

r o o f



roof

Produce/Produce:

Examining urban sustainability

Arnica Artist-Run Centre, Kamloops

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side stream environmental design

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These notes are in anticipation of the material from 'roof', that is exhibited at Produce/Produce, being posted electronically at a soon to be constructed site, www.gordonbrentingram.ca/roof.

acknowledgements

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JJBeans cafes have given us many bags of coffee grounds for our compost and we are grateful to Mark Labrecque and Abigail of the Railway Street cafe and Nick, Pete, and Zoë who work in the Woodward's Building.



calendula with Canada Place, Vancouver in the distance,
2 July, 2006

overview

'roof' consists of a series of notes, documents, and explorations of Vancouver's first dedicated green

roof. Approved by Vancouver City Council in the summer of 1995, the Railtown Studios green roof was installed in 1998 as part of a public-private redevelopment of a fish warehouse, that had been owned by the City, for artist / designer live / work studios. The garden became another workshop for artists and designers to explore and create. At times, the dissonant contributions of a dozen or more households, at any one time, have felt operatic. At other times, the food and (agri)cultural production on the roof was more like tentative, and often flat, performance art. And at other times, the roof garden felt like a sandbox for toddlers. And somehow the plants, bees, aphids, worms, slugs, ants, and migratory birds have suffered the vagaries of multiple creative processes with far more grace than the many *Homo sapiens* who have enjoyed the food and visual delights. This work in Kamloops and booklets is the beginning of a reflection, visual

exploration, and documentation project that could well go on for some time.



poppies 23 July, 2010

origin stories

For twelve years, I have been growing odd bits of food in a garden on top of an old warehouse on Vancouver Harbour that was converted for artist studios. Gardening on top of and in the midst of

various artistic practices, and dramas, has been fun and sometimes daunting. Over the years, I have remembered, photographed, pondered, and written about a small portion of the comings and goings. And in the midst of it all, my extended household has grown and lived off of many kinds of 'produce' from crabapples and strawberries to kale, bok choy, garlic and lemon sorrel to a few sources of protein, such as scarlet emperor beans, to a wide array of cooking herbs. In 'roof', I reflect on the site-specific culture in urban agriculture and green roofs in particular.

In what was an old fish-packing plant built around 1920, Railtown Studios affords spectacular views of Downtown Vancouver, the Harbour, and the North Shore mountains. Those mountains to the north also send down cold winds that get salty moving across the Harbour limiting what we can

grow. Many plants that once thrived later have died over cold winters and hot summer.

The building is dedicated and zoned as artist live / work studio rental. For providing these badly needed spaces, the landlord was able to gain approvals, buy the building from the City of Vancouver (at 5% of the current value), and creatively renovate. But it was the proposal for the green roof, in 1995, that swayed City Council. So this green roof, as part of a package of subsidies to the developer, made the deal became the first legally designated green roof in British Columbia. And the cultural ebb and flows, the politics, of nurturing plants, worms, and bees, and other creatures, wedged between the Downtown Eastside and the Port of Vancouver can be fierce. In the following notes, I sketch a cycle of urban roof-top, produce production that is as much

about the fertility of ideas and human relationships as it is about the fecundity of the soil that is suspended so high over a crowded harbour:

- ✚ roof gardening as real estate;
- ✚ roof gardening as restoring biodiversity;
- ✚ roof gardening as romance;
- ✚ roof gardening as opera;
- ✚ roof gardening as agrarian karaoke;
- ✚ roof gardening as Métis 'homeland';
- ✚ roof gardening as cure for dementia;
- ✚ roof gardening for The New Poverty Diet Plan;
- ✚ roof gardening as art production;
- ✚ roof gardening as romantic produce production; and
- ✚ roof gardening versus real farming.



grape vine and anise and the first fruit of the Railtown Studios vines, in early September 2010, in the upper right

roof gardening as real estate

Each green roof has an origin myth that obscures what really happened. The official version works its way into planning and design documents that

become little more than artefacts. The commencing of myth-making is the true origin. Never believe a charming document, it covers something over – like dirt on a green roof.

