



Courtney Moran and Mike Wolf planted popcorn. Little Bluff Farm, May, 2008.

Singing of the downward movement of skyscrapers

Skyscrapers, spy satellites, military occupations, super-max prisons (to isolate people and exacerbate mental disorders), these things are part of a movement, a back-to-the-land movement. I mean, someday these things will decompose, and end. We've seen sky-scrapers topple, satellites fall out of orbit, and decaying, abandoned military posts and prisons. The fact of their returning is not a question but a matter of destiny. But *how* they return or decompose, the particular path of that grand arc is not so much a foregone conclusion. I say it is a matter of culture.

Culture is biological.

Culture is an agent of decomposition, digestion, and metamorphosis. We see these eminent structures, how they seem to lord over people and places. They seem un-budging. But they are mere incomplete systems, they are linear--lines of great force; think of victory, the swoosh on a pair of shoes. They have gone up, how will they come down?

The coming down part, though it is predestined, is relegated into a void of consciousness, the systems don't incorporate that part. We don't think of it. The great line, the grand gesture, actually curves down, underground, seems like permafrost. Our eyes can't see where it goes, they don't know how. They haven't learned how. We'll do it differently as we learn to think of that part, which is not only wise, but is *also* predestined.

There are consequences to this lack of vision; it makes it easy for us to relegate more and more things into the permafrost, even people, their lives. It has become easy to believe that there are no contradictions in our life. Having a more true purview, a wiser outlook includes the existence of a thing and its passing, a contradiction. A contradiction to live through.

Someone has to have pointed it out already, the uncanny resemblance between the tragedy of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the spate of Hollywood films that emerged in the 1990's, employing digital effects (CGI) to violently, virtually destroy monuments of modern architecture. Asteroids, aliens, natural disasters, I was captivated by these spectacles. I spent considerable time watching, for example, the collapse of the Golden Gate Bridge in the crystalline clarity provided by the brand new consumer technology of my DVD player. I was staring into a crystal that presaged the future.

Culture is a crystal.

Culture is geological.

It has a geological timescale. There is a seed crystal, and larger crystals form around it. We gaze into them, multifaceted, refracting light. The crystals vibrate and resonate, they shatter and the shards form new seeds.

Geological and biological, the commonality here is the cyclical aspect--the contradictory aspect of a thing forming and decomposing. Culture is nature.

A sky scraper is made from rocks and things pulled out of the earth by people using large machines made from rocks and things. Some of the rocks and things are formed by the bodies of very old, decomposing plants and animals and people. Biology and geology meet underground and they meet again, above ground, in culture.

In the decade leading up to the decomposing of the World Trade Center our culture imagined it in the form of spectacular Hollywood movies, using emerging digital technology to paint the picture, CGI and DVD. Afterward we are seeing the emergence of some other ways of imagining the decomposition of these megastructures. These are like speculative documentaries, Alan Weisman's book, "The World Without Us" for example, trying to answer the question of just how would these things decompose upon our abandonment? It is a question of how will the potential energy bound in these structures dissipate?

What does it mean to have imagination trapped in an explosion? We are the choir and we sing a song of violent destruction. We keep turning it over in our imaginations: verse, chorus, verse. Of course. The chorus is that part that we keep going back to. It is silence, it is underground. Silence equals death. The chorus is a corpse.

There is a difference in the before and after, from

Hollywood to Weisman, and I don't think that placing 9/11 at the pivotal point of a change in the contemporary culture of apocalyptic imagery is an entirely arbitrary decision. Here in North America, at this moment, it is part of the cultural base of experience--a shattering cultural experience, when something we have worked so hard to hide from ourselves unquestionably reared it's head.

One thing that we can begin to understand through the experience of 9/11 is that apocalyptic conditions are imposed, man-made, if you will.

Now, a small leap, if you please:

Apocalyptic conditions are imposed by imperialism. Think of how Europeans colonized North America. They brought apocalypse upon this land. Apocalypse isn't any easy thing to recover from, sometimes this process involves starting up a casino or two. But casinos also decompose.

I am not making any legal arguments. While legal arguments can have great consequences the connection to the truth is merely tenuous, so particular that the situation is bound to be different the next time around. I can't work like this. I don't think anyone should have to hire a lawyer to understand this world. We are all capable of understanding the world with our own faculties, for free. But it is work. Anyway, the legal field is not mine, not at the moment.

