demonize their opposition, which is antithetical to the peace they hope to bring into the world. This character was potentially dangerous. He would have been militant in the violent sense of the word and would have needed to post plans for his devices online to share them with the community. I did not feel right about doing this, the potential for someone to find the site and build a bomb that might harm themselves or others is a burden I did not wish to carry. Aside from the ethical concerns raised by the nature of the original character, this conception of The Militant
Gardener limited the types of projects that could be completed while in character. This combination of factors led me to reconsider who, or what, The Militant Gardener was.

Over time I came to realize that I was The Militant Gardener and that The Militant Gardener was not confined to traditional gardening. I found that the implications of the work extended beyond the confines of political critique and was fueled by my interest in who we are and how we function. Researching the definitions of “garden” and “militant” I found a level of abstraction I was not expecting. A Militant Gardener may be defined as one who is aggressively active in improving an indefinite area of the world, or a sphere of activity or interest, through labor, care, or study. Arriving at this definition opened the project to a range of activities beyond the physical act of gardening. The Manifesto that begins this paper, though written specifically for The Militant Gardener, offers an insight into the whole of my art practice. The content of my work varies, but tends to focus on major crises that afflict us currently or those which may afflict us in the near term. The crises I am particularly interested in are the kind created by humans, such as climate change and the War on Terror. These crises provide an unfettered view of our species making both our positive and negative traits shine.

The Militant Gardener project is the most recent work I have finished and is the work I submitted for the MFA thesis show. Though I have given The Militant Gardener a good deal of discussion thus far, it is useful to present the works that I completed prior to The Militant Gardener as they are the context from which The Militant Gardener arose.
Chapter 2: G.Ro.W. The Gardening Robotic Wanderer

Figure 2.1: G.Ro.W., The Gardening Robotic Wanderer.

A vacant lot is all that remains of an old industrial site. The brick and mortar of its factory has been crushed into gravel. Its soil is packed and hard from the heavy
machinery that brought down the building and pressed its remains into the earth. Toxins leftover from the factory’s heyday linger in the ruined landscape, never far from the surface. One or two plant species dominate the landscape and struggle to grow more than a few inches high – a little patch of desert in Ohio.

2.1 Description

GRoW, the Gardening Robotic Wanderer, trundles across the landscape on a frame hacked together from used bicycle parts. Two mountain bike wheels act as drive wheels, and a smaller bicycle wheel acts as a caster. A galvanized steel garbage can is nestled between two orange plastic bins which house the electrical components. Inside the garbage can is a mechanism to disperse compost and wildflower seed. A steel mast rises from this conglomerate of repurposed goods to a height of six feet and is topped with a bird feeder and sensor array. Inside the garbage can is a mechanism to disperse compost and wildflowers. Lacking any form of shock absorption, GRoW transmits every feature of the landscape into gesture. As GRoW clumsily traverses the site, the steel handles of the garbage can bang loudly as they slap the sides of the can. After traveling a certain distance, GRoW stops and is quiet for a moment before dumping seed or compost. It then chooses a new compass bearing to follow and the motors whine as it pushes forward. When the robot senses an obstacle that is too large to drive over, it intelligently adjusts its course heading to avoid the obstacle. This combination of behaviors ensures that over time GRoW will eventually cover the entire plot in seeds and compost.
*GRoW* is not meant to be a practical device. *GRoW* proposes a possible future in which technology is built for non-anthropocentric purposes and exists in a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. *GRoW’s* purpose is to inspire thought and conversation regarding public perceptions of the relationships between humanity, technology, and the natural world and the assumptions underlying these perceptions. Humanity was once in a symbiotic relationship with the planet. Our population was subjected to the same environmental controls as every other species. However, through the development of language, fire, and agriculture, we learned how to defeat the population controls to which we had been subjected. Our relationship with nature became increasingly autocratic as technology and our understanding of the laws of nature progressed. This self-promotion, coupled with the Western, anthropocentric philosophical views of humankind, have made us and our inventions quite toxic to our world.