1. In the beginning of the roof garden of Railtown Studios there were...
 - a. some kind of a creator that was not an architect;
 - b. various evolutionary processes and the coming and going of Ice Ages;
 - c. the Squamish people;
 - d. various traders of mixed and unpredictable backgrounds;
 - e. the British Empire;
 - f. colonial politicians;
 - g. local politicians;
 - h. immigrants hungry for land;
 - i. immigrants hungry for money;

- j. trees, stumps, and a mill;
- k. a brothel;
- l. a concrete warehouse shipping fish to Japan;
- m. a concrete warehouse confiscated in early 1942;
- n. a morgue for Allied troops who died on the way back from Asia and World War II;
- o. a concrete warehouse shipping fish to whoever would buy it;
- p. a concrete warehouse contaminated with PCBs and abandoned to the City of Vancouver;
- q. a condemned concrete warehouse where many of the early episodes of *X-files* were filmed;
- r. arts activists looking for studio space;
- s. a city council that wanted to see more artist studio space and to support the construction of green roofs;
- t. artists looking for affordable studios;
- u. lots of soil and plants hauled to the roof;

- v. artists looking for all sorts of 'space' for production;
- w. artists turning roof garden space into art;
- x. artists growing food;
- y. weeds, two irrigation systems, a worm bin and, finally after eleven years, a full compost; and
- z. dreams barely remembered.

2. In the beginning of the roof garden of Railtown Studios was a developer, named Jack, who bought a piece of property from the City of Vancouver that had been condemned because of PCB contamination so since the cleanup could never be entirely complete the building was proposed as artist live/work studios. But city decision-makers were a bit nervous about selling a contaminated building, especially because of opposition of the Canada Pacific Railway, so were swayed by being able to approve and require a green roof as part of the conversion.

3. In the beginning was a developer, named Jack, who employed his son Rob to design the roof of his new property, a property for which part of the terms of its sale by the City of Vancouver was a green roof that Vancouver City Council approved in 1995. The roof garden was a father and son story: planting, growing, cooperating, and even getting some 'approval'.

4. In the beginning of the roof garden of Railtown Studios, Jack paid roughly \$750,000 for the property and put less than that amount into the cleanup and renovation and less than a decade later the property was worth ten times the amount of Jack's original investment. And Jack built a beautiful garden just like he told the City of Vancouver that he said he would. But as time passed, Jack did not like his son's design. After 8 years, Jack yelled at his son in the roof garden and

threatened to tear the garden out. But Jack remembered that he had made a (legal) commitment to the City of Vancouver so decided to keep the garden going. In fact, it was the many artists that had come and gone in the building who had planted most of the garden and kept it going – and not the work of either Jack or his son.

5. There never was a beginning. The creation myth was a conversion myth. The municipal events are all but forgotten. Jack's son is now an architect down the hall from his father's office. There are no signs of Jack's son have designed any more green roofs. Since the Railtown Studios green roof was created in 1998, over fifty building residents have gardened passionately and sometimes created art there.



Zan Comerford with flowering leek 13 July, 2009

roof gardening as restoring biodiversity

Many of the nursery plants started dying the day we planted them and the natives started re-colonizing as soon as the soil was laid out. Like after a clearcut, the first native species as a pioneer: red alder, *Alnus rubra*. The tree took off and nearly dismantled a bed. The green roof was already getting gnarly so after five years,

'management' hacked it down. The trunk is still there. There came the Indian rhubarb, *Rumex occidentalis*, but being of use as a mild psychedelic and after spread through seagull shit, it did not stay long. Clearly, native plant pioneers were interested in the garden. Soon came salal, *Gaultheria shallon*, which has never left. Today, the salal has a symbiosis with the apple trees: relying on the shade in the summer and the protection from the wind in the winter. And nearby, thrive planted red currant, *Ribes sanguineum*, and an ever expanding bush of wild roses, *Rosa nutkana*. Other planted natives on the roof are more vulnerable. The bee balm or bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa*, will be replanted in more sun as soon as the first draft of this essay is completed. And the blessed *Lomatium nudicaule*, the medicinal of a hundred names that we on Railtown Studios add to pesto, needs to be uncrowded and free of