We know that the War on Terror is a war for oil. So we know it is foolish because a war for oil is foolish. (Do you disagree? Do you think it is alright to kill people so you can drive your car to work? I think it is foolish to kill people to get to work. I think when it comes to killing people to maintain your way of living it is high time to start finding another way of living.) But we also know that terror is an emotion that emerges in individual bodies and despite the best

efforts of numerous dictators in the course of human history, it is clear that you cannot attack an emotion with guns and bombs, nor can you lynch it, ethnically cleanse it, or put it in a concentration camp. So this war on terror is a war that is foolish on two levels. It is a twice foolish war. It is each individual who must confront h/er terror. For some people it is done through an inner-war, for others it is a dinner party, yet others, maybe a pilgrimage. Kanye and Randy Newman and Chan Marshall sing.

Anyway, this war was declared ostensibly in response to 9/11, even though it is a war for oil, as I said. I am not the only one using 9/11 as a pivoting point. Actually, there was a war for oil before 9/11. It just hadn't found the convenient mask of the War on Terror yet. The war for oil has been an effort to control a place where people are getting really rich pulling rocks and things out of the earth. It is imperialist. It imposes apocalyptic conditions. To recover from an apocalypse some people (like you or me) have an urge to become militant fundamentalists, willing to kill people and die for what they believe. That's how fucked-up and disorienting apocalyptic conditions can be. Maybe casino's are a better approach. They are both destructive. But the solutions are also both temporary, destined to contradict themselves, decompose.

We can imagine other ways to bring down skyscrapers, aside from abandonment, and the explosive release of potential energy. It is a process of bringing it down to the ground, taking it back to the land. What are ways of calmly dismantling a megastructure?

Composting is a process whereby we feed surplus materials like kitchen scraps, newspapers, cardboard, or corn-based-plastic stuff, to micro-organisms,

bacteria and fungus (or macro-organisms, like worms or...what?) that live in the air and dirt. With the slightest encouragement they kindly transform this material into nutrient rich soil that we can use to grow and feed plants. And of course plants give us so many wonderful things: food, fuel, visual pleasure, shelter and so on. It is a complete, cyclical system, a fully conscious song, that need not depend upon any bureaucracy and makes no waste. What about the idea of taking a giant compost bin filled with all kinds of specialized micro-organisms and turning it upside-down on top of a skyscraper, a compost hat or a compost cocoon, to digest the skyscraper, making it into dirt to grow food or fuel or materials to build homes? I guess it would be good to remove all that glass first. This could be used to make thousands of geothermal and solar heated green houses to grow fruit year-round in northern climates. I'd rather work in a greenhouse than an office cubicle. I'd rather decompose a megastructure calmly and with care than leave it to a fiery, tragic collapse.

I read somewhere that in Chicago in the late 1800's (perhaps) bicyclists were some of the most vehement advocates for paving of the city streets. There was a photograph of nearly a hundred dashing, sporting, athletic, mostly wealthy looking, men all with the gleam of speed in their eye. It's a tad ironic, you could say, these early advocates for accommodating cyclists were not the least bit aware of the ecological consequences of the transportation technology for which they fought. These conceited macho types just wanted to go fast and do dangerous things like so many adolescent boys. I can't blame them, this is one aspect of the broad appeal of bicycles that kept me riding in my youth. My energy and vision are different on different bikes. If I'm on the right kind of bike I will habitually look for curbs and cracks in the

side-walk to pop off of, constantly taking jumps. It is a habit I formed as a boy on my bike and it literally changes my perception of the landscape. I had to buy an old Schwinn cruiser (1972, older than me, from the famous Working Bikes Co-op in Chicago), with a step through frame and wide, wide leisurely handle bars to break the habit of this aggressive style of riding.

You still find people today who feel bicycles are only for the adventuresome adolescent boy types and don't consider them the people's transportation that they are becoming. Are they really that much better than cars? As Dan Gleason said, "You can't think on those things!" My experience is that you can only think on a bike (at least the way Dan is talking about thinking) when you get out on an empty rural road that stretches for miles. In the city it's more nerve wracking than driving a goddamn car, generally. Though I have to say, I much prefer riding in the Twin Cities than I do in Chicago.