In the early twentieth century, the US government sponsored a culling of predators in the western United States. The misperception that predators were cruel, wanton murders of innocent animals led to the extermination of wolves, cougars, birds of prey, etc. “By the end of the 1930s, however, there was disturbing evidence from across the West that predator persecution was not creating a peaceable kingdom. By removing natural constraints on deer and rodent population growth, it was instead producing biological catastrophes.” [1] The unchecked populations of deer and rodents ravaged the landscape until succumbing to disease and starvation. Though disastrous, the consequences of this large scale slaughtering taught the scientific community the importance of balance in a healthy ecosystem.
We often cannot imagine the true impact of our actions within a complex, ecological system until they produce a dramatic shift in its balance. Though we are quite skilled at predicting the outcome of our actions in the short term, we fail when the system is complex, or when the impact of our individual actions is imperceptible. Humankind often sees itself as separate from the Earth and in opposition to natural processes. Our consciousness and intelligence have estranged us from the natural order. However, we must come to understand that we, and the technologies we are developing, are an implicit part of the natural order. As our fate is tied to the fate of the Earth, we must express the same generosity toward the Earth that we are capable of expressing toward other human beings by designing and implementing technology for symbiotic non-anthropocentric purposes. GRoW uses organic waste as compost to fertilize plants while increasing biodiversity by spreading seed as symbolic gestures of goodwill. By working at former industrial sites, GRoW not only remediates the plot, but remedies our technological relationship with the Earth.

As architects, designers, artists, and engineers, we need to think beyond sustainability. The artist Mel Chin has worked extensively with scientists to genetically engineer and test hyperaccumulators, plants that excel at pulling heavy metals from the soil. Following his lead, we need to design systems and structures that benefit the environment. We need to make our ventures carbon negative, rather than carbon neutral. We need our cities to increase habitat for threatened species rather than reduce their habitat. We need power plants that clean the air and water rather than pollute it. In short, we need to design systems that become a part of their ecology and fill the niches created by the byproducts of human action.
The purpose of *GRoW* is not to promote an ideology, but to offer a different lens from which to consider the crises of our day. Where the crises we face are an expression of the failings of our nature, *GRoW* is an expression of one true strength of our species: generosity. To solve the ecological problems of our day we must learn to not only use technology to facilitate our taking from the planet, but also to facilitate our giving to the planet. Through this lens additional costs sustained by industries can be thought of not as lost profits, but charitable donations. We need to not just be stewards of our planet, but collaborators with it.
Chapter 3: Unattended Baggage

Figure 3.1: Unattended Baggage, video still.

On a hot summer day the cool and damp basement air is a welcomed relief from the un-airconditioned house. It is still early as a man descends the stairs a cup of coffee in his hand. He settles in at his workbench, flipping on a halogen work light. Setting down his coffee cup he turns on his soldering iron and picks up where he left
off late last night. He has mounted most of the electronics into the box and is ready to finish up the last few solder joints before he begins testing the device.

After a full day of careful testing and debugging his wife calls down to him that dinner is ready. He screws the lid on the aluminum housing and heads upstairs. His wife has gone all out and has roasted swordfish steaks and served them with wild rice. After dinner they spend a bit of time together and he gives her a kiss before heading back down to the basement.

Once in the basement he lays a couple of two-liter soda bottles tightly wrapped in duct tape into a bright red vintage samsonite make-up case. There are wires protruding from the tops of the bottles. He carefully places the aluminum case holding the electronics on top of the bottles and connects the wires from the case to the wires coming out of the bottles. The aluminum case has two switches and a LCD display on the front face. He flips one switch and the display lights up. He hesitates slightly before flipping the second switch. A timer starts to count down from one hour. He closes the lid on the luggage and climbs the stairs.

Outside the evening sun is low as he places the red piece of baggage in the trunk of his car with several other pieces of vintage luggage. They are the product of several weeks of work. Each has its intended target. He starts the car and pulls into the street.

3.1 Description

*Unattended Baggage* is the story of a terrorist told in the form of a two minute long video. Throughout the work you never see the face of this person. The beginning of the video shows several pieces of vibrantly colored vintage luggage distributed
throughout a city. As the narrative progresses the protagonist makes coffee, works furiously in montage on a project in his basement, has dinner with his wife and returns to work. Within the final 30 seconds it becomes clear that the protagonist has been building a bomb and hiding it within a vintage piece of luggage. The film ends with the protagonist placing the luggage under a bridge.

