

M. Simon Levin  
C.H.A.R.T.

## **Exorbitant Bait**

BY MARGOT LEIGH BUTLER

### **Shifting Vision: the importance of metaphor in the recent work of M. Simon Levin**

BY CAROL GIGLIOTTI



## ***Exorbitant Bait***

**Margot Leigh Butler**

My father, who grew up in the '30s, he always used to tell us that he was starving and he used to walk to school barefoot in 10" of snow for 5 miles uphill in both directions, and stuff like that. He didn't have no truck with you playing around with your food but the only thing that we were able to interrupt our mealtime for was if you had a bite on your rod and then you had a cheering section, my mother and my sister and my father would all be clapping and whooping and hollering as you ran like crazy down to the beach to a rod that was almost being

M. Simon Levin  
*C.H.A.R.T.*, 2003

mixed media installation  
(detail: aerial photograph on transparency)

SAG 2004.02.01

pulled into the river.... And they would join in on cheering you on the fight, 'cause of course we ate them, we ate the fish, so, we did lots and lots and lots of fishing.

C.H.A.R.T. interview (timecode 22:08)

*C.H.A.R.T.* artist M. Simon Levin wants to take me, to take us, to the river. He likes to talk almost as much as he likes to listen, wholly, in every way he can. The conversation we have in his truck on the way to the mighty, muddy Fraser, what we talk about as we stroll through long grasses toward the river's edge, the half-remembered stories which poke into this unusual afternoon: all of these, embodied, moving ahead, are also sent upward, caught by satellite and

later, back at the gallery TechLab, traced in scant orange ink onto a photo of frothy jade river-waves. Since I've hung this photograph in my hallway, I travel that afternoon daily, its orange line giving away our speed, mis-steps, pauses, but keeping private our content.

Installed in the corridor outside the Surrey Art Gallery TechLab, we're invited to put on headphones and listen to the stories which many people told Simon and his collaborators, Theresa Hutton and Alex Konyves, about their rivers. While listening, people slip past and into the gallery, like fish along the polished hallway and into the gallery's net—at that



M. Simon Levin, *C.H.A.R.T.*, 2003, mixed media installation (dimensions variable) SAG 2004.02.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

time, an exhibition called “Rivers,” in celebration of the International Year of Fresh Water.

For the future of the environment it’s very important to maintain wildlife corridors and they’re best maintained along streams.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 45:15)

While standing in this public interspace listening, privately absorbed, the voices of passersby mingle with the storytellers’ which also, through editing, interrupt and overlay each other. Then, unexpectedly, there’s only the sound of rushing water which draws attention to the black and white rivers running on the bank of small surveillance monitors further down the hallway.

The sound of water can enhance well-being, calm anxiety, slow rushed time. While writing this essay, I had the *C.H.A.R.T.* DVD playing on my computer, and I enjoyed the sound of shallow water shirring over polished river rocks. Later I discovered that the DVD has no audio, and that I’d been communing with the sound of my computer’s fan.

“Anecdote” and “theory” carry diametrically opposed connotations: humorous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general. Anecdotal theory would cut through these oppositions in order to produce theory with a sense of humor, theorizing which honors the uncanny detail of lived experience.

*Anecdotal Theory*, Jane Gallop, page 2.

Here is the first *C.H.A.R.Tale*, though perhaps it’s not the first one you may have heard on the audio component loop:

I remember one freshet particularly in May and June that it uh, gross story, it brought a brown horse down the river. And the horse I

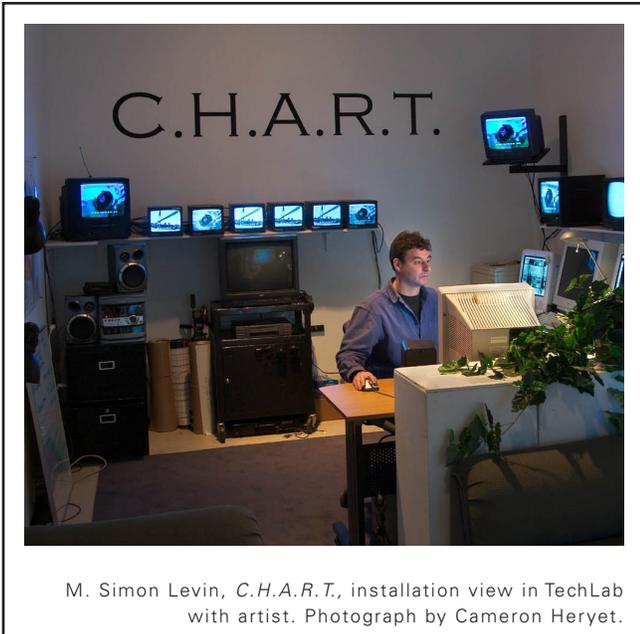
guess fell into the river further upstream and drowned or died but it had bloated up like a rubber raft—big huge belly on it—and floated into that back eddy and it was there for about three weeks. And we used to row across to go swimming and we used to gross out all the people that came down by sitting on this horse. We’d climb, two of us would sit on the horse and ride around—mind you we were stark naked at the time—but the people just couldn’t believe that we were sunbathing, floating around on the back eddy on a dead horse.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 00:00)

