

ART AS AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMONING: DEBOUNDING HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIPS - THREE WORKS

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Abstract

As a cultural practice, art can affect the paradigms that either maintain or shift societies to new ways of behaving. The foundational role of paradigms in systemic change makes art a meaningful infrastructure for addressing desired changes to such concepts as human-nature relationships. The common theme of interconnectedness among humans and between humans and the rest of nature in approaches of commoning and partnership are summarized and then further explored through three artworks that “debound” or challenge the divisions between humans and the rest of nature.

Keywords: art; partnership; commons; boundaries; paradigms

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*Downstream, Upstream, One Stream All,
Downstream, Upstream, One Rainfall
-- Chorus from Downstream/Upstream Song, 2011
Jonee Kulman Brigham, Full Spring Studio, LLC*

Environmental art, according to one definition by green museum.org (2010), is “... art that helps improve our relationship with the natural world” (para. 1). I like to alter this definition to say “...with the *rest* of the natural world,” to acknowledge our human embeddedness within larger natural systems. That slight phrasing change is a minor act

of what I call ‘debounding,’ or challenging the divisions we create between humans and all other life on earth. Beyond language, as an artist I also engage with debounding in human spatial and property relations marked by property lines but defied by natural systems that freely flow across them. From greenmuseum.org’s definition, the word “improve” is also important, in that it points to the agency possible in human-nature relationships and the recognition of the active and instrumental role of art in negotiating those relationships.

My work is informed by systems thinking and by the work of Donella Meadows. In *Thinking in Systems* (2008), Meadows points to the primacy of paradigms, saying “Paradigms are the sources of systems” (p. 163). She talks about how paradigms change – from pointing to the flaws in an old model and to the workings of the new model, in a way that makes the old model obsolete. As a prime holder and shaper of paradigms, art can be an infrastructure for maintaining or altering existing world views within a system. Consciously engaging in this activity is what I call “paradigm work” (Brigham, 2020).

While the language I often use references systems, story, and interconnectedness, this paradigm work has much in common with language and paradigms of both partnership studies and the commons. Partnership studies explores research and applied practices based on Riane Eisler’s scholarship which “uses systems thinking and a macro-historical approach to uncover the patterns of social organization she calls partnership systems and domination systems (Potter et al., 2015, p. 1).” Commons can be described as a “social lifeform” which creates “wealth (both tangible and intangible) through which people address their shared needs with minimal or no reliance on markets or states” (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 74). Both partnership studies and commons literature recognize an important role for art and an awareness of our interconnectedness in helping bring about the changes each proposes. In this paper I explore how art can be used as an infrastructure to support the creation and maintenance of commons our to improve our human-nature relationships in a partnership context. My intent in exploring

these intersections through examples from my art practice is to offer visual and experiential ways of knowing in support of transforming cultural paradigms in two ways. First, through dismantling old paradigms by debounding the perception of our spatial relations that enable dissociation and domination, and second, through constructing new paradigms by increasing awareness of our interconnectedness that is a foundation for mutualism and caring.

PARTNERSHIP, COMMONS, AND PARADIGM WORK

In this practice-based essay, I will connect to partnership and commons paradigms with one primary source for each that informs my reflections on the role of art in transforming culture and fostering awareness of our interconnectedness that is a premise and foundation for both partnership and commons.

In *The Chalice and the Blade* (1988), Riane Eisler, founding scholar of partnership studies, lays out a basis for a Cultural Transformation Theory that puts societal practices – from the personal to the political – on a spectrum between domination (where authoritarianism and power-over concepts are primary) to partnership (where mutualism, reciprocity, and power-for concepts are primary). Different from general concepts of partnership, which may use collaboration for purposes that are still domination-oriented, partnership studies is concerned with purposes that aim at mutual care. Eisler recounts a history of civilizations that reveals that domination is not inevitable in societies as is often thought, and points to a future in which we can return to partnership ways of interacting that support life for both human and larger natural systems. The art produced by partnership civilizations reinforced belief systems. Eisler notes that symbols such as the life-giving chalice were understood as sources of power through relationality and that “...the secret of transformation expressed by the Chalice was in earlier times seen as the consciousness of our unity or linking with one another and all else in the universe” (1988, p. 193). The premise of our interconnectedness is thus foundational to partnership and its centering of mutual care.