Bicycling as it stands, though, is still largely dependent on paved or fine gravel surfaces. We have these surfaces and the technology to deploy these surfaces with great rapidity not because of bicycles, but because of the automobile industry and the military industrial complex. The interstate highway system was sold to the federal government as part of a system of national defense, so the military could move weapons around the country quickly in the case of a twentieth century style war fought on U.S. soil (so to speak). The fact that we use it to take camping trips on memorial day weekend or whatever is practically an after thought. Roads are for weapons not people.

The amount of energy that goes into making and maintaining these paved places is staggering. They seem so immovable. If you try to break through a

concrete driveway with a sledge hammer you will be hard at work for some time and you will be quite exhausted when you finally break through. Yet when they are not used and maintained it is only a matter of months until the pavement will be largely obscured by vegetation and the material begins to work its way back into the soil, back underground where it came from, a common, sublime image. I am always arrested by an abandoned parking lot. The song of pavement is a destructive, energy intensive one. But even the making of a gravel road, you will see if you visit a gravel pit out in rural Minnesota, away from the interstate, represents a destructive process. A gravel road is also a verse in a song of destruction.

The permanence of a paved surface is an expensive fantasy; like all ground, when you observe it carefully enough, you will see that it is more like a shore. There is no stable surface, it is in constant flux, it is a zone of change and exchange. It is most evident in forests or well cared for farm land (which--do I need to say?--does not include conventional industrial monocrops). Underground there are organisms churning and digesting organic matter, making different nutrients and constantly moving material from one state of being to another. The plants bring this material up from below in their specialized ways. They shed leaves and fruit and the cycle continues. People and animals live entirely on this shore; we insert ourselves into these cycles by using this material. And if we die correctly--as St. Phocas, the patron saint of gardening, by composting himself in his garden--then we die in this shore too.

How do we insert ourselves, how do we touch this shore? How does it touch us? Is there liberty in this touching? The relationship that we have with this shore is the birth of our culture.



We hoed the popcorn about a month later. June, 2008.

In a conversation with my dad on the phone a few months back he told me that he was worried about bananas. He had recently read an article in the New York Times and according to my father's synopsis (I must admit I did not read the article) the writer argues that since they are not from here, that they are not grown in the climate of northern North America, that those of us who live here should not be eating bananas. What a provocative stance. Part of me is quite sympathetic with the notion that we should eat seasonally and locally and not eat food that requires tons of fuel to produce and ship long distances. No, wait I am not partially sympathetic to that idea, I think we need to do that. I think we need to remake our culture of nourishment so that it involves a much greater percentage of the population in the growing and making of food for people that are near to them. Greenhouses and gardens instead of warehouses and office cubicles. Instead of the toxic universe of nonsense office work, and the junky, pointless content it spews out, why not spend our

time and the energy of our minds understanding and producing our nourishment and that of the people who are near us? As far as bananas, there is something about the idea that we shouldn't eat them because they are not grown here that strikes me as unimaginative and puritanical. Why don't we grow bananas here? Why not, instead of allowing this very good idea of eating locally to feel oppressive and deprive us of the things we love, why not make this idea better by piling it on with liberty, with liberty of the imagination and of the body. Most people I know love bananas, here where we shouldn't eat them. How many people know the joy of pulling a piece of food that they love from the place it has grown? I recently dug potatoes for the first time and while I wouldn't expect this to happen all the time, it was an incredibly moving and joyful moment, to see living potato come out of the ground and shine in my hand. I am so grateful for the experience. The fantasy of devising a sustainable way of growing bananas in this climate--the pleasure of the creative experimentation--will provide a tremendous amount of gratification. It takes only one or two people to initiate it, but it will spawn wonderful networks for sharing knowledge and the pleasure of that knowledge--things like how to make a greenhouse and heat it responsibly, how to make and maintain soil for bananas, how to take care of the plants. And imagine all of the possible varieties we could have access to, instead of just the one type of banana we are familiar with at the grocery store.