The genre of this story crosses reminiscence with Kwikwetlem First Nation history, for starters; its status as a ‘true account’ may hinge on its teller, and there are thirty-five (unseen) speakers—including Joe Kambitz, quoted above—each with different and specific perspectives, experiences, interpretations, cultures, desires, voices, accents and aged from 8-80. Such representivity is a technique and method—in social research and in ethnography, the writing of cultures—and it’s also a politic: the commitment to representing difference and connection is the hallmark of much work in ‘identity politics’ over the past fifty years or so. In this context, offering so many different speakers and so many genres of stories promises that no matter who listens, somewhere along the line they’re bound to get caught.

The whole world, we are told, is waking up to the importance of water. It’s all one big system whether it’s salt or fresh water. And we’re slowly waking up to it but whether we’re going to wake up in time or not, I don’t know.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 28:51)



M. Simon Levin, *C.H.A.R.T.*, installation view in TechLab with artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

The practice of artists linking people is part of several art and activist movements. In ‘community arts’, local projects emerge from, animate and connect communities.<sup>1</sup> Some community arts projects are also cultural activist works in which political concerns, such as environmental issues, are addressed and expressed through cultural forms and figures of speech:<sup>2</sup>

We were gathering little, we called them minnows, they were little baby salmon. I can remember filling this jam tin and taking it home to show our mother, and she said “Oh, well that’s very nice, now take them home and put them carefully back” and we went back to this creek where we’d caught them, and a neighbour girl who usually played with us came along and she was upset because we hadn’t called on her to go and catch the minnows and, um, she kicked the can over and if you talk about “no use crying over spilt milk” well there’s not much use crying over spilt minnows either because you can’t,

there’s not much way you can safely gather them back up, I learned.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 15:56)

Her anecdote speaks to a sense of ‘nature’ lost—even plundered and squandered—through human involvement, as do these:

If it’s allowed to work, it works well. If the human animal interferes, it doesn’t work so well. [laughs]

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 36:00)

I can remember in my day watching them back up a garbage truck and dump their garbage straight into the Fraser. And I know that I’ve read that the refuse on the river was sometimes so dense that it looked as though you could walk across it.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 38:47)

At the same time, there’s the chance that, through awareness, education and activism, better environmental practices can prevail:

Like, most people won’t know that if you wash your car near a storm drain the soap water will go in the creek....At a community event I was talking to a little boy while he was colouring his fish hat and we were talking about storm drains and how everything that goes down the storm drain goes directly in the creeks and he was nodding vigorously as though he knew exactly what I was saying and when we finished our conversation and started to walk away he turned to his mother who was standing behind him and said “See Mom, I told you weren’t supposed to wash your car there!”

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 28:21)

In this anecdote and the following one, the environmentalist figure of the ‘child educating the adult’ works with the elder(ly) ‘figure of experience’ to embody times of significant change. But, before ‘meeting’ the elderly fisher, this may be a good moment to flag how anecdotes are shaped—tensely and tenuously—into narratives in *C.H.A.R.T.* which effectively, and even exorbitantly, bait audiences to see themselves as participants in a larger story about rivers.

An anecdote is the account of a single incident, a single moment. But as narrative, anecdote may also tend to elicit an urge to embed the incident in a larger story. Such an urge would lead us away from contact with the singular moment into all-too-familiar directions—conventional narrative arcs, standard plots. This contradiction between capturing the singular moment and a drive to insert the moment within a familiar plot may be not just a problem for this particular story but a tension intrinsic to the anecdote.

*Anecdotal Theory*, Jane Gallop, page 85.

Times’ve changed a lot. Gears became more efficient as time went and that turned out to be one of our downfalls today ‘cause now we’re so restricted we hardly fish at all. We used to fish five days a week, fish or no fish, with linen nets. Then we got more efficient and more efficient and then it was 4 days a week and 3 and the last few years that I fished I fished 2 days or 1 day or 3 days maybe 5 days on the river maximum.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 22:53)

This story continues:

It’s been a fun life for me. I wouldn’t have done anything else. We never got very rich doing it but we had the richest life you could ever imagine, you against Mother Nature and out fishing there, it’s just been something else.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 23:40)

The phrase ‘you against Mother Nature’—because of how it jars against environmentalist ideologies—raises questions about how the *C.H.A.R.T.* ‘interviewees’ were selected or self-selected, and how the ‘interviews’ were conducted and edited, for certainly this phrase could have been edited out. Then again, perhaps it reveals a good deal about the role of ethnography in *C.H.A.R.T.*.