In *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (2019), thought leaders David Bollier and Silke Helfrich describe commoning as a process specific to a situation, where people create a system for providing for their needs and using peer-governance to manage this process over time. Commoning is a primarily social and relational activity. While commoning is often related to shared resource or land management, it is broader than that, encompassing non-material assets such as knowledge and computer code. Bollier and Helfrich also point to the role of art and ritual in establishing and maintaining commons. Because commons relationships are rooted in cultural and social practices, art, as a tool of culture, can serve as a means to maintain the norms of the commoning culture or help it adapt as needed. Many dimensions of commoning are discussed in Bollier and Helfrich's book, but two particular dimensions inform the ideas of interconnectedness in this essay. Bollier and Helfrich establish that a concept they call the "Nested-I" is fundamental to the ontology of the commons. They say that the concept of the Nested-I "...is an attempt to make visible the subtle, contextual social relationships that integrate "me" and "we" (p. 42). They also acknowledge its roots in many cultures, for example the Bantu languages in South Africa that weave conceptions of human relations through the word *Ubuntu*, which names and centers the relationships between people. The concept of Nested-I supports commoning by pointing to our relational reality.

The second dimension of commoning addressed in this article, 'decommodification,' helps dismantle – or at least loosen – paradigms of ownership and property that hinder commoning. Bollier and Helfrich describe a concept of relationalizing property, which they say "...means to arrange the enactment of use rights in ways that nourish our relationships to each other, the nonhuman world, and past and future generations" (pp. 241-242). They illustrate the relationalizing of property through case studies of decommodification: instead of sharing benefits by expanding ownership of a commodified resource, they create patterns of sharing in which usage is not strictly tied to ownership and in which "...the boundary around the commons is treated as a semi-permeable membrane" (p. 276).

Both partnership as described by Eisler (1988) and commons as described by Bollier and Helfrich (2019) rely on foundational paradigms of our interconnectedness with other humans and the rest of nature. And neither deny the possibility of individuality or hierarchy within these relational structures, but rather they see relationality at multiple scales from self to society and hierarchies best used to serve the needs of community, not just those at the top of the hierarchy. It may be possible to have what some would call a commons without partnership or to have partnership without using strategies of commoning, but as laid out by Eisler and by Bollier and Helfrich, the two approaches seem to have substantial overlaps in paradigms of interconnection, centering caring relationships and practices that engage cultural tools of art and language.

I am particularly interested in how both of these models inform paradigms of human-nature interconnectedness and human-nature hierarchical paradigms. My approach to human-nature relations in my artwork comes from a belief that we belong to nature, more than nature belonging to us. In a 2017 article in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, I wrote about how a realization of our embeddedness in larger natural systems need not be a denial of ourselves, but rather a finding of our right position of relationality in a mutually reciprocal relationship with the rest of nature and the larger earth system in which we dwell (Brigham, 2017). As a paradigm worker, I am a grateful student of the profound and hopeful models of partnership and commons and joyfully join in their aims of cultural transformation.

DEBOUNDING: ART AS INFRASTRUCTURE, ART OF INFRASTRUCTURE

This paper is part personal essay, part themed exhibit of artworks that serve as examples of paradigm work toward embracing the environment as a commons of reciprocal care. Part of my approach to this goal is ‘debounding’ perceptions of commodified space. Across the following three sections I present artworks that fulfill my studio’s mission, which is to “make art that explores the connection and flow

between people and the rest of nature” (Brigham, 2021, para. 1). In the spirit of the definition of environmental art from the beginning of this essay, I hope that this paradigm work, as part of a larger movement, helps repair human-nature relationships. In that way I see my art as part of the larger cultural infrastructure for systemic change.