The color palette is vibrant and the styling of the work is a nod to Wes Anderson. The song, Breakdown, by Wentworth Kersey is a beautiful melodic tune about a mental breakdown and thoughts of suicide. The work is meant to draw the viewer in so that they identify with and are interested in the protagonist. He is shown as a caring husband with a hobby. There is no indication of any malice in his actions until the end.

In the mythology of terrorism the terrorist is often reduced to a two-dimensional villain; the embodiment of evil. In this oversimplification the human who committed the murderous act is lost as is our ability understand how a human becomes so firmly attached to an ideology as to extinguish the lives of others in service to his or her ideal.

The recent arrest of four elderly men in Georgia alleged to be conspirators in a plot to assassinate several government officials and use Ricin to kill scores of civilians pokes holes in the stereotype who commits acts of terror. These men are fathers and husbands, not lone wolves nor misguided youth. The video invites the viewer to consider the human behind the act without condoning the act itself.
Chapter 4: Grass Mask

In a bustling city center a woman rounds a corner with her eyes fixed on the sidewalk a few feet ahead of her. She walks with purpose, her dress shoes striking a diligent rhythm on the concrete. Her business skirt is tight and as she walks its motion amplifies the intensity of her stride. She stops at an intersection. The dense traffic has come to a standstill belching exhaust onto the crowded sidewalk. The light changes and she maneuvers through the gridlocked traffic blocking the crosswalk. She avoids eye contact, but receives stares. Covering her face is a gas mask with wheatgrass growing where the filter should be. With each breath the grass absorbs some of the toxins in the air around her and she inhales some freshly generated oxygen.

4.1 Description

The concept for the Grass Mask arose while I was contemplating the irony of selling canned oxygen. The canned oxygen I am referring to is not used for medical purposes, but sold directly to consumers without respiratory ailments. Though I do not have the stats, I am sure that more than twenty-two ounces of air was polluted in the manufacture and distribution of one twenty-two ounce can of pure oxygen. Canned oxygen is a recursive product, a product whose supply increases its demand.
The *Grass Mask* started as an equally laughable, but environmentally sound alternative to canned oxygen. The challenge was in finding the perfect gas mask to modify. This took the better part of a month. It had to meet two criteria, firstly, the filter needed to point down rather than out to the side, and secondly, the mask needed to be the iconic, here-comes-the-apocalypse gas mask. The filter needed to point down
in order to invert the grass, as this allows for a stronger communication between the grass and the mask.

The Grass Mask, on its own, was lonely. It needed to be a part of a larger whole, it needed a context to exist within. It was the first of a group of projects that would compose The Militant Gardener. I consider the Grass Mask to be quite important, perhaps not the world, but to my practice. Its creation was during a pivotal moment where my practice became more consciously aware of the semiotics of objects. Not only what objects mean within a culture, but how they communicate with one another in the mind of the viewer. Previously I had been making aesthetic choices intuitively, or subconsciously considering semiosis, but had not been able to state why one choice felt right while another felt wrong. In a sense this hasn’t changed. Intuition is still how choices are made, however now I have the ability to better speak and write about these choices and also to evaluate, or prune them.

Though The Militant Gardener is literally gardening, the projects are just one possible manifestation. The Militant Gardener and my art practice in general is driven by my need to understand the mind. From a young age I have been asking the question, who am I? A lack of compelling answers led me to drift away from my Christian upbringing and to eventually adopt Buddhism. I have found the Buddhist understanding of the mind and meditation practices that Buddhism prescribes to be a quite fruitful in my attempt to answer the question posed above.

From the Buddhist perspective nothing we can observe in the physical world or within the mind is self. This is not to say that there is no self, but if there is, we are incapable of perceiving it. This perspective allows for one to understand the mind as a garden. Thoughts, ideas, and emotions arise and cease and thus are not self.
They can be understood to be the plants in the garden. There is an agent in the mind, the one we typically identify as self or the ego. When the ego acts from the perspective that thoughts, ideas, and emotions are independent of self then it can act as a gardener. When we garden we are setting the conditions for our plants to be successful. This is analogous to how we engage our creativity. We provide the right conditions for creative synthesis to occur. We have no direct control over our ideas, just as we cannot activate or stop the genetic imperative for a plant to grow. We can prune a plant and guide its growth, but we do not make it grow.