Contemporary ethnography—which is now of wide interdisciplinary interest—pays attention to the relations between power and knowledge in writing cultures: who, and which knowledge, is considered



M.Simon Levin, *C.H.A.R.T.*, installation detail.  
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

valuable, by whom, and for what reasons and purposes? And how is it represented? This is a politics of representation in which homogeneity (i.e. 'unmarked' positions) stands out, difference and representivity (such as the wide array of people represented on the *C.H.A.R.T.* audio loop) is attended to and knowledges are deftly, critically situated. The figure and practice of the 'artist as ethnographer'—gathering knowledge from social subjects/participants through 'fieldwork' and writing cultures in many technologies—was emphasized by anthropologist James Clifford in his landmark book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988) and again by cultural theorist Hal Foster in the chapter entitled "The Artist as Ethnographer" in his *The Return of the Real* (1996). Clifford's proposal, re-stated in the visual art anthology *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (2000) after reading Foster's account, "argues that the space of cultural representations is populated by differently situated authorities, producers, not simply conduits, of self-reflexive 'cultural' knowledge." (page 57)

My grandmother... picked blueberries at Pitt Poulder when she was a young girl. Now, Pitt Poulder is the confluence of the Pitt River and the Fraser, there's a big swampy area in there, and it never used to be diked, and the sturgeon would be through there, in fact, today, it's called Sturgeon Slough, in behind that dike. Well my grandmother's story is that she was picking blueberries with her mother, as a young girl, and in the evening, and hot, because you pick blueberries in June, and July, wild berries and high bush and low bush blueberries, and she wanted to have a bath and so she took off all her clothes and waded into a slough and sat on a log to

wash her feet and the log turned out to be a sturgeon. She sat on it and when it took off, thrashing, it cut all the back of her legs, her rear end, and she had scars that were 3" long and she had a row of them about 4 wide running down the back of her legs. And that's the story...

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 9:43)

In this story, the familiar becomes unfamiliar; indeed, such 'defamiliarization' makes this story. Defamiliarization is a technique and practice in arts movements such as Situationism, an influential arts/political movement which produces 'constructed situations' so that participants can see freshly what they're part of personally, culturally and politically. *C.H.A.R.T.* practices defamiliarization by constructing situations—like the elaborate technological installations inside and outside the TechLab—which hope to encourage you to be taken to the river by the artist and mark differently something you've likely done many times before; to see it freshly and have a different relation with it, and with the artist. Some constructed situations give rise to and rely upon 'relations,' as does "relational aesthetics," a curatorial formulation proffered by art's current philosopher-king Nicolas Bourriaud:

Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.

*Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud, page 22.

And we would think nothing of taking our coffee mugs and dipping them in river water and drinking it. I know I wouldn't wish to do that today. And I don't think other people would. And so that is partially the river that

got into my system and of course I lived around the bog for 45 years.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 24:51)

Bourriaud positions his relational aesthetics partly via Situationism: “The work that forms a “relational world,” and a social interstice, updates Situationism and reconciles it, as far as it is possible, with the art world.” (pages 84-85) Relational aesthetics’ stated formal interests pertain to work inside gallery contexts, but it may also be practiced by artists who work outside gallery contexts, or, like C.H.A.R.T., deliberately move between the two. One key difference between Situationism and ‘relational aesthetics’ may turn out to be relational aesthetics’ commitment to political effectiveness, compared to the stated revolutionary politics of Situationism, where the point isn’t just to construct situations which defamiliarize the world, but to change it.<sup>3</sup>

Two Situationist<sup>4</sup> practices which *C.H.A.R.T.* participates in are ‘psycho geography’ and the

‘dérive:’ both focus upon the effects of geographical environments on subjects’ emotions, moods, perceptions and behaviours (the definition of psychogeography<sup>5</sup>)—for instance, what effects and relations transpire when gallery goers take a GPS-recorded trip with Simon between the Surrey Art Gallery and the Fraser River, and then go ‘aimlessly drifting’ (the definition of a ‘dérive’<sup>6</sup>) upon the water? Or perhaps they stay on foot, and drift along the shore.

Artists and writers have cultivated critical and creative practices of ‘walking’—through both rural and urban landscapes—for some time, perhaps most famously through Thoreau’s countryside ‘saunterer’ (figured in his germinal 1862 essay “Walking”) and the emblematic Modernist urban figure of the (bourgeois) flâneur or, more recently, the (female) flâneuse. Alone and with companions (and sometimes in Situationist-inspired ‘constructed situations’), writers walk with pens<sup>7</sup> and artists walk with sketch pads and cameras<sup>8</sup>



M. Simon Levin, *C.H.A.R.T.*, installation detail.  
Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

and, increasingly, new communications technologies. Last autumn there was a two day festival of Art and Psychogeography in Vancouver called “PreAmble” where Simon presented *S.A.L.T.*, his collaboration with Laurie Long in which farmers in an Australian outback community donned GPS bandoliers to re-map their relations with their hyper-salinated land.