But actual, physical infrastructure is also prominent in my artwork. Distribution infrastructures are manifestations of so much of our shared resources, such as drinking water, sewage treatment, power lines, oil pipelines, natural gas distribution, food, and waste disposal and recycling. The design of these infrastructures can conceal or reveal those relational networks, but the networks are real whether we perceive them or not. Our collective lack of knowledge about infrastructure and its neglect enables the commodification of resources and nature, keeping our attention away from the inherent interconnected realities they embody. My work aims to amplify these interconnections and challenge the boundaries that conceal them.

EXHIBIT 1. PEERING BEYOND THE BOUNDARY: A LIGHT SWITCH AS AN ARTIFACT OF FLOW

I’ve long been intrigued by the storytelling potential of infrastructure. In 1994 the thesis for my architecture degree, about a pottery studio, included the mechanical, plumbing, and ventilation systems as part of the composition of the space. I felt invited to make this move by the philosophy of functional pottery, which celebrates its relationship to its useful function rather than hiding it behind an emphasis on the pot as an object. In 2007 I started an artist’s book called “Artifacts of Flow” (Brigham, 2010) in which I collected photographs of parts of my home that were clues to the elements of water, power, materials, fuels, and air flowing through it. Later, when we remodeled our home and ended up with piles of old light switches, electric wire, and metal junction boxes, I didn’t let the electrician dispose of them because I knew they were art supplies with stories to tell. I started a series of artworks called *Power Contemplations* (still in progress). One of the artworks was called *Switch*. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Switch*. Jonee Kulman Brigham, Full Spring Studio, 2016. Shown: Left: Switch as exhibited at Form and Content Gallery in 2016 as part of the Fierce Lament exhibit, curated by Camille Gage. Right: Detail from Switch showing the Allen S. King coal-fired power plant in Bayport, Minnesota. Media: Reclaimed electrical switches and junction boxes, reclaimed wood framing studs, tar paper, non-toxic wood finish, acrylic paint, mirror, inkjet-printed photograph and text transparency film. Dimensions: 66 in w x 13 in h x 4 in d

Switch is an interactive art installation in which visitors can toggle the light switches and move side to side to see the semi-transparent image of a power plant waver over a mirrored backdrop. *Switch* reflects a struggle with the effects of power consumption and questions about personal agency to make change. As part of *Switch*, I went on “pilgrimages” upstream from my electric meter to photograph five power plants that represent five types of electric generation (nuclear, coal, gas, oil, and trash incineration) that I hope will be substantially replaced by clean, renewable power sources. *Switch* is a ritual object, representing appreciation of the gifts of electricity from these plants, sadness at their (and my) impacts, and a decision upon opening of the exhibit to switch to electricity sourced by wind power.

In our everyday lives, our experiences with the interfaces to the infrastructure of our homes is designed to be physically and mentally as frictionless as possible. If we wish to have a light shining in a room, we flick a switch without having to worry about how to make that happen or how that relates us to the electric power system and its

economic and ecological impacts. The switch-plate cover and painted drywall of our homes conceal the wires and conduit that connect our actions with our environment. What happens when we lift the veil and peer beyond these boundaries that conceal our connections?

I mentioned that *Switch* was triggered by the experience of a home remodel. While as an architect I'm well aware of the "innards" of buildings, the embodied impact of living with those exposed interiors amplifies this consciousness. I looked at the piles of wire, old switches, and old junction boxes, and perhaps because I spend time contemplating infrastructure, I saw a cultural artifact. I recognized the history of electric current that flowed through the wires, gated and ungated by the switches to serve the needs of prior homeowners and our own family. And perhaps because I'm an environmentalist, I know what is connected to the other end of those wires: the coal, gas, nuclear, oil, and trash-burning power-generation plants that are significant players in our current climate crisis. Of course, if you follow those power plants upstream from supply to demand you find people like our family members turning those switches on and paying our electric bills. And if you look between the power generation and all of our uses, you find (at least in my urban electric service area) the middleman: the electric utility companies that provide a service and profit from the sale of kilowatt hours of energy.