encroaching mint. And then there are the ghosts: the natives who probably just died because it was their time: the tree that did not grow, the osoberry, *Oemleria cerasiformis*, that probably could not handle so much wind and sun. The last known aboriginal landscape on the Railtown Studio site was the mouth of Lucklucky Creek with a camp and landing beach for large canoes. A grove of very large native maples, *Acer macrophyllum*, clothed the site. So given that the roof is at the level of what were the tops of the big, old trees, it was time to re-establish that grove. Big-leafed maple is a curious West Coast plant that extends from a few hundred kilometres north of Vancouver, along the drier parts of the coast, and then south to the mountains of northern Mexico. Below central Oregon, *Acer macrophyllum*, is rare and confined to stream sides in dark canyon bottoms – places that are increasingly vulnerable

to climate change and human use. Vancouver, Seattle, and Victoria are the only metropolitan areas where *Acer macrophyllum* is a near-dominant tree. So I began looking for surviving trees in the neighbourhood and found one that had survived a hundred years of obliteration. I waited for errand seedlings to survive a year and then transported them by bicycle to the roof. They are thriving and one day may well break the bounds of their beds and take hold. Even if they die young, those big-leafed maples will have scattered *Acer macrophyllum* all through the neighbourhood.

Do food-producing plants receiving better treatment in the roof garden than native species with marginal food or medicinal uses? Is the balance of species still stacked towards those crops from afar that provide direct benefit in

the short-term? These are serious philosophical questions on our roof. Certainly being able to eat large quantities of a plant makes many predisposed to keeping it around, perhaps even watering the crop in the heat of summer. But the native plants are quite lovely and have a robustness suggesting that they will be there well after the building goes from being a crumbling palazzo to an island roost for seagulls and wayward bald eagles.



bee balm, bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa*, 17 July, 2008

roof gardening as romance

Roof gardens are full of romance even when the beds are only barely three feet deep. Fluffy, facile, and low productivity-wise, green roofs are good places to indulge in easy meetings – with dirty fingernails. But aside from the human encounters, polite or more carnal, the true romance is with ideas. Many notions of gardening have been

enacted in the roof garden as a kind of stage. Legend has it that Rob the designer was taken by mid-1990s industrial brut. His original design was a love poem to rosemary, ivy, and junco: simple, dispassionate, but overwhelming. The ivy shrank from the salt winds and we pulled out the junco. The rosemary thrived. The original design, like spring romances, eventually 'died'. And then there were the food production beds that have been mainly used in the warmer months that shifted to year-round production, especially of hearty green-leaved plants, such as kale and parsley.

Soon came visions of 'permaculture'¹ and a romance with possible permanence. 'Permaculture' is a particularly ironic idea for tops of buildings given how temporary are most green roofs especially if the water is turned off. People

often like the idea of 'permaculture' because our own lives are so impermanent – especially being renters. But the lives of condo and house owners are not much longer, that I know of. So within five years, trees were planted and there was much talk of settling in. For a while, there was a pond in an old basin. The more people talked about settling in, especially while they gardened, the shorter, it seemed, were their tenancies in the building.

Perhaps the most long-lasting romance in the Railtown Studios Green Roof is a kind of *ménage à trois* between the eager gardener and their perceptions of both natural order, on one side, and the futility urban chaos, on the other. In this way, the truest romantic literature for the Railtown Studios green roof was Masanobu Kukuoka's *The One-Straw Revolution*.² Kuukoka's ideal of 'natural farming' has been particularly attractive for a

place so unnatural (and for a building that still may have residual contamination). Still, with Kukuoka, we could imagine being on some sort of shore island or cliff especially with so many seagulls flying around sometimes chased by various young eagles who soon would tire of urban life and head out to real islands and cliffs.



scarlet runner bean flowers 23 July, 2010



Patrick Blaeser & Emilio Rojas, 27 September, 2009

roof gardening as opera

If permaculture was the morality play, the libretto of the opera that is the Raitown Studios green

roof is the 'agroecology' of Miguel Altieri.³ Altieri recognizes far richer but more tentative cultural and ecological links and makes permaculture seem like neo-colonial dabbling. Altieri was a pioneer in his recognition *cultural* systems of food production particularly for Indians and *mestizos*.