Much of the argument I am making regarding the un-mapping, re-mapping and counter-cartographies to be found within contemporary art practices revolves around the structures and signifying systems by which knowledge is organized and conveyed.

*Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*,  
Irit Rogoff, page 73.

*C.H.A.R.T.*'s gallery set-up is a fictional mapping and monitoring station inside the TechLab, complete with staff (the artist), confident outside signage and prominently displayed imaging and listening technologies. By appropriating the institutional aesthetics of a mapping and monitoring station—inside and out—Levin has implicated the structures and signifying systems by which ‘environmental knowledge’ is organized and conceived: the installation is part environmental awareness agency and part ‘security post,’ part listening-station and part lure. It accomplishes this effect through exorbitant, multi-aspect and multi-media installation art techniques:

site-specificity, arrangement of components which audiences move through, scale, gesture, timeliness (being installed in the corridor leading to the “River” exhibition during the International Year of Fresh Water), and careful and innovative use of aesthetics, materials and established cultural meanings.

Anecdotal theory would base its theorizing on exorbitant models.

*Anecdotal Theory*, Jane Gallop, page 7.

*C.H.A.R.T.* is exorbitant: exceeding in intensity, quality, amount or size the customary or appropriate limits; excessive. It's exorbitant bait, luring audience-participants to accept Simon's offer to be taken to the river, to have unexpected conversations and swap stories, to re-map, in scant orange ink (which may later evoke memories of this unusual experience) their relations with their rivers.

When you go out to catch a fish it's an unseen thing, that fish is underwater, and you're using lures for sports fishing or commercial gear, but you have to know the river and the bottom or you'll lose your net.

*C.H.A.R.T.* interview (timecode 20:03)



M. Simon Levin, documentation of canoe trip to map GPS data for *C.H.A.R.T.*, courtesy of the artist.

## Notes

- 1 Much of Levin's art and pedagogical practice is part of community arts; for instance, see the Collective Echoes catalogue (see Works Cited). For a sense of current Canadian community arts practice, see "Documenting Engagement: A Community Artists' Media Institute" <https://icasc.ca/resources/documenting-engagement-community-arts-media-institute>
- 2 See Nina Felshin's *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* and Margot Leigh Butler's "Making Waves":
- 3 Of course, this is a play on Karl Marx's renowned "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."
- 4 Please see Karen Elliot's essay "Situationism in a Nutshell" by Karen Elliot on <http://www.barbelith.com/cgi-bin/articles/00000011.shtml>
- 5 "The *dérive* was an experimental practice of unitary urbanism and is translated as 'drift' in English. The practice is effectively to wander aimlessly and without destination through the city, soaking up its ambiances. Psychogeography was used to describe the study of the urban environment's effects on the psyche. The SI produced psychogeographical reports based on the results of their *dérives*." <http://www.barbelith.com/cgi-bin/articles/00000011.shtml>.
- 6 For instructions, see Situationist Guy Debord's "The Theory of the *Dérive*" <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/314>.
- 7 "Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture"; Lisa Robertson, Clear Cut Press, 2003.
- 8 See, for instance, "Don Gill Walks"; exhibition catalogue essay by Salvador Alanis from Gill's show "Axis of Coincidence" at Gallery 101, Ottawa, 2004. The essay is posted on <http://www.gallery101.org/exhibits/axis-coincidence>

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***Shifting Vision: the importance of metaphor in the recent work of M. Simon Levin***

**Carol Gigliotti**

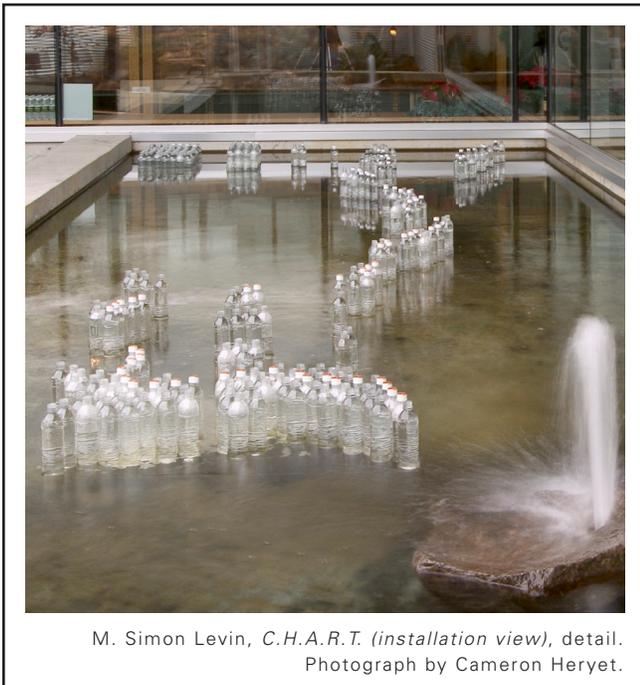
The rivers. The land. What are these things to us anymore? How do we, who live in the cities, or the subdued versions of the cities, the suburbs, envision these “things” on which our lives depend? Do we think about them at all? And if we do, are they merely objects of use, regulated to that corner of our consciousness where things needing fixing are located: the washing machine, the car, those extra pounds, the environment?