The switches in the artwork are still attached to the wires that they controlled for 46 years, although the wires are snipped off, disconnected from their prior story. When viewers approach the artwork, they will recognize the iconic light switch that they are likely to have in their home. What does it mean to flip a switch that is disconnected? The lights don't change, but placed above the switch is a reclaimed electrical junction box containing an image of a power plant beyond the boundary of daily experience. The average viewer may or may not think about where the power comes from when they flip a switch, but the artwork invites them to peer beyond the boundary to the common infrastructure that lies beyond. If they are modestly environmentally aware, they will know that the power plants are directly connected to the welfare of our earth

commons as sources of pollution and contributors to climate change. With the wall removed, and the distance removed from switch to power plant, the commodification of electric power has been partially debounded conceptually. Instead of passive, unconscious electricity consumption, the possibility of conscious agency in electric use has been introduced through the visual connection of the light switch and the upstream power plants haunting the junction boxes. There is an implied connection between the switch and the junction box above, but the connection is not fulfilled. The switches obviously don't toggle the power plants on and off, and nothing happens when the participant flips a switch. This begs the question of impact: "How *can* we affect this power commons?"

I decided to focus the power plant types in the artwork on those I hope will become part of the past due to their environmental impacts. The work offers an opportunity for participants to say goodbye to the old as we enter our transition to renewable energy. While the switches are powerless in the artwork, participants are connected in the exhibit documentation to actions they can take, such as purchasing renewable power. As I made this work, our family enrolled in a program enabling us to switch our electric source to wind-generated energy. This seeming accounting trick is backed up by third-party verification that ensures that the utility will build more wind power beyond that required—about 600 subscribing households add one new wind turbine to the grid. While the transactional purchase of wind power is not a realization of the vision of commoning, it does offer some agency and self-awareness of our systems-embedded lives that aims to help create a conceptual foundation toward power-nature commons.

EXHIBIT 2. CROSSING BOUNDARIES: FOLLOWING THE FLOW, AND DISCOVERING OURSELVES MIDSTREAM

My early explorations, such as *Artifacts of Flow* and documenting the upstream power plants for *Switch*, launched journeys that I took by myself, examining my own embeddedness in larger infrastructures. As I approached my final master's project, I

turned my attention toward where this line of inquiry might lead, and realized I wanted to offer this embodied journey experience to others. I designed an experiential curriculum called *Systems Journey* (later renamed *Earth Systems Journey*). This was a hybrid, interdisciplinary model that was both curriculum and experiential art, along the lines of “social practice” art forms. In 2011 I launched *Downstream/Upstream*, which was the first artwork to implement the model and which also incubated the model that developed along with the project. Over the next 10 years, nearly a dozen other *Earth System Journeys* have been performed, with more being planned as of this writing. See Figure 2.