This gardening analogy does not only pertain to creativity. We are constantly tending various mental states. When we fixate on a particular emotion or thought we are actively encouraging its growth. Be the thought positive, or negative, when flattered with a significant portion of our attention, it will become stronger and more robust than those which we ignore. Attending to negative thoughts is similar to gardening hemlock.

One could blame the wind for blowing the seeds of a noxious weed into a garden, but that does not change the fact that the weed itself is rooted in the garden and in order to remove it one needs dig the root out of the soil. The same is true for all of our thoughts. Though they arise in us, rarely do they arise from us. “Winds” are continually blowing them into our minds. When ideas do arise from us, they are not conceived immaculately. They are formed from what has “blown” in. Creativity is the sexual reproduction of concepts.

Earlier in this paper I defined a militant gardener as one who is aggressively active in improving an indefinite area of the world, or a sphere of activity or interest, through labor, care, or study.
Ideas, whether planted intentionally or “blown in,” grow within the mind and occasionally cross-pollinate creating new ideas which can be disseminated to others. At first it would appear that we should uproot all negative thoughts and feelings and attend to all positive thoughts and feelings. This is not the case. Things that are toxic in a large or sustained dose are often medicinal in smaller doses. Likewise, something nutritious in a moderate portion may be unhealthy when consumed frequently or in excess. If we are strongly distrustful of others we will never let anyone get close to us, thus missing out on deep friendship. If we blindly trust others we will likely have our trust abused.

When studying plants, botanists do not stop their investigations where the plant enters the soil. In order to know the plant they examine it in its entirety. This understanding of the full structure of the plant allows them to better predict which conditions are optimal for its wellbeing. The same is true for human thoughts and emotions. To understand why we, as humans, become angry in one situation and peaceful in another one needs to observe the whole plant (by paying attention to what events trigger and sustain the emotional state) not just the blossoms (the mature expression of the mental state). This is the goal of my art practice. I am concerned with understanding how and why humans behave the way they do. I often create work around an issue that I am passionate about. This passion leads to attachment to one side of the dispute and allows me to directly study the emotions and thoughts that this attachment fertilizes as they arise within my mind. I am not attempting to sway anyone to my side of the dispute. My interest is in in how the dispute impacts those engaged in it. Understanding the mind as a garden allows me to disassociate from my thoughts and feelings and study the underlying mechanisms that impact all humans.
I believe that it is possible to create the appropriate conditions for certain mental states to flourish and that through careful examination of our thoughts, feelings and creativity that one can learn how to cultivate, or starve them.
Chapter 5: The Militant Gardener: Projects

Figure 5.1: *Roadside Seed Bomb*, video still.
The following section describes two works of *The Militant Gardener* project. They are the physical expression of the manifesto that begins this paper. Both are works that do not take place in the gallery and I found it quite challenging to adapt them to the gallery. It was important to me that they function as art even in the white cube. Projecting straightforward documentary video on a wall felt as though it would put distance between the viewer and the work and that they would be encouraged to adopt the same passive role as when watching television or a film.

### 5.1 Roadside Seed Bomb

![Roadside Seed Bomb](image)

Figure 5.2: *Roadside Seed Bomb*, video still.

Dawn is about to break as a man wearing a red hat makes his way from a frontage road toward a freeway. The occasional car zips past ahead of him. In a few hours the
highway will be at a near standstill all eight lanes filled with thousands of cars. In his arms is an improvised explosive device. Red, spiraled telephone cords run from an aluminum box to the charges. The box has a digital display and two switches mounted to it. An a cylindrical orange-colored sensor sticks out of the top. The frame of the bomb is made from scrap steel. He places it just off the edge of the highway where it is hidden from view in some tall grass. He does a visual inspection of the connections to the charges and the ignitor. Satisfied, he flips both switches into the on position. The digital display lights up showing a calibration routine. Once calibrated the display shows a constantly changing decimal number. The man walks back up to the frontage road.

A few hours later, once traffic on the highway has come to a standstill, the sensor value reaches its threshold and a countdown timer pops up on the display. In ten seconds it will detonate...

The sensor on the top tests for carbon monoxide levels. When the carbon monoxide levels (a good indicator of air pollution) rise significantly above the light traffic carbon monoxide level the bomb responds by detonating. The charges are a mix of clay, wildflower seeds, and soil. Black powder acts as the explosive. The clay is still damp, ensuring there are no hard projectiles in the explosion.