This approach, while exaggerating and oversimplifying the kinds of thinking about the natural environment of the average inhabitant of say, Canada, the U.S., France or Australia, does highlight related and disconcerting observations about current public feeling about the natural world. In the industrialized world, a gap has appeared between the commonly

accepted knowledge of increasing environmental degradation and the actuality of doing something about it. Aside from very real economic and political obstacles serving as obstructions to environmental action, one hears a profound fatalism in discussions about the environment, a hopelessness for what has been lost, and that does not bode well for the shift in consciousness needed for real change. A number of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists have been looking more deeply into possible reasons for that significant gap between the awareness of environmental loss and a commitment to acting upon it.<sup>1</sup>

In her book, *Reordering the Natural World*, the anthropologist, Annabelle Sabloff, surveys what she calls “active forfeitures:” what we give up as part of the contract we have accepted as the price of cultural order.

Nature, it would appear, gets a name, a shape, and a weight as we feel ourselves separating from it. Having lost touch with our own creaturely nature we feel removed from the whole, until finally, in its latest incarnation, nature becomes ‘environment:’ a stage-set, a backdrop to human life. But now that this backdrop is damaged, and willful, and reactive in ways a backdrop usually is not, we have had to begin to question this metaphor for nature and our relationship to it. We have found to our bewilderment that our loss of the use of metaphors from the natural world has resulted in a dulled, ill-equipped imagination, with significant consequences for our ability as a society to deal with our current environmental problems.<sup>2</sup>



M. Simon Levin, *C.H.A.R.T.* (installation view), detail.  
Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

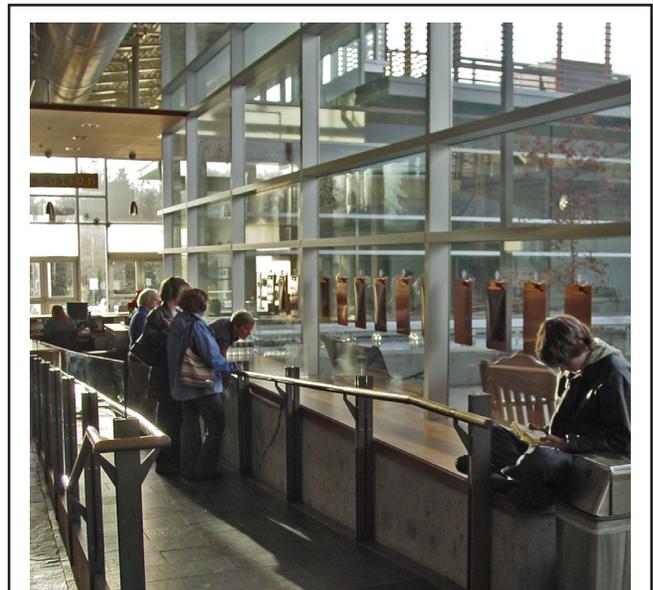
Sabloff's description of the currently predominant metaphor for nature as 'environment' in place of the embodied metaphors of the natural world points to a compelling explanation for the gap between our recognition of natural devastation and our commitment to doing anything about it.

This explanation has everything to do with the importance of embodied metaphors in our perception of meaning in the world.<sup>3</sup> As so many of our current metaphors emerge from the constructions of market rationality and reliance on technological efficiency (or, more likely, the promise of efficiency), metaphors of intrinsic worth of the natural world are eclipsed. Perceiving the natural world as primarily a resource, in the case of market needs, or as a less efficient developer of genetic evolution, in the case of technological efficiency, generates metaphors and meaning disconnected from metaphors of embodied experience in the natural world. In turn, the loss of these experiences, and related metaphors, leaves us with a paucity of imaginative tools and experiences. The rationality of market and institutional constructions based primarily on goals of economy and urban life has constricted, in many cases, digital metaphors from including natural experiences, and hence, severely limited emergent imagination about the natural world.

Contemporary art, while involved with social change, has been preoccupied with the effects of culture and artifact, and most recently, in no small part, with the effects of digital culture. There has been a recent increase, however, in the visibility of artists whose work involves issues and concerns about the natural world. Many of these current works are quite different from the work of Earthworks artists of the early sixties or Land Art of the seventies in which artists used the natural landscape as sculptural

material, or brought to it new unnatural objects. The goals of artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim and Walter De Maria, had more to do with questioning the established notions of artistic objects and the contexts of modernism than with relating to the natural environment itself.<sup>4</sup>

Precedents for current artistic involvement with the natural world, however, can be seen in environmental artists, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Betty Beaumont, Agnes Denes, Helen Mayer Harrison, Bonnie Sherk, Mel Chin and Mark Dion. These artists have been particularly interested in the health of the natural environment and providing communities with opportunities to shift their relationship with that environment. They achieve this through a number of similar strategies: personal involvement with the communities involved, involvement with scientists and/or municipal agencies, who are often the gate keepers of environmental policy change, proposing or actually initiating reclamation projects for the land or water involved, and public educational components.