The acts of a roof gardening opera usually end in death – either of the diva or the ideal if they can be separated. Everybody wants 'permaculture' but nothing lasts – especially on green roofs through the winter. To protect our plants, our 'investments', we mulch in the autumn and build little structures for the bleaker weeks. But still, half the plants get freeze-dried into dead stalks. April is the cruellest month: deciding whether to wait on or just snip a dead-looking plant. But crueller than winter winds is the ignorance of fellow gardeners. Weeks after the photograph of

the fig tree was taken, a neighbour hacked down our one and only fig tree. He claimed that he thought that it was a 'weed'.



seedling lovage with ladybug (upper)
and bee pollinating leek flower (lower)



sage with sculpture and artichokes and crabapple
29 August, 2010



sunflower, poppy, lovage stalk and trellis with runner beans,
31 July, 2010

roof gardening as agrarian karaoke

The Railtown Studios roof garden has plenty of drama. There are the regular disappearances of beloved crops (this year the loss of Roman camomile, *Anthemis nobilis*, just as, post-Olympics, we might need it most). And there are the assaults:

the hacking of a fig, the defecating of various unauthorized and rat-like dogs, the follies, and falls, of drunkards. But for every crisis, what might be viewed as plain old 'disturbance' in the jargon of landscape ecology⁴, are week-long bouts of painful karaoke. Gardens bring out the nostalgia in many of us. 'How green was my valley'. How green was this roof garden when the irrigation system worked. With every lurch, there is new grasping for nostalgia: what we thought he had but did not.

The most obvious sign of roof gardening as agrarian karaoke is when people start singing often because they are engaged in an aspect of roof gardening that they did not quite sign up for. Pulling crab-grass is sure to bring out a Beatle song sung like a dirge. Early Patti Smith is good for

emptying the compost and pulling out hair and coconut shells that did **not** decompose.



Lomatium nudicaule flowers with chives in background, 25 May, 2008



scarlet runner bean flower 24 July, 2010

roof gardening as Métis 'homeland'

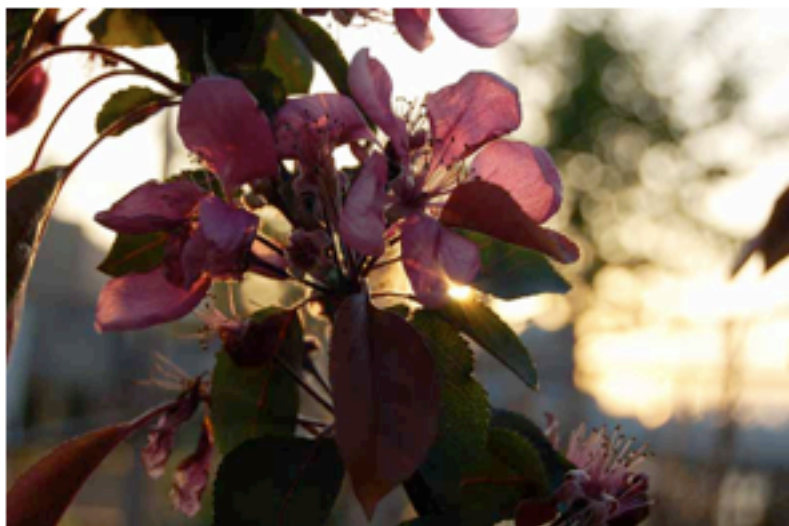
My friends who are members of First Nations have commented that my gardening is a pathetic attempt to make territory for myself. While the idea of gardening on top of a building, owned by a large Gastown landlord, strikes them as repugnant, they view my engagement with native

and traditional plants as 'Métis space'. Perhaps they are relieved that I am not asking for some of their traditional lands. A roof garden is eminently moveable. There is no illusion of a 'homeland' other than getting the rent paid on time. A roof garden is tentative, temporary territory; stealth when necessary and utterly nomadic if need be.

Because of my mother's Métis heritage, I was exposed young, through Salish neighbours and other family friends, to West Coast aboriginal digging horticulture at a young age. As a male, I never saw a digging stick but had some fine training in traditional burning and plant identification. One of the plants to which I have been introduced, one that is sacred from Victoria to Kamloops, is *Lomatium nudicaule*. But I have never been able to get it to grow from seed. I buy from people who know nothing about its many

names, some secret, or its medicinal uses. I don't tell the sellers and just pay for the plant.

