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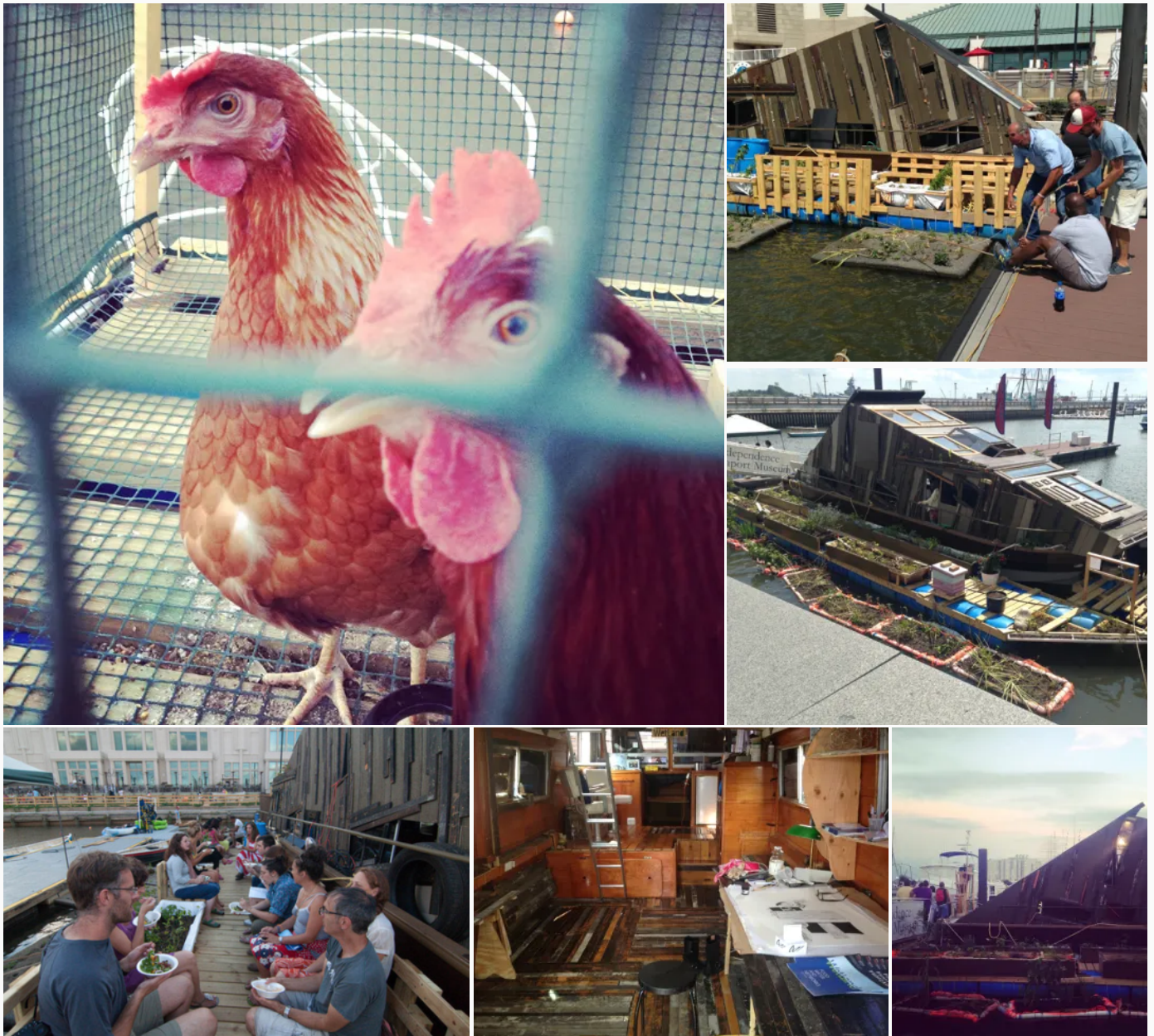
Mary Mattingly, *WetLand*

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Penn's Landing, through September 21

By Brian House



A few days ago, the long-anticipated [Apple Watch](#) was released. As a design object, it is, of course, impeccable, and only possible given the ever-increasing tempo of technological advance. It is an object from the future made real – and it is made obsolescent by its very existence, so we already anticipate the next iteration. This future – a shiny one marked by progress, speed, disposability, and new technologically-enabled freedoms – is an old one, not so different from that famously

articulated in 1909's *Futurist Manifesto*.