Visitors viewing and listening to C.H.A.R.T. components installed in the lobby and courtyard. Photograph by Cameron Haeryet.

While these strategies are just now being accepted as part of an aesthetic agenda, the most important, and sometimes hidden, aspects of their work are the embodied metaphors upon which these strategies rest.

The deeply experienced metaphor of water, whether compromised or absent, percolates through both of the recent works of M. Simon Levin, and therefore highlights one of the most important and paradigmatic realities of our time, the battle over water. Vandana Shiva relates the contrasting examples of Pepsi's plastic bottled line of water, Aquafina, being sold on the train from Delhi to Jaipur while on the streets Jal Mandirs (water temples) give water from earthen pots as a free gift to the thirsty. She comments:

This was a clash between two cultures: a culture that sees water as sacred and treats its provision as a duty for the preservation of life and another that sees water as a commodity, and its ownership and trade as fundamental corporate rights.<sup>5</sup>



M. Simon Levin outside of the TechLab. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

In North America, where the notion that water is a commodity has appeared, one looks fruitlessly for a working water fountain and feels propelled towards the sinking conclusion that even the most basic of needs is up for sale. It was not always this way.

In *C.H.A.R.T. (Confluence Hub of Art, Rivers and Technology)*, the people interviewed by M. Simon Levin and his collaborators (two students mentored by Levin), Theresa Hutton and Alex Konyes, talk a great deal about their relationships with the rivers flowing throughout the metropolitan area of Vancouver, British Columbia. As Levin points out, the people narrating these stories and whose lives have been bound up tightly with the Fraser River, and the other smaller freshwater rivers, such as the Serpentine or the Nickomekl, recognize the preciousness of these places. Whatever their relationship with these rivers, whether as industrialist, dockworker, environmentalist or member of First Nations, all participants in the interviews, to some degree, express concern for the river's health.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all of the experiences related, however, are told in the past tense: fisherman's tales of eighteen feet sturgeon, farmers, once adolescents, now in their seventies who used to swim tens of kilometers in the current of the Fraser, housewives' tales of the muskrats and mink once existing in numerous quantities, and people in their twenties who talk wistfully about picnics their families ate along the banks of the Fraser. As one old-timer who still lives along the river, says "I call this Industrial Avenue, not the Fraser River, anymore." One woman talks about the *riparian* rights offered to logging companies because of the insistence by the Fraser River Authority of the designation of the Fraser River as a working river, even though its health is fragile. As historian Donald Worster explains:

In ancient times, the riparian doctrine was less a method of ascertaining individual property rights and more the expression of an attitude of non-interference with nature.<sup>7</sup>

This older meaning of the riparian principle did not allow for rivers to be regarded as private property and people were permitted to consume the water only so long as the river itself was not diminished. This meaning was changed by the settlers of the American West into the doctrine of prior appropriation. According to Worster, this was so "... because it afforded them a greater freedom to exploit nature."

Even though the earlier meaning of riparian rights has all but vanished in contemporary Western notions about water rights and the use of rivers, the idea that the river and its waters exist as a unique, free-flowing un-owned entity still exist as a hidden metaphor in the consciousness of many of the people interviewed by Levin.

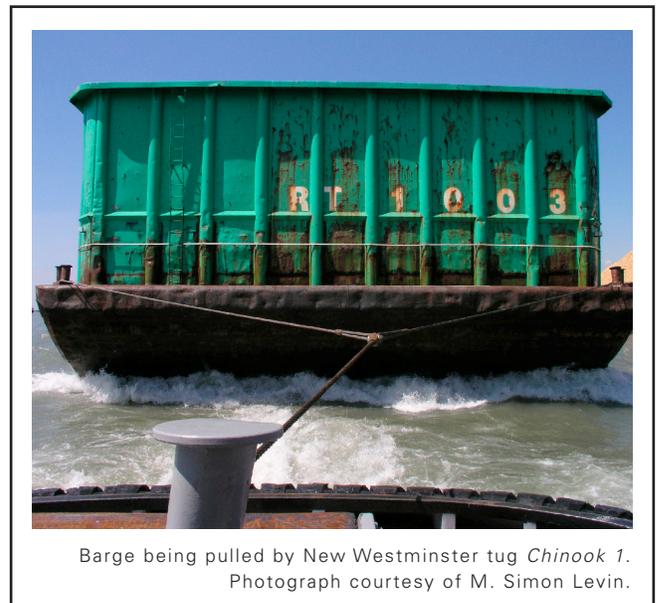
Given a chance to focus on these remembered experiences through participation in Levin's work, these people are offered the opportunity to re-consider their relationship to the river. No matter how removed their surroundings seem to be, they find a willingness to participate in that revisioning they themselves find surprising.

