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Renegotiating Space

by [John Motley](#)



In the wake of the digital age, most discussions of space orbit around the virtual: namely, how ever-accelerating means of communication flatten (or at least shrink) distance and geography. But physical space—particularly, the evolution of the modern city—has undergone a similar flattening effect. As cities have continued to expand outward, creating suburbs of suburbs and encroaching on rural areas, the clean distinctions between the urban and the rural have eroded. The German architect and urban planner Thomas Sieverts has dubbed these new landscapes "Zwischenstadt," or "in-between cities." Largely informed by the writings of Sieverts, *Suddenly: Where We Live Now*, co-organized by writer Matthew Stadler and Cooley Gallery curator Stephanie Snyder, is an ongoing examination of the new shape of cities and the social imaginations they inspire.

"In the 1990s, Diana George, Charles Mudede, and Lisa Robertson, among others, began writing interesting evocations of the landscapes of city/sprawl, and they made me think more about the whole fabric of where we live," says Stadler of the project's origins. "At the same time, I wrote a piece called 'I Think I'm Dumb' about the possible shapes, logic, and culture of a place like this. Writing went on for a decade and it became clear that we lacked a good vocabulary for the things we were trying to describe. Around 2004, I convened a group to deliberately work on developing better descriptions."

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Suddenly: Where We Live Now
 Cooley Gallery at Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock, through Oct 5; opening reception and "Psychedelic Sprawl," Sun Sept 21, 5-7 pm (at Cooley), 7-10 pm (at Reed Student Union)



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Working with Snyder, Stadler parlayed that dialogue into a proposal for the Paul G. Allen Foundation, suggesting an exhibition and publication as a way to make sense of these new landscapes. The result—or at least its first fruits—comprises exhibitions at both Reed's Cooley Gallery and Milepost 5, tours of 2008 *Whitney Biennial* artist Fritz Haeg's locally installed *Animal Estates*, a forthcoming reader, and a symposium with Sieverts and Cincinnati Art Museum Director Aaron Betsky in early October. In fact, *Suddenly's* scattershot activities sprawl in much the same way as the subject of its investigation. It's a kind of living, breathing project that is taking place out in the world as much as it is inside a gallery—a notion evident in the work collected in the main exhibition at the Cooley, where notions of "inside" and "outside" are emphatically reversed.

The first work a viewer encounters is a handful of photographs from Zoe Crosher's *Transgressing the Pacific, LA-Like* series. Each image depicts a site of disappearance, where celebrities, such as Natalie Wood or Beach Boy Dennis Wilson, have drowned in the ocean. Haunting and cinematic, Crosher's photographs are, ultimately, tidy and conventional representations of an unknowable wilderness. The show's other inclusions, however, complicate those boundaries. Michael Damn's videos replicate the frantic bustle and monotony of an urban transit center in a sequestered corner of the gallery. New York-based photographer Marc Joseph Berg offers a kind of catalyst for instant environmental makeovers with a series of posters for visitors to take and disseminate throughout the community.

Haeg's fifth installment of his *Animal Estates* project, which attempts to reintroduce native species into urban contexts, is manifested in a towering snag, a structure designed to house seven distinct species. But no entry in the exhibition illustrates this tension as poignantly—or as violently—as Eli Hansen's hand-made axe, which he and his brother Oscar Tuazon used to build a dwelling in a remote part of Kodiak Island, Alaska. Like some bizarre variation of a bon voyage ritual, he effectively christened the exhibition with it. "When Eli delivered the axe, he asked me where I wanted him to put it," says Snyder. "As a curator, I have a responsibility to protect the artists' work, but I also have control over the room itself. So I told him to drive it into the wall."

Now, the axe rests against the wall, several gashes of varying depth above it and a pile of powdery dry wall beneath it.

Snyder and Stadler expect the project will stretch into the future, continuing the dialogue in new places and through myriad disciplines. For example, the entire exhibition travels south to the Pomona College of Museum of Art in January and, after that, individual works will travel to Paris, Berlin, and Shanghai through the spring of 2010. In the meantime, the intriguingly titled "Psychedelic Sprawl" event takes place at Reed on Sunday, September 21. So what sort of spatial renegotiation will that entail?

"Books for sale, music, food and drink, disorientation and fun, carefully chosen words, some of them beautiful, bright smiling faces, a bong loft with a puppet theater," explains Stadler. "The usual."

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