The countdown timer expires and the bomb explodes blowing chunks of seed-laden clay in all directions and creating a mushroom cloud of dense, white smoke. A dull thump echos across the highway. A sound that disappears against a background of diesel engines and deep bass pulsing out of custom sound systems. A few drivers notice the smoke, but most have tuned out the world around them, and are talking on the phone or texting, waiting for traffic to resume moving.
5.1.1 Description

The gallery manifestation of the *Roadside Seed Bomb* consisted of a narrative video projected on the wall behind an oval-shaped pile of soil in the middle of the floor. The bomb itself sits on top of the soil with the remains of exploded charges spread around it. An instructional poster indicates for the viewer that they are meant to kneel down and blow into the carbon monoxide sensor. When the sensor is triggered the narrative loop fades to black and a clip of the explosion takes its place. Much like explosions in bad action films this explosion is played back in slow motion and is cut so that five explosions take place in the video in rapid succession. After the fifth explosion the video holds on the smoke as it spirals up creating a perfect mushroom cloud and then fades back to where the narrative loop left off. Thus the audience gets to actively trigger the explosion. Though not the real thing, the explosion is actually more dramatic and immersive than experiencing it in person.

The narrative loop is not straight documentation. It shows the construction and placement of the bomb, but this is done through montage and is intercut with footage of cars. The video begins with a shot of an engine being started and then exhaust from a tailpipe, and a shot of the first step in making the clay charges. Next, clips of bomb building are layered with shots of highways both from an overpass and from within a car. The layerings continue to become more complex with three or more clips playing at any given time. during this build up a deep low grumble is building in the speakers. By the climax it is shaking the walls of the gallery. Suddenly, the video fades to black and the audio is silent. Birdsong and the sounds of traffic fade in and the remaining video shows the placement and activation of the bomb without any layering of video.
The work, as seen in the gallery, is a dramatic and somewhat fictional narrative of the art event. This is not to say the entire event was staged. The bomb detonated and chunks of seed-laden clay flew in all directions. However, if the events had been portrayed with complete truthfulness, the power of the work would have been diluted in its documentation. Though the footage implies that the bomb was placed near to a highway, the explosions took place far from any roadway. When I conceived of the piece I was completely focused on the art object and did not consider its context. By placing the bomb within the context of a narrative structure and giving myself the freedom to contrive aspects of that narrative, I learned I could tune the world of the artwork by only including elements important to the concept of the work.

Incidentally, a high level of safety was exercised during the construction and documentation of this work. Though the footage implies that the bomb was placed near to a highway, the explosions took place on private land that I had permission to use, for this purpose. As the intention is to do no harm I did not want anyone being accidentally injured by this work.

As a child I had an endless fascination with fire and explosions. When fireworks ceased to be entertaining I cut them open and combined their powder to create a much larger boom, I made “napalm” from gasoline and styrofoam, and I fashioned flamethrowers from cans of WD-40 among other experiments. I am surprised I still have all of my fingers. As an adult I have come to deplore acts of violence, yet my fascination with destruction remains.

For a long time I attempted to purge what I considered to be a childish and unhealthy fascination from my mind. I ceased engaging in destructive activities. I stopped making potato guns and homemade fireworks, I gave away my 1860 Army
pistol replica, and I steered clear of violent video games, but still the fascination remained. My desire to commit acts of destruction appeared to be hard-wired into my being, with almost the same tenacity as sexual desire – the urge to create. These fraternal desires mirror the inherent nature of the universe. Everything is in a constant state of flux with matter and energy coming together to form distinct objects for a time before dispersing and later coalescing into a new object. Our existence is no different. We are conceived, born, grow old, and die. During our life we consume materials to build and sustain our bodies and at death the bonds holding these materials together are broken and we are absorbed back into the environment. Rather than dismiss or suppress the urge to destroy I believe that we must accept it. It is important to note that the willing refusal to engage in destruction allowed me to understand how fundamental the urge to destroy things is to our nature (or at least to mine). The Roadside Seed Bomb and other projects that are part of The Militant Gardener are expressions of that acceptance.