As it stands the most common relationship with the land is highly dictated and controlled economically, this affects people's ability to imagine other possibilities. Look at the expansive mileage of corn and soybean fields in the Midwest. Go, look, walk around. It sucks. Can you imagine anything more

boring and oppressive? Aside from how incredibly boring it is, it is destructive and unhealthy, on numerous levels--from destroying water quality in local wells, streams, rivers and out into the Gulf of Mexico, to the high cancer rates in farmers and people living in agricultural areas, and the unhealthy food produced by the chemicals derived from these plants. I could go on and on listing problems with this system, but I have been ranting about this for some time now in my life and I am tired of it. So, one very simple argument against so-called conventional agriculture--to avoid those same rants--is that this way of relating to the land, as I said, is really, really boring!

I am not saying that I want relating to the land to be exciting like extreme sports with all the adrenaline and high-flying action. No, for the most part I find that very boring too, it's mostly about selling high-fructose-corn-syrup laden beverages to a population of youth already struggling with obesity and diabetes. I was a skater and spent thousands of hours riding a BMX bike in my youth. These things were not boring, they taught me ways of relating to my body and ways of dealing with authorities who felt my pleasure in these activities was undeserving of any place on the sidewalks or streets. I think there can be joy in relating to the land as there was joy in working with my body on my skateboard--an unfolding process of discovery and improvisation, working with the materials and landscape at hand, as well as socializing and sometimes being encouraged and helped by my friends.

I think there should be room for all kinds of idiosyncratic ways of relating to the land and making nourishment. Under our current conditions it is difficult to imagine the huge variety of possibilities. In three or four generations what we now think of as

rural areas, where all you find is corn and soy beans, each mile will bring different possibilities to life. People will live in many different ways, with different economic and social formations to relate to one-another and to neighboring areas. As you move through the countryside you will experience an array of people with different ways of housing each other, different ways of relaxing and entertaining each other, different plants and trees and animals that sustain them and keep them company. Instead of imposing control and dictating how land is used, let our desires for nourishment and the work that we do to fulfill them determine our relationship to the land.

Let us, as we must, learn of the indigenous histories of this place and how these cultures have managed to live in a variety of ways, for millennia, on this land. Let us learn how to revitalize the soil that is being depleted and killed by industrial agriculture. Let us transform the culture imposed upon us into cultures that belong to us. Let us deal calmly with the inconveniences and vicissitudes that this kind of transformation brings, as it really isn't so bad and it will only get more difficult the longer we put it off. Let us learn what it means to nourish one another. And let us do so with the understanding that all things decompose...

especially monoculture.

Mike Wolf
Summer, 2008



The popcorn tasseled and pollinated itself. Late July, 2008.

love and thanks to courtney, family, and the other domestic struggle part three contributors, from the soil to the gallery.

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On Starting a Radical, Sustainable, Urban Co-op: An invitation sent to a large list of activists and cultural workers in July, 2008

Mark Shipley

I was recently booth-hopping at 2 big fairs in the Midwest: the Green Festival in Chicago, and the Midwest Renewable Energy Fair in northern Wisconsin- the biggest renewable energy fair in the country. Careening down the aisles of vendors and exhibitors, perusing an array of slickly marketed, industrial technologies that will purportedly allow us to transition into a "sustainable" society and future, I began to wonder about the implications of these technologies. Envisioning a culture or society where everybody partakes in these new technologies as the solution for the future, I began to wonder about all of the material, energy, resources, human energy, etc that goes in to all of these products and systems. When I began to inquire into the embodied energy in all of these products (that's all of the energy and

material used from beginning to end in the entire life cycle of the product from resource extraction and design to disposal), and into the materials needed to make them, many if not most of the vendors did not understand, did not know, or could not grasp the extent of the life cycles of these products. They did not seem to comprehend the magnitude of the industrial system on which those products depend, and often staggered a bit at the line of questioning, for it exposed the whole premise and aura of these events: the perception of sustainability. Sustainability has been spun.

At an informal gathering during the fair, earnestly confused at the wide array of deceptively sustainable technologies available to homeowners, I ran into midwest permaculturist Mark Shepard and asked him what type of building heating system he thought was the best and most feasible for a long-term future. He told me that every house in this country, at a bare minimum of design, should have solar thermal heat—that is, hot water and in-floor heating using sun energy.