In these projects, Levin acts as a guide in this revisioning process for inhabitants of a region that hold the bodies of water that have been at the centre of their history. In the *C.H.A.R.T.* project, and another recent project (*S.A.L.T.*) completed in the hyper-salinated environment of Kelleberrin, Australia, he attempts to act as an interpreter between the human inhabitants and the water they and their ancestors have been involved in impoverishing. The role of the artist as an agent of social change is not unusual in

contemporary art. The role of the artist as an agent of environmental change, however, is a less common, and relatively more difficult, goal in the arts. Much of that has to do with contested notions of the "nature" and the "natural" in cultural theory—theory that has had an enormous impact on thinking on the arts.

Levin's goal is not to move away from the materiality of an art practice, but locate that materiality in a "highly produced frame." This frame may be described as the event or series of events through which the re-visioning experience takes place by highlighting the realities of the actual natural world, the one experienced by the people who participate in these works. Utilizing strategies, such as those listed in the previous paragraph, he produces that frame rooted in a specific environmental location and community situation. That specificity is rich ground for the development of meaningful metaphor.

One of Levin's most interesting uses of metaphor in both *C.H.A.R.T.* and *S.A.L.T.* is his use of a relatively recent technological tool to help frame these experiences. In *S.A.L.T.*, GPS (Global Positioning System) bandoliers are offered to community



Barge being pulled by New Westminster tug *Chinook 1*.  
Photograph courtesy of M. Simon Levin.

members to wear on their daily travels throughout their environment. In *C.H.A.R.T.* a GPS was used to map participants' travel along and on the rivers throughout the BC lower mainland. For Levin, the GPS becomes an "interactive aesthetic tool" to "map people's relationship to the rivers" or the land. The resulting GPS maps, a series of marks of the co-ordinates, serve also as drawings of the participants' movements through their compromised environment. While GPS was originally developed by the military for precise positioning, in this context Levin's use of this technology reveals submerged metaphors embedded in both the technology itself and our reliance on its ability to reveal knowledge we assume is unavailable to us.

GPS receivers work by using the distance information from at least three GPS satellites to discern co-ordinates on three overlapping virtual spheres. But in order to pinpoint the location of the GPS receiver, the actual sphere of the earth is used as the fourth sphere and is the deciding factor in actual location. The receiver eliminates the point in space and chooses the one on the surface of the earth. While technology is augmenting our innate abilities to locate ourselves, even the technology relies on the actual planet earth to complete its activity. And though the rationale behind GPS technology is to locate specific individual positions, Levin's use of the "paper trail" serves as a visual reminder of the fluid quality of the living beings and life itself. The coordinates are connected on paper by the flowing lines of the participants' movements, belying the technologies' ability to suppress one of the most evocative and meaningful metaphors for both life and water as primary sources in flux, sources that cannot and should not be owned.

Along with photographic images and videos of the land, the river or, in the case of *C.H.A.R.T.*, the

hours of audio tapes of interviews with community members, often collected while canoeing the local rivers, the "highly produced frame" is collaboratively constructed. In this way, Levin's methods may be traced to the political and social attributes of early digital interactive work, in which the goals of this new media were linked to the ethical possibilities of dialogue and communication, a quality not always given a priority in many of today's "new media" works.

A few urgent questions occur in this interest in interactivity. What "voice" does the earth itself have in this dialogue? Having ruined the land and the rivers, how does our use of interactivity relate to that "voice?" For the 800 inhabitants of Kelleberrin, or the 2,400,000 inhabitants of the BC Lower mainland, how will an interactive approach help change that relationship? The only role we seem to be able to envision for nature is one in which we take from it, drain it, ravage it. This, however, is where both of these projects by Levin go past a more conventional approach to the natural environment.

Levin's willingness to both intervene in the inhabitants' relationship with their natural environment and to encourage the various members of that community themselves to revision their identity based on that land is unusual in two ways. The first way involves his attempts to mediate on the earth's behalf. In the S.A.L.T. project, taking into consideration the extreme salinity of the land caused by years of clearing all the land for farming and some sheep grazing, Levin's goal is to offer the people of Kelleberrin different ways of experiencing the land. His hope is that "they might see the actual landscape, rather than distressed, as incredibly powerful."<sup>8</sup> The land is video-taped, photographed, as is. In the case of Kelleberrin's hyper-salinated land, its spare



Theresa Hulton and Alex Konyes working on the banks of the Fraser River. Photograph by Surrey Art Gallery.



Docent in conversation with school group while viewing *C.H.A.R.T.*  
Photograph by Cameron Heryet.