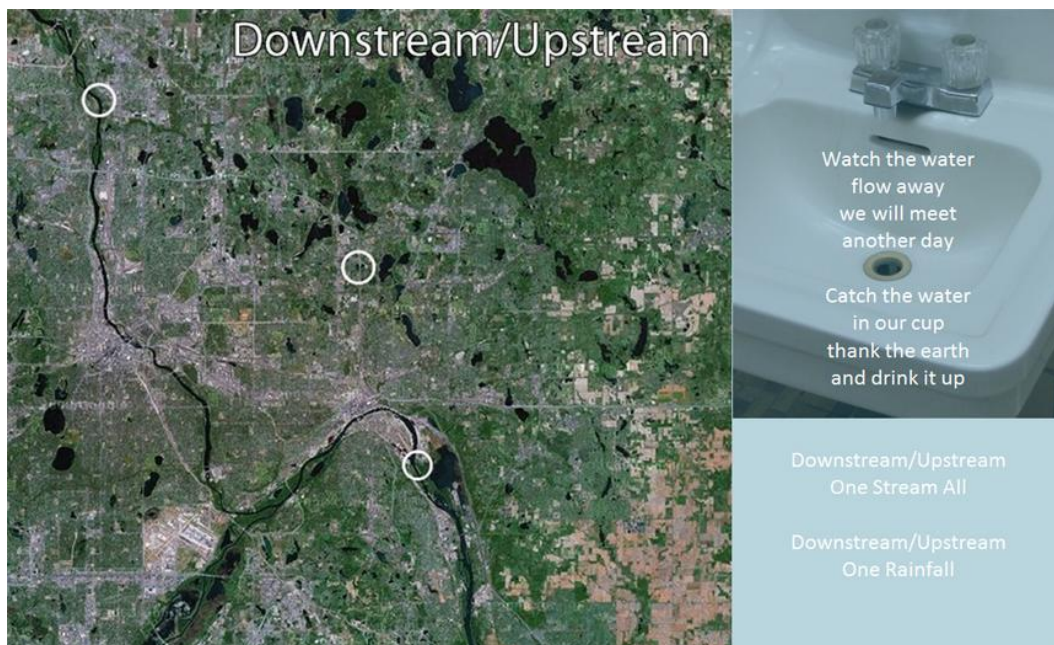


Figure 2. *Downstream/Upstream*. Jonee Kulman Brigham, Full Spring Studio, 2011-2012. Shown: Images from the *Downstream/Upstream* website of a map of key points in the journey, the children’s sink that was the midpoint of the journey, and some of the lyrics to the *Downstream/Upstream* Song. Medium: Designed experience supported by multiple art objects: interactive wall map, photographs, visual journals, mosaics, song and lyrics performed by children, and project documentation in an exhibit. Dimensions: Twin Cities Metro Area approximately 20 miles from end to end. Date: May 31, 2011-August 31, 2012. Site: Little Canada, St. Paul, and surrounding area.

Earth Systems Journey is inspired by both systems thinking and the narrative form of a hero's journey. A hero's journey, according to Joseph Campbell (2008), takes the hero out of the world of the familiar into a world of exploration. In *Downstream/Upstream*, as the participants travel upstream to see where their water comes from, they find themselves first in a more natural setting, observing the sky, the rain garden, and the river that are upstream of their faucet. As they cross the river to the intake building where they meet the people who manage the water supply, they encounter the point in the landscape where the river becomes a resource. The loud intake pumps suck the river into pipes (filtering out the fish), and what is quite remarkable is that it is the same water that was just in the river, but now is an industrial input on its way to becoming safe drinking water. Ivan Illich (1985) describes two experiences of water: the "water of dreams," which is water we might experience in nature as picturesque, and "H₂O," which is commodified water, flowing out of the tap. It is in the taking and transporting of the water that it crosses a threshold of our conceptualization and starts to become a commodity.

As the participants travel alongside the water, they find it passing through multiple cities and watershed jurisdictions. They see it manipulated in giant tanks and treated with various methods before it is sent out through water mains. They see the giant water tower that it is stored in, the place it enters their building, the water meter that measures its use, and finally the sink, where they can play a part in activating this entire chain of events just by turning on the tap. One of my goals was that in the future, when the participants turn on the tap, they will remember that the water came from the Mississippi River, right where they visited. I want them to perceive themselves as midstream of a larger flow.

Remembering the common source of the water- helps the participants realize that while we manipulate the quality of water, we do not make water. It comes to us from the natural world, we take it, change it, use it, and as they later learn, it goes down the drain or the toilet, through the wastewater treatment plant back to the river. Many

boundaries of water jurisdictions have been crossed, and the journey reveals that these jurisdictions are secondary to water's singular, continuous flow. Our downstream is the next city's upstream in this shared resource that flows through our lives. While *Switch* peered from point of use beyond the boundary to suggest our interconnectedness, *Downstream/Upstream* crosses the boundary – many boundaries. The artwork aims to foster a sense of water as a shared resource and then, through a stewardship project, act on the mutual responsibility suggested by seeing that we are “one stream all.”