So, I wonder, what are we doing? What are we waiting for? If us progressives— young, living in co-ops, working for non-profits, trying to live responsibly— cannot even make the changes necessary that every American more or less must make if we do not want to be gunning each other down from state to state over food, water, and fuel access in the future, then who will?

In my conversations with people in the last few months on the topic of a land-based housing cooperative in Chicago, I have gotten some major impressions from people. Mainly: 1) that people have not given too much energy and time thinking about what their long-term living situation will be, their vision for the type of healthy community that they

would like to live in, or their futures; 2) that people do not seem to have a very realistic critique or analysis of the changes that we need to make personally in order to not die or kill each other in this country and on this planet; and maybe 3) I suspect that most people especially in my generation have a rather weak sense of home, place, and grounding. I have also noticed that there are a lot of out-of-towners in Chicago, a transient population that does not envision staying in this area of the world or being rooted here, including many people who are a part of the "sustainability" or environmental movement.

This summer I have been spending more time than ever working with plants and food. I have been gardening a lot, but mostly harvesting— from the waste at the end of farmers' markets, from dumpsters, from landscaping and other edible food and medicine plants throughout the city, in wild places, on farms. In these activities, I have noticed the sheer amount of abundance that exists now that is being overlooked, ignored, underused, and flagrantly wasted. I have been meanwhile participating in the weekly Tuesday Hull House Museum "Rethinking Soup" events. At the last event we were talking about alternative farming practices. We ran out of time for comments, as often happens at these short events, but I wanted strongly to comment that the best thing that we can do now, regardless of responsible farming practices, is to participate in the direct meeting of our needs through interaction with food. This applies as well to shelter, fuel, and fiber.

The discourse around sustainability is weak. It is severely limited within the industrial paradigm, and that is because it is an extremely powerful, alienating, and dark thing to look at our culture and

admit that every aspect of it is resting on an impossible foundation. That foundation has more to do with our consciousness and our relationships than it does with any technical or material questions which the modern discourse around environment and sustainability would have us believe. In order for a culture to sustain itself over any significant period of time (to use a popular and wise marker, at least seven generations ahead of our own), that culture must have folk knowledge of its place and surroundings. Folk knowledge is knowledge passed from generation to generation, household to household, widespread and populist, colloquial and popular. Common knowledge, common sense.

Social justice activists everywhere: in order to survive we must become an agrarian society once again. This means that we all have to start having relationships with land, plants, animals and food. More, if not most of us have to participate on some level in the harvest and raising of food. There is no way around it. Industrialized agriculture can not sustain itself. We are wasting, squandering, and therefore losing soil and water at breakneck speed. More people need to be interacting with land, plants, animals, and food or we will die. There are simply not enough people right now doing the work- with and on land- that needs to happen in order for us to survive. Inefficient, "labor-saving" (those are not oxy-morons) machinery that us urbanites rely on cannot be sustained. The average farmer is over 55 years old and few are stepping up to replace and relieve them. The soil is being mined, the water is being mined.

What does this have to do with an urban co-op house? I believe, at this point in time, that in order for a household to meet the demands of the work, structure, and maintenance that go into a model of more sustainable living, that the household must be

co-operative, because co-operation is the only way that we can sustain. A rental structure would not work for the level of engagement and participation needed to maintain such a house. I believe that, although many people do not want to commit to the work that needs to be done, we cannot continue to prop ourselves up on hands-off systems of natural gas, electric appliances, switches, buttons and handles that so conveniently allow us ample time for our other work and play. The work is at home. The work is creating home. That is the work that we must do now.

It has been difficult to find anyone who wants to commit to this type of work. Masonry and rocket stoves. Passive solar thermal systems, tankless water heaters. Greywater, dry toilets, composting, harvesting and food processing, remodeling. We want other people to do this work, but right now almost nobody is doing it. We can't rely on other people to do it, we have to do it ourselves, because nobody else will do it for us. Almost nobody is doing it, and yet it must get done for our very survival. Perhaps if we realize that this is an issue of survival, more people will begin to do this work.

I invite you to join me in living in such a place, and doing the work needed to make it happen. These are basic technologies that will have to one day become folk knowledge in order for our survival and sustainability. I have done some preliminary research into all of these technologies and into properties and codes, but the road is long and I need some help. Can we help each other?

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