Visitors looking at the digital information presentation to learn more about the *C.H.A.R.T.* project. Photograph by Surrey Art Gallery.

and ruined beauty is lovingly highlighted throughout the project. Levin and his collaborator, Laurie Long, transformed the International Art Space into a welcoming information centre, replete with Long's stunning videos of the salt affected natural lake, its brown and green layers bifurcated by the black road. The reality of the land, its still powerful force visible through the devastation it has endured, is a large part of the project. Highlighting that power serves to reframe the communities' existing relationship with it and uncover layers of metaphor and meaning through which the land and water is itself "seen and heard."

Similarly, in *C.H.A.R.T.*, the videos of the river itself, highlighting its continual flowing nature, the numerous canoe trips with residents, and the transformation of the Surrey Art Gallery TechLab

into a station for "mapping and monitoring" people's relationship with local rivers contributes to a mediation on the rivers behalf. Rather than approach each project with a prescribed plan or vision, Levin insists, through these strategies, on the importance of listening and seeing the natural environment in its present state.

This openness to the reality, the "voice," of the natural environment is echoed in the second unusual way in which Levin both intervenes and encourages the voice of the community in these projects. Levin approaches these works with a willingness to serve as a mediator in this process, as well as an instigator. In both *C.H.A.R.T.* and *S.A.L.T.*, the gallery was transformed into a hub where community members were not only offered documentation of various forms of the environment's "voice," but were encouraged



Installation of C.H.A.R.T. water bottles in the configuration of the GPS pattern from the Fraser River.  
Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

to communicate their own shifting visions of their natural environments. These two works by M. Simon Levin and his collaborators are important examples of a shift in attitudes towards both the role of the artist in contemporary culture and the role of a community towards its surrounding natural environment. The key to this shift is a new-found humility towards making art our relationship with the earth, a shift much needed in both instances.

November 2003.

7 Worster, Donald. *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*. Pantheon Books, New York. 1988, p8. Quoted in Shiva, 2002.

8 Levin, M. Simon and Long, Laurie, "Relational Aesthetics: About S.A.L.T. and C.H.A.R.T." *Western Front*, Vancouver, BC. 3 November 2003.

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#### Notes

1 See particularly Sabloff's book mentioned below, Nicholson, Shierry Weber, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002 and Pointing, Clive. *A Green History of the World*. Penguin Books, London, 1991.

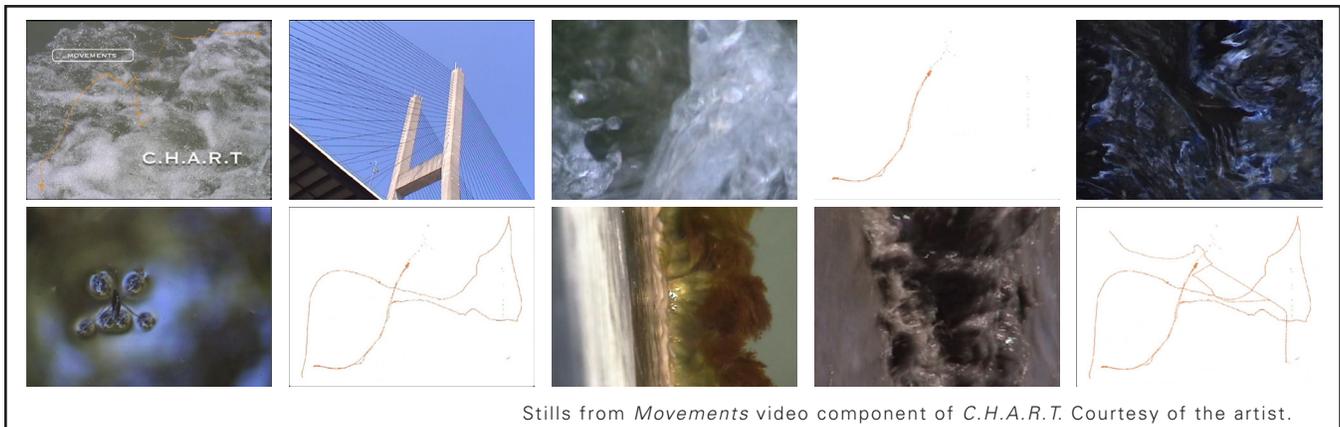
2 Sabloff, Annabelle. *Reordering the Natural World: Humans and Animals in the City*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.9.

3 See especially Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. Basic Books New York. 1999.

4 Kastner, Jeffrey. "Preface." In Jeffrey Kastner (Ed.) *Land and Environmental Art*. Phaidon Press: London, 1998.

5 Shiva, Vandana. *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit. Between the Lines*: Toronto. 2002.

6 Levin, M. Simon and Long, Laurie, "Relational Aesthetics: About S.A.L.T. and C.H.A.R.T." *Western Front*, Vancouver, BC. 3



Stills from *Movements* video component of *C.H.A.R.T.* Courtesy of the artist.

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 Westminster Tugs  
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An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-1-926573-17-5 Published 2018