Yet even as we achieve totalizing technological visions – the universal knowledge of Google, the abundance of GMO crops, the global logistics of international trade – those visions have become more desperate, less believable. It is the curse of the anxious that they are not able to dream, and Kate Crawford has written of a new “[anxiety precipitated by “Big Data”](#)” (that most rarefied form of high-tech). It is a twinned fear. On one hand, we are frantic to gather more data in the belief that it will allow us to quell the hazards of an increasingly complex world, such as climate change and terrorism. On the other, we ourselves are trapped within an ever-more surveillance-focused society. The Apple Watch includes a biometric sensor through which we may message to each other our very heartbeats, a science fiction love-letter through which we might assure each other of our mutual presence, even as the watchful (and costly) infrastructure in between forms an unbridgeable gap. In this is the loss of what Bifo Berardi calls ‘[sensibility](#)’, and he bemoans that “[this faculty] which enables humans to understand ambiguous messages in the context of relationships might now be disappearing.” Can we dream of some other futurism?

It's worth remembering that Silicon Valley's history is entwined with what at first may seem like an incongruous sort of utopic vision. Steward Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, first published in 1968, embodied a DIY spirit of community and self-sufficiency through the dissemination of know-how and “access to tools”. It famously influenced Steve Jobs, among other later business innovators, who saw in it the potential that consumers would embrace high-technology. But the *Catalog* was in turn inspired by Brand's visit to an artist commune called [Drop City](#). Situated on the open plains of southern Colorado, the collection of multicolored Fuller-esque geodesic domes was home to an experiment in living as a work of art. Working with scavenged materials, rejecting cultural norms, and seeking a more honest and unconstrained way of life, the Drop Artists' idea of the future celebrated the *sensibility* of connection. Of course, at least in the immediate sense, Drop City was a failure. Overrun in just a few years by personal rifts, drugs, and even violence, the commune is now emblematic of a bygone era and its unfulfilled idealism, even while its unexpected progeny – our digital culture – ascended.

When viewing Mary Mattingly's photography and video work from several years ago, such as her

[Nomadologies](#) series (2007-2009,), the specter of Drop City is immanent in the repurposed technology and often dome-like structures that dot wind-swept land- (and water-) scapes. Yet these images, while invoking the same spirit of self-reliance, do so from the perspective of a failed future. What calamity has transpired is uncertain, but it clearly relates to Nature turned hostile by the negligence of unchecked human progress. The aesthetic is not a hopeful choice, then, but is reframed as a matter of survival. That Mattingly's emphasis is on temporary construction and marginal spaces suggests the uneasy culmination of Deleuzian deterritorialization, the removal of a cultural artifact from its original point of significance. Its dystopic appeal is that of science fiction writer Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren*, a detached sensuality of both psychological and geographical schizophrenia.

As Mary's work has progressed, she has increasingly chosen to move outside of the frame of the photograph to instantiate her prolific ideas in public performances and livable habitats. [Flock House](#) (2012), for example, is a series of modular and migratory housing units deployed throughout New York and Omaha as an alternate urbanism, geometric pods of wood and canvas clinging to the brick and concrete cityscape. The widely celebrated [Waterpod](#) (2011), a functional geodesic habitat afloat on a repurposed barge in the New York harbor, was complete with garden, chickens, and a resident artist community. The vast effort of such endeavors begs the question of the nature of Mary's investment in realizing them. Though maintaining a fantastical sense of beauty, they exceed the mandate of production for solely aesthetic purposes, and can only be understood as earnest, if temporary, attempts at alternative living. As something more than visions of ruin, are these domes motivated by a nostalgia for the failed utopian hopes fostered by communities like Drop City, or a heartfelt attempt to revive them?

[WetLand](#) (2014), currently active at Penn's Landing in Philadelphia as part of the FringeArts festival, is an iteration on the *Waterpod* concept. With the appearance of a house toppled and partially submerged in water, it offers a stark visual contrast to both the anachronistic grandeur of the historical military vessels anchored nearby and the banal facades of the Hyatt and Seaport Museum lining the shore. It is a sculpture, a habitat, and a provocation that includes a rainwater bathtub, a garden with ripening jalapeños, chickens, two beehives, solar power, a compost toilet, and, of course, wireless internet. Loose rafts of wetland plants extend from the main structure into the river, remediating its water with their growth – a gesture toward the precious role of wetlands in maintaining ecological balance and water itself as a resource that connects communities.