A roof garden is tentative, temporary territory: there are evacuation plans in my mind. If I were ever to evacuate, some plans would be left behind, others taken as seed or cuttings, other replanted with friends; a Métis ecosystem that is stealth when necessary and utterly nomadic if need be:



crabapple blossom 22 April, 2010

roof gardening as cure for dementia

My mother asked to live with us the spring of 2008 and stayed a lovely, tense six and half months. She was struggling to move back to her big house in Victoria, with its lovely garden, and was in Vancouver for rest and a geriatric assessment. It was an enchanting time and we often gardened on the roof; or rather she watched and advised and

then sat and knapped inside the roof pavilion. Sometimes she would drift and a few times became terrified of the heights. So that she would not worry about blowing away, we would sit low with the plants: as protection. She loved the roses. As she had become forgetful and let the potted roses that I gave her die inside, we made a deal that after a few months in her home on Vancouver Island that I take them away and plant them in the roof garden. When she came to live with us, the roses were waiting for her on the roof.



scarlet emperor runner bean, cf. *Phaseolus coccineus*,
17 July, 2008

roof gardening for The New Poverty Diet Plan

Any hope of using roof gardens as a major source of nourishment is linked to some aspiration for The New Skinny. There are other factors as well such as lack of money. For some us on the Raintown Studios roof garden, we call this hybrid

impulse to grow crops creatively while, coincidentally, there not being money to buy food, 'The New Poverty Diet Plan'. Some of us have argued that his is more a form of denial, especially of rising rents, than a true diet plan. We do not 'weigh in' on the Railtown Studios green roof. We do not have to. And adjacent to cherished neo-vegan points of plant nurturing is a barbequed where money members of our 'community' haul up and seer large hunks of meat. This tension between valiant attempts to grow kilograms of beans, such as scarlet emperors, and the reek of burnt beef, that we will not consume, is the trade secret of The New Poverty Diet Plan.



tomatoes and Port of Vancouver in the background,
4 September, 2007

roof gardening as art production

While many argue, easily, that cultivation is a primary form of cultural production, along side of drawing, painting, dancing, and singing, some on the roof separate urban farming from the arts. This is a fatal mistake. While there is no sign that Robert Smithson ever proposed a roof garden

when he visited Vancouver⁵, instead hoping for an island of glass, growing food, with or without a sculpture, is still a kind of sculpting. And Smithson never seemed interested in growing food as an art practice. So because of this theoretical gap, artists who garden on the top of Railtown Studios often add sculptures and other found objects to their sites of food production. Perhaps the knowledge that so little food is probably going to be produced combined with the anxieties of rising rents, and artists being pushed out of the city centre, suggests that one way to hedge one's bets is to add sculpture to food growing.

While often being safe objects that attest to the fabricator having taken some courses in art school, the sculptures do often confuse seagulls and can blow away adding a certain night-time drama. On a windy roof, sculpture is forced to be kinetic.

Curiously, little performance work has, so far, used the roof garden. I have no explanation for the emphasis on sculpture over performance in the roof garden. It is one of the riddles of the Railtown Studio roof garden.

There is some talk that the Railtown Studio roof garden is a totality, an integrated point in space, which embodies the creative statements of many past and present gardeners along with the impulses of other residents, their friends, and some of their pets. If the Railtown Studio roof garden were seen as a creative ecosystem, we could be said about us? Transient, resilient and tenacious come to mind. But the garden as a piece of art is terribly vulnerable and easily exhausted. In 2008, we held a Fertility Festival to ruminate on problems with the soil. The rains leach out much of the nitrogen and calcium and the plants, aside from those with deeper roots such as the

rosemary and the fruit trees, are constantly malnourished. So in response to various discussions and incantations that May day, we began to put egg shell directly into the garden under green mulch. And since then, many plants, from roses, artichokes, to grape vines have grown with more gusto.



grape leaves 23 July, 2010



rose, sorrel & Julian Castle May 2010

roof gardening as romantic produce production

If we love gardening that yields so little food, it can only be some kind of romantic produce

production. It may be cultural and is certainly art but what drives it is some kind of romance: for people we live with and next to; for the space in the air; for the location within a city as points of exchange; and for what we learn. But all this is about hope and desire rather than the food we actually produce. For us the herbs, the vegetables, and the beans are crucial. We have hopes for apples and grapes but so far have seen few. The one artichoke bud that we produced was too beautiful to eat and we let it flower and dry out. The romantic produce production is engaging in the connections that are always central to agriculture but too often, these days, have been lost in culture.



crabapple fruit, 3 August 2008

roof gardening versus real farming

Roof gardening and real farming differ in whether or not there is any dilemma around eating versus aesthetics. In real farming, food production is paramount – especially when food is in short supply. But in the loftiness of gardening in the sky, only slightly disconnected to bedrock, the line

between desires for nourishment and other kinds of pleasure begin to blur.