When we design implements of destruction, we focus our attention on what we want to destroy with little regard for collateral damage, or the creative outcome of our acts of destruction. Whenever something is destroyed another thing arises. While not intended to destroy anything other than itself the Roadside Seed Bomb allows for the expression of destructive desires and uses the act of destruction for creative ends.

Many artists have worked with various forms of destruction as an artform. Survival Research Labs creates robotic performances of destruction. With fire, explosions, rotting animal carcasses, rocket engines, and air raid sirens they celebrate destruction. The Burning Man Festival is centered around the burning of a four-storey tall man. Other large artworks at the festival are also constructed and often only survive a few
days in their finished state before they are torched. In these examples the destruction of the work is the end of the creative act. With the *Roadside Seed Bomb* the act of destruction is not the end of the work, it is a creative act in itself spreading wildflower seeds which germinate, grow, and produce offspring. The impact of the work is felt on the landscape long after the smoke has cleared. Additionally, the creative act of constructing the video and installation propagates the ideas presented in the work far from the landscape in which the work occurred.

### 5.2 Ploughshare’s Shotgun

A man cradles a shotgun in his arms as he traverses a rural landscape. He is in search of prey. He pushes through dense brush, and scrambles up a rock formation to get a better vantage. Scanning the land below his heart jumps as his eyes come to rest on his quarry. He quickly descends and makes his final approach. He had been catching glimpses of his prey all morning. Flashes of brown through the foliage, the wind carrying that unmistakable damp and earthy smell. Now so close it was all he could do to keep calm. The brush was opening ahead of him. He could see it now. He shoulders the shotgun, leans slightly forward to prepare for the recoil, and fires. He quickly pumps the shotgun chambering and firing round after round into the barren earth ahead of him. His shells are not firing buckshot, but wildflower seeds. He fires the last shell and a deep silence settles across the landscape. The smell of gunpowder hangs in the air. He picks up the spent shells – which he will reload later – and moves forward to the patch of exposed earth to check out his handiwork. Some seeds rest on top of the soil, others have been thrust into fissures in the ground. The barren patch
is thoroughly infused with seeds. He pulls fresh shells from his pocket and reloads his

gun. His work is far from over.

After a long day of hunting he returns home and sits on the stool by his workbench.
A shotgun shell reloader sits on the workbench. It is a simple machine made of steel,
painted bright red. One long lever arm protrudes from the front of it. When pulled it lowers a plate populated with a variety of implements which allow the user to complete all the needed steps to reload a shell with a few pulls of the lever.

He pulls the spent shells from his pocket and meticulously reloads them. He follows the steps adding the primer, powder, wad, and wildflower seeds to the shell. Each step is punctuated by a singular pull of the lever. After a few rounds he is lost in the rhythm of the machine.

5.2.1 Description

For *Ploughshare’s Shotgun* I brought a workbench and shotgun shell reloader into the exhibition space and provided viewers the opportunity to make their own shells, which could not be fired, to take home. Each shell had a sticker on it indicating that it could not be fired, which also lists the web address. The workbench was laden with all the accoutrements required of a Militant Gardener. Bags of organic soil, manure, and peat sat on the same shelf as milk crate overflowing with wire and electronics. Posters promoting Victory Gardens hung on the wall referencing the history of war and gardening. One poster illustrated a farmer firing a basket full of produce as though it were a cannon, the other showed Lady Liberty sowing seeds.

During the opening I was on site to assist people in using the reloader. I wore a red ball cap with insulated ear flaps, a dark pair of denim pants, and a workshirt. The cap had a big patch on the front that read, “Stewart Seeds.” This was an expression of the Militant Gardener persona, but I would not characterize my presence there as a performance. I acted and spoke as myself, not as a performer whose part only exists in the context of the work. Though I filled the role of *The Militant Gardener*
in this show I am interested in experimenting with having other people dress as The Militant Gardener in the future. For the same reasons it was important for me not to be acting when I was present with the work, any person donning The Militant Gardener outfit should be themselves.

I came dressed as The Militant Gardener because I felt it important to have something to tie the world that the work creates to the real world. By being myself in militant gardener’s clothing I facilitated the communication and interaction between those two worlds.

