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FRITZ HAEG ON *ANIMAL ESTATES* AND *EDIBLE ESTATES*

I DIDN'T GIVE R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER much thought until 2000, when I moved into my geodesic dome–topped house on Sundown Drive in the hills of Los Angeles. The following year, I began a series of loose, last-minute salon events with no budget (which later transformed into an educational project). I think the psychic draw of the geodesic dome attracted people to these events and, in fact, made the gatherings possible. Typically, in the United States, you experience that sort of hemispheric space only in Neoclassical structures. You're down below, looking up. But by actually inhabiting the sphere, you feel as if you are at the center of everything.

Fuller made a lifelong argument for the generalist. "I am not a category," he wrote in 1970. If a certain idea required him to make a map, say, then he became a cartographer. That's how I've been most inspired by Fuller: There is no single discipline that I subscribe to. Gardeners call me an architect; architects often categorize me as an artist; those in the art world may refer to me as an activist; and many activists call me a gardener. Ultimately, I want my work to enter into a mainstream dialogue without the label "contemporary art." While some would argue that it's no longer reasonable to be a "comprehensivist" (a Buckyism) in our increasingly complex times, I don't believe that. Indeed, I've actually moved toward projects that are more diffuse, which manifest themselves variously as a garden, building, video, photograph, book, website, gathering, dance, or workshop. Precisely because of my inevitably limited experience and technical knowledge, I collaborate with experts, locals, and consultants, freely working with and depending on others.

The *Animal Estates* project I began this year is particularly dispersed: There is no clear focus for any one of its regional editions. Each of these involves many layers of activities and materials. They may begin with homes constructed for animals that have been displaced by people, but they also include libraries, documentary videos, field guides, workshops, and performances. Along with dispersal, though, comes specialization: I am doing the animal project in six cities this year (New York; Cambridge, Massachusetts; San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Utrecht, the Netherlands; and Cleveland), and each incarnation is different, based on the particular city, the needs of the local wildlife, and the host art institution. I am attracted to these two extremes—abstract, universal thought and focused hyperlocalization.

With each edition of *Animal Estates*, I typically start by meeting with local authorities on urban wildlife to understand the unique characteristics of that location and its human and animal inhabitants. So, for example, when I spoke with experts in Portland, they brought up the "snag," or the dead tree, which about half the wildlife in the Pacific Northwest depend upon for their homes. In land managed by humans, most dead trees are immediately removed, so the project started with the design of a multiple-unit residential tower for seven local species—such as the orange-rumped bumblebee and the silver-haired bat—that would otherwise occupy a snags. This is probably the most monumental *Animal Estate* so far; in others, the physical presence of the home is extremely slight. The *Slender Salamander Estate* in San Francisco is simply a board of wood thrown on the ground under which the creatures live; the estate for the grass snake in Utrecht is a large compost pile.

Each *Animal Estates* project sprawls far beyond the construction of a single home, usually incorporating a "headquarters" with a cozy geodesic tent, information display, photographic portraits, and a documentary video. In the Netherlands, the project was less about the animals and more about the five local wildlife experts who were featured in the video, wrote essays for the field guide, and led a series of workshops. In all of these projects, I try to prompt a broad network of communication: At the core is something impossibly modest, yet it's broadcast in a complicated way—in the exhibition space, online, on the streets, and in mainstream media. Focusing on these animals and their homes in the human city is partly ridiculous, but also quite serious. It may be tragic or utopian, depending on how you choose to look at it.

In this sense, I'm also interested in Fuller's dome as an invented, as opposed to "designed," piece of architecture that can go anywhere in the world; anyone can pick up his model of the dome and make it his or her own. Everything I'm doing is like this prototype, with the possibility of being replicated by others. For instance, my initial motivation for the *Edible Estates* project that I began in 2005—which consists of replacing front lawns with fully functioning gardens of edible vegetation—was to make something for the entire country. That was a real shift in my work. I wanted to do something that would resonate in the very geographic center of the country, Kansas, and spread from there. With both the garden projects and the *Animal Estates*, I work with one simple premise—replacing a domestic lawn with food production, or making homes for animals in cities—that is so basic it can be applied anywhere. It has the infinite capacity to mutate and evolve as needed.

I have a problem with the way social and environmental issues are discussed today in art and design, often as a kind of hyperbolic, crisis response that purports to save the world. Like Fuller, I'd rather get down to the most basic roots about who we are and how we operate in the world. I'm starting from more fundamental issues that have to do, in fact, with pleasure. I'm interested in bypassing or even harnessing the polarization that exists in our society today. I once heard a great interview with Jane Fonda, in which she quoted the British dramatist David Hare: "The best place to be radical is at the center." I want to find those complicated intersections. The front lawn is one of those examples of a space we all tend and share, cutting across religious, political, and geographic boundaries. Only by operating in that space of overlap do you start to have the multiple audiences necessary for a real conversation. □

FRITZ HAEG IS AN ARTIST BASED IN LOS ANGELES.