One example of the dilemma of roof gardens for food versus art is around what to do with our globe artichoke. Slowly dividing, are planning on thinning out the new artichoke stems in the autumn and giving them to friends to plant in their *terra firma* gardens for eating. But the artichokes in our sky garden are pampered and we only eat their base leaves as cardoon sautéed with other vegetables. Up on the roof, the delicious globes have been too beautiful to cut and eat. Instead, we let our artichokes progress until they dry out and become grand blue thistle flowers.

With roof gardening, beauty seems to always trump the practicality of needing to eat – though we hope the artichoke's beauty will inspire a new

generation of gardeners. Some people walk through our garden and express confusion about our combining of plants for aesthetic satisfaction with those primarily for nourishment. It's the old form versus function game: a false dilemma. Everything we plant is both beautiful, somehow and sometime, and useful, somehow and sometime. Curious ask about our thinking about mixing plants for beauty and food, some individuals walk out of the garden baffled by our explanation. Sky gardens are supposed to be puzzles.



tomatoes & Port of Vancouver 25 September, 2009

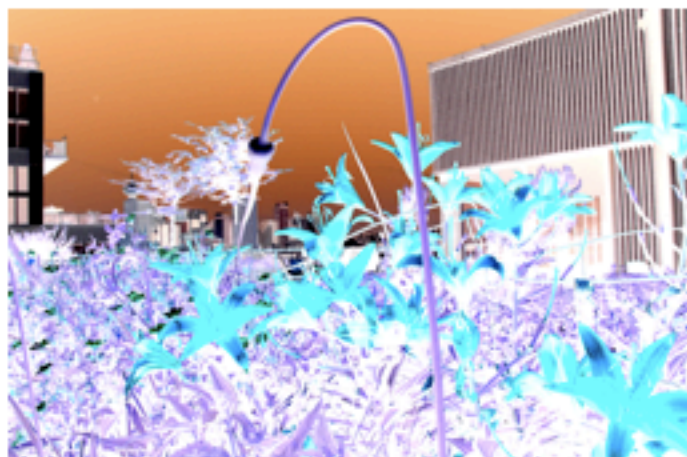


artichoke flowers, early September 2010

roof gardening coda

The food that we have grown from our roof garden has only been a tiny fraction of what we have consumed. Instead, the Railtown Studios roof

garden has been a space of production of ideas, icons, tentative forms of cooperative practices, and myths: part sand-box, part performance space, part opera stage, part sculpture, and part site for contemplation; all rolled in together and packed tightly between concrete and metal. And sometimes the garden busts-out of the constraints, at least for a time.



garlic scape with lilies, mint & lilies, 2 July, 2006

notes

¹ In 1981, I had taken a workshop with Bill Mollison the father of the permaculture movement and over the years have used his old standby manual. See Bill Mollison. 1979. *Permaculture Two: Practical Design for Town and Country in Permanent Agriculture*. Stanley, Tasmania: Tagari. Another early manual that I used was about the Farallones Institute where I once studied. See Farallones Institute. 1979. *The Integral Urban House: Self-Reliant Living in the City*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

² Mananobu Kukuoka. 1978. *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press.

³ Miguel A. Altieri. 1995. *Agroecology: The Science Of Sustainable Agriculture*. Second Edition. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. & Miguel A. Altieri. 2005. *Manage Insects on Your Farm: A Guide to Ecological Strategies*. Waldorf, Maryland: SARE Outreach.

⁴ Richard T. T. Forman and Michel Godron. 1986. *Landscape Ecology*. New York: Wiley.

⁵ The major documentation on the proposed 'Island of Broken Glass', that Smithson proposed in 1969 during a visit to Vancouver, for the Strait of Georgia, is the 1969 – 1970 essay 'Four Conversations