Steven Madoff recently gave a talk on spaces at the Wexner Center focussing on the interplay between spaces in and around a work of art, specifically within an installation. The spaces he was referring to included both physical space and other spaces such as political space, personal space, etc. According to Madoff, a successful work allows the viewer to understand how different objects or ideas presented in the space are connected. Had I been wearing formal attire my connection to the work would have been jarring or incomplete and the work would have suffered. Had I acted as though only the world of The Militant Gardener existed I could not have authentically connected with the audience.

The aesthetic of The Militant Gardener website is based on my sketchbook. I prefer to do all my drawing and planning on grid paper and thus the background of the website is a light blue grid. The font used on the website is a custom font I created from my handwriting. All of the images on the site are line drawings based on photos of the objects. The use of drawings rather than photos allows for an aesthetic continuity on the site. Using these techniques ties the online documentation back to the work and to the process of creating the work.
The adaptation of the *Roadside Seed Bomb* to the gallery raised an interesting question. How does one make an artwork, whose life and action takes place outside of the gallery, live within the gallery? Documentation of a project presented in a gallery can often feel dead and distant. In order to present this project in a compelling and active manner in a gallery I realized that I needed to treat the documentation as a work of art in itself. I had previously looked at documentation as a straightforward, non-narrative explanation of a work, not the work itself. I have come to realize that editing the documentation in a way which creates a narrative, but does not necessarily
explain the work is significantly more effective at communicating the experience of the work. It even becomes the work.

I am not the first artist to come to this realization. In the late 1990’s Paul Granjon created a series of two minute videos documenting a wide range of projects, such as *The Cybernetic Parrot Sausage* and *The Antigravitational Vehicle for Cats*. These projects come to life in their documentation. His videos are least as much the work of art as is the physical objects and I would argue that the objects themselves would be much weaker without the context his videos create for the works. Similarly, at an artist talk at the Wexner Center, Ernst Caramelle spoke about his practice of treating all of the ephemera one needs to generate when planning and exhibiting a work of art as independent works of art in themselves. He even considered the talk he was giving an artwork and showed slides of posters and invitations as equals to his paintings.

In my recent work I am applying what I have learned from the production and exhibition of various projects considered in this paper. The following is one of several projects I have been working on since the completion of *The Militant Gardener*. A work in progress, currently titled *AgriNet Husbandry Environment*, has been conceived and is being executed from this new perspective.
Chapter 6: AgriNet Husbandry Environment

Figure 6.1: *AgriNet Husbandry Environment*, 3D rendering of chicken enclosures.

A convention hall reverberating with the dull thunder of a couple thousand voices. Men and women are milling about with entry passes hung around their necks, one
hand grasping a plastic bag filled with pamphlets, promotional frisbees, and stickers. They have been lulled into a passive state by the overstimulus of visiting hundreds of vendor booths all touting some state-of-the-art agricultural product. It is late in the day and they are all being drawn slowly toward the exits.

A crowd has gathered around one booth near the exit drawing the attention of the weary conventioneers. Some alter course veering away from the exit and toward the booth, postponing their inevitable exodus. A video projection of what appears to be a videogame about farm animals is displayed on a wall of the booth. One of the booth attendants is addressing the crowd as another helps two volunteer audience members into a virtual reality headsets. Once the headsets are mounted the volunteers place their hands on large rubber balls housed in an apparatus that allows them to spin in place. As the participants move their heads the video projection mirrors their motion in the virtual world. Using their hands on the ball they are able to navigate around what appears to be a virtual chicken run. Both appear severely disoriented.

The attendant addressing the crowd explains that this is a virtual world that will revolutionize the industrial farm. Maintaining the efficiency and safety of conventional chicken farming while allowing chickens to experience a free range lifestyle without the inherent danger of predators. He explains that the two disoriented audience members are seeing the world as a chicken does with only a small portion of their total vision being binocular.

The presenter moves on to describe the technical specifications and costs and benefits of the technology as a second projector displays a slide show of technical drawings, flow charts, and 3D models.
As the volunteers become accustomed to their virtual world their motions become more and more bird-like. One is busy trying to peck a bug off the ground. The other turns his head to one side to get a clear view with one eye of the other volunteer’s chicken avatar. As he has no depth perception with only one eye he begins to bob his head to regain parallax. After a few minutes the attendants remove the VR headsets from the participants and allow a couple more people to experience the virtual world.