EXHIBIT 3. DISSOLVING THE BOUNDARIES: COMMUNION AND DWELLING WITHIN

In 2020, in the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic, with summer enrichment activities suspended, I decided to create an “Earth Camp” for my sons, then 13 and 15. We worked within the bounds of our 1/3 acre property. I began to map out projects in an artist's book, using our property lines as a reference point. Meanwhile, our street was being torn apart and new infrastructure was being installed. I felt the inward, homebound feeling of the time and expressed this in dark, thickened property-line marks on my artist's book map. This contrasted with colored lines extending past the boundary representing all the utilities that run along the street and to our home: natural gas, power, water, sewer, and communications. How mechanically negotiated it seemed our inner world was with the outer world.

Amid this activity, I was invited to participate in an international exhibition integrating art, science, and sustainability that was a cultural exchange between artists in Minnesota and artists in Siberia, with an online exhibit of video works that would also be part of a physical installation in Novosibirsk, Russia. Thinking of communicating across languages, cultures, and across the globe got me reaching for something more universal and common than the particulars of infrastructure locally. I thought of the actual material of the Earth in its sphere, how reaching across the globe invokes the thickness and depth of the Earth we share as common ground. I thought of our common experiences with the boreal forest, and northern climates, and moss, and the shared

threat to our northern climates as Minnesota moose disappear at the same time Siberian permafrost recedes. The common climate-related losses highlight the common environmental experiences we share. My usual work with infrastructure might have parallels in Siberia, but it is more local in its expression. I wanted to reach a larger shared infrastructure – one with which we have a more direct shared experience. And so, I engaged the earth systems themselves, our shared infrastructure of life. I created a structure and an associated video called *Shelter*. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. *Shelter*. Jonee Kulman Brigham, Full Spring Studio, 2021. Shown: Still image from *Shelter* video during a transition from interior to exterior video footage. Medium: Structure (reclaimed cedar planks, cloth, earth), Enactment (artist approaches, enters, lies down in, and exits structure), “Shelter” Video (in three parts: Sheltering, Making Shelter, Remembering Shelter, including footage of enactment, reflection, sketches, contextual images, and poetry). Dimensions: (structure) 8 ft w x 12 ft l x 5 ft h.

We often think of shelter as an act of separation. We shelter “from” something to separate ourselves from harsh elements, whether it is hot or cold weather, wind, sun, rain, snow, vermin, or other people who could harm us or steal our belongings. Sheltering from the elements of the surroundings can provide a sense of safety and security. But taken to extremes, sheltering does not satisfy. We are communal beings and need to balance our separation with our connectedness. So I built a shelter to

protect us from our isolation, holding a space that was debounded to enable communion with the environment.

The Shelter structure resembles roof rafters set into the ground. Mimicking the form of a roof or a tent, it is only symbolic protection. There are neither walls nor roof sheathing nor floor to mitigate the weather. *Shelter* is designed to be experienced from within – or to imagine experiencing it from within. And it is here, within a space delineated but still permeable, that physical perimeters of people and places may be questioned and debounded. *Shelter* reaches for common experience across cultures, connecting people in a shared affective bond for our northern climates and our ever more fragile winters.

CONCLUSION

If commons systems depend on the premise of a “Nested I” and thrive in part on affective bonds to place (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), then it seems there is good work for art to do as an enabling infrastructure, fostering the paradigms of connectedness and care that create fertile ground for commons to grow. Even more transforming than promoting this paradigm in protected commons zones is reorienting the modern mind to realize what ecologists, professionals in planetary health, and other species already see: There is one atmosphere we share. The earth is ultimately a commons in that it can’t truly be owned, nor can its magnificent complexity be effectively governed solely by property owners and bordered nations with commodifying mindsets. Our human-made boundaries are fragile fabrications, limited in their utility. This is evident when floods cross our borders without any regard for our concepts of ownership, or when aerial photos show the ghosts of old river paths below squared-off farm fields, or when birds and butterflies migrate across continents, free from our illusions of division below.

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Disclosure

Jonee Kulman Brigham is also affiliated with the University of Minnesota. She is the owner of Full Spring Studio, which owns the Earth Systems Journey curriculum model referenced in this article. This relationship has been reviewed and managed by the University of Minnesota in accordance with its conflict of interest policies.