The ambition of eco-friendliness in Mary's work has attracted the interest from many quarters. Sustainable living, a nascent discourse in the days of Drop City, is nonetheless its echo, now fully ensconced in liberal ideology, whether the practices of the local food movement (which are, in a way, reactionary) or the more techno-centric, "bright green" approach that seeks solutions to environmental degradation through innovations in design. Flip to any page in the *Whole Earth Catalog* and you will see precedence for both. And, indeed, the array of Mary's myriad collaborators, from architects to beekeepers, local students to software developers to eco-punks, suggests an openness to participation by any interested party, the occasional prepper included.

That the institutional sponsors of *WetLand* might celebrate its 'futurism,' however, gives one pause, as the feasibility of the project as a progressive approach for eco-topic living is obviously questionable. And indeed the thought of the masses flocking to nautical habitats seems plausible only with the specter of a catastrophe, likely involving rising sea levels. If *WetLand* is dystopic, however, it is missing the melancholy. Each day Mary, the FringeArts staff supporting the project, and a crop of current resident artists (for a time, me included) talk to the public about the future, ecology, technology, and DIY. Kids, coast guard, native Philadelphians, and international visitors have all been drawn to the theater that is daily life on *WetLand*. On one lively day, for instance, the bees were kind enough to let me share fresh honey with passersby.

Such interactions reveal that the project functions best not as a model for living, but as a platform for discussion, open to multiple interpretations. That discussion easily exceeds the spatiotemporal bounds of the piece and slips into how we talk about 'habitat,' or maybe 'inhabiting' in general. Bees, reclaimed materials, collective living – here they are conversation starters about what is novel, tolerable, exciting, or uncomfortable for each of us, and what it is that makes a habitat permanent or transient relative to the diverse everyday conditions of *WetLand* visitors. At its root are questions of precarity (life lacking security and certainty) and privilege in an anxious world which are, of course, unevenly distributed.

Mattingly's role as provocateur, therefore, rests on her voluntarily entering a state of precarity, standing in for our collective precarity. A comparison might be made with her back-breaking work

[Pull](#) (2013), which has her dragging a huge ball of twine enclosing her belongings through the streets of New York. It is a more blunt manifestation of the labor also present in *WetLand*. In each, her (sisyphian) efforts are laid bare in an attempt to exist in conscious, embodied relation to her interdependencies with society. Rather than a polemic about how anyone should live, likely to be idealistic or patronizing, *WetLand* can thus be understood as the manifestation of what she has learned thus far, at times necessarily – but confidently – incomplete or misconstrued.

Critically, Mary's understanding includes the collaborations that she has cultivated to realize the work – from volunteers to engineers to institutional support – which ensures that *WetLand* is not a gesture of social refusal or a denial of technological utility. It might be seen alternately as an act of mapping. By starting from square one and examining her bare necessities, Mary is able to identify her personal, technological, and global interdependencies and hence aspire to creatively redefine them. The social engagement of the piece is thus at its most interesting when it gives visitors the tools to define a map of interdependence from our own perspectives, contributing to a communal network of expanding possibilities. Such an exercise invokes Frederick Jameson's "[cognitive mapping](#)," a call for an aesthetics that might render navigable a complex world. In this case, the map is built from the ground up by local knowledge and experience. While it might remain more limited in scope than Jameson had in mind, it nonetheless offers an agency that precludes our general anxiety.

Thus, unlike Big Data, it is not a matter of epistemological excess – gray areas on the map might be considered opportunities for connection rather than existential threats to total vision. Further, Mattingly's preemptive response to precarity is to cultivate deeper mutual value from relationships marked by sensibility – that is, those relationships that, in remaining undefined, might more readily form an adaptable and resilient community. This could be considered a form of pragmatic utopia. Like Drop City, it is free to imagine alternative modes of living, but it is also one that from the beginning is situated in the present and is aware of its failures, incompleteness, and inevitable dependencies in the face of a rising tide. While this might not be enough to restore our capacity to freely dream of the future, it points to a means of waking imagination.

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