6.1 Description

As the AgriNet Husbandry Environment is a work-in-progress the above narrative is as yet unrealized. Thus far this project consists of a powerpoint presentation which I have given three times to small audiences and have been refining based on their feedback. Work has begun on the virtual world and prototype headset/enclosure. As in the above narrative the headset will be built to accommodate a human head, not a chicken head, though the LCD screens, via which the wearer experiences the world, will be displaying the world as a chicken would perceive it, with only fifteen degrees of binocular overlap between the two eyes compared to 120 degrees of binocular overlap in human vision. Binocular overlap is what allows us to perceive three dimensional space. Predators have a wide field of binocular vision at the expense of a significant blind spot. Conversely, chickens have two wide fields of monocular vision and a narrow band of binocular vision as a defense against predators. By allowing people to enter the virtual world and experience it as a chicken would the work provides the participants the opportunity to consider the chicken as more than just a commodity. By suggesting that chickens could be completely at ease in a virtual world the work engages the ethical debates of contemporary animal husbandry and humanity’s
increasing immersion into virtual worlds. Though a portion of the audience for this

Figure 6.2: *AgriNet Husbandry Environment*, 3D rendering of chicken with virtual reality headset.

work will get to wear the headset and experience the world as a chicken does, this will only be a small fraction of the potential audience for the work. Due to the experience of making *The Militant Gardener* function as art in the gallery throughout the initial phases of the *AgriNet Husbandry Environment* I have considered how to give a variety of potential audiences, whether they be online, in a gallery, at a film/video festival,
or possibly even at a convention that is appropriate to the work (as suggested above), access to the experience of the work, not just documentation of the work.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

My opening question was who is the militant gardener? Though *The Militant Gardener* started as a singular project, the project became a metaphor for my entire creative practice. The execution and exhibition of the various projects subsumed by *The Militant Gardener* have transformed how I think about making work. Two years ago I was primarily concerned with the art object. I had given little thought to how my works could live outside of their intended context.

Between the completion of *GRoW* and *The Militant Gardener* my documentation of the works evolved from documentation concerned with transmitting information about the work to documentation concerned with transmitting the experience of the work. This is an important step as much of my work cannot be directly experienced by an audience. This move to the theatrical for *The Militant Gardener* has impacted my work in general and though I still make objects I no longer see them as the whole of the project. They are the center around which the work rotates. All of the ephemera that orbits around the object (videos, writing, flyers, performances, etc.) create the space in which the object exists. They create a world for this object and tie the world of the artwork to our world.

I started this paper with *The Militant Gardener* Manifesto. This manifesto is an example of folding all of the ephemera related to a work of art back into the work
itself. The manifesto is an artist statement. Though written in a different form it serves the same purpose as an artist statement: it gives the audience a context for the work. However, in the case of the manifesto, it is also a part of the work.

When I arrived at OSU I felt compelled to make a particular kind of work, but I could not evaluate why I was compelled to make it. My aesthetic choices were blindly intuitive, and I could not explain why I chose to use one object in a work and not another. In my artist statements I struggled to distinguish what the subject of my art practice was. Initially, my motivation for creating GRoW came from the conflict between desiring to live sustainably and desiring to create New Media artworks, which, due to the toxic nature of electronics manufacturing, leave a heavy ecological footprint. GRoW is a technological act of generosity toward the Earth. Through discussion, critique, and writing I was able to discern that the questions the work raised that were interesting to me were not questions of ecological footprints or a specific act of generosity. I was much more interested in how we, as humans, choose to bestow generosity on one person and dehumanize another. Which is a question about human nature. Ecological crises and militancy are only lenses through which I examine our nature. This realization has allowed me to develop a mutable art practice devoted to the exploration of human nature through manifold topics and media. This can been seen in the three projects that are currently in production. The AgriNet Husbandry Environment looks at the future of animal husbandry, An Algorithm for Consciousness focuses on designing an artificially conscious entity, and The Tablets considers the fragility of data in the information age. The goal of each of these projects is to expose an aspect of our nature through the distinct topics they address.
When I arrived at OSU my art practice was an overgrown garden. Only through the research conducted while at OSU have I been able to prune back the myriad overlapping concepts and ideas that had developed in my practice to expose the core principle around which my practice rotates. Discerning the core principle of my art practice has given the practice the direction that it lacked and promises to supply a lifetime of diverse research.
Bibliography
