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HIKING WITHOUT NATURE

Mobile Media Happenings and the Performance of Everyday Wilderness

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INDETERMINATE HIKES +
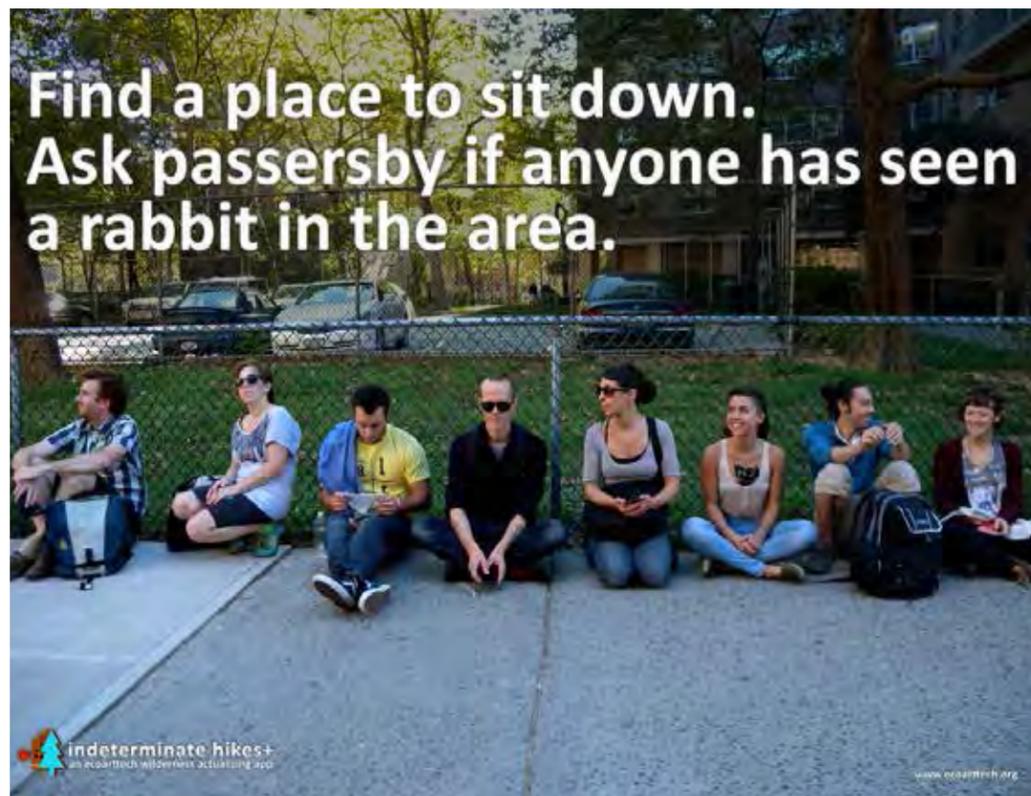
What is a waterfall? A cascade of water tumbling over boulders, brilliant in the sun, beckoning backpackers with sturdy leather boots to climb into remote, magical valleys? Or inspiring tourists to follow road signs to popular, sublime spectacles, such as Niagara Falls. Or the path taken by droplets of moisture falling to the sidewalk from an air conditioner hanging out of the window of an eleventh-floor apartment in NYC.

In 2011, our ecology, art, and technology collaborative launched a mobile phone app called Indeterminate Hikes + (IH+) that re-imagines ecological awareness. Ecoarttech's post-disciplinary work fuses theory with creative practice to deconstruct traditional environmental categories, showing the limits of preoccupations with wilderness, nature, and the rural and exploring the sort of ethics that might arise from cities, suburbs, the cultural commons, and even the "virtual" environments created by new media technologies. A significant part of our practice is the effort to rethink the remoteness and inaccessibility so often applied to "nature" or "wilderness" in contemporary critical theory. This separation of the social from the natural has silenced public, democratic discourse about environmental issues, according to Bruno Latour, and for Timothy Morton, modern thinking has turned "Nature" into "a reified thing in the distance, 'over yonder,' under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener… in the wild," preventing "access to the full scope of [ecological] interconnectedness" (Latour 75). When we co-founded ecoarttech five years earlier, our aim was to create eco-art "without nature"—to borrow a new phrase from Morton's book, *Ecology without Nature*—and to examine what it means to be an ecological being in the context of convergent networked environments, biological, digital, social, and cultural, from biological systems and industrial grids to media networks and the world wide web. Indeterminate Hikes +, enters into dialogue with theories like those posited by Latour, Morton, and others by bringing nature out from its "reified," faraway realm and into daily life. However, Indeterminate Hikes holds onto the concept of wilderness—not as a synonym for an originary Nature, which is ethically and intellectually immobilizing concept, as Latour and Morton point out; but rather as otherness, the unimaginable, that is both part of and beyond the self, wilderness can call on us to see un-wild environments in bewildering ways. In the IH+ smart phone app, the discourse of sublime wilderness is imported into everyday locales, transforming chance encounters

on the street into public performances of bio-cultural diversity and wild "happenings." Inspired by the way Fluxus in particular, and early- to mid-twentieth-century avant-garde art movements in general, reinvigorated the way we see mundane life rituals, IH+'s artistic gesture refracts this ethical impulse into the contemporary concern of about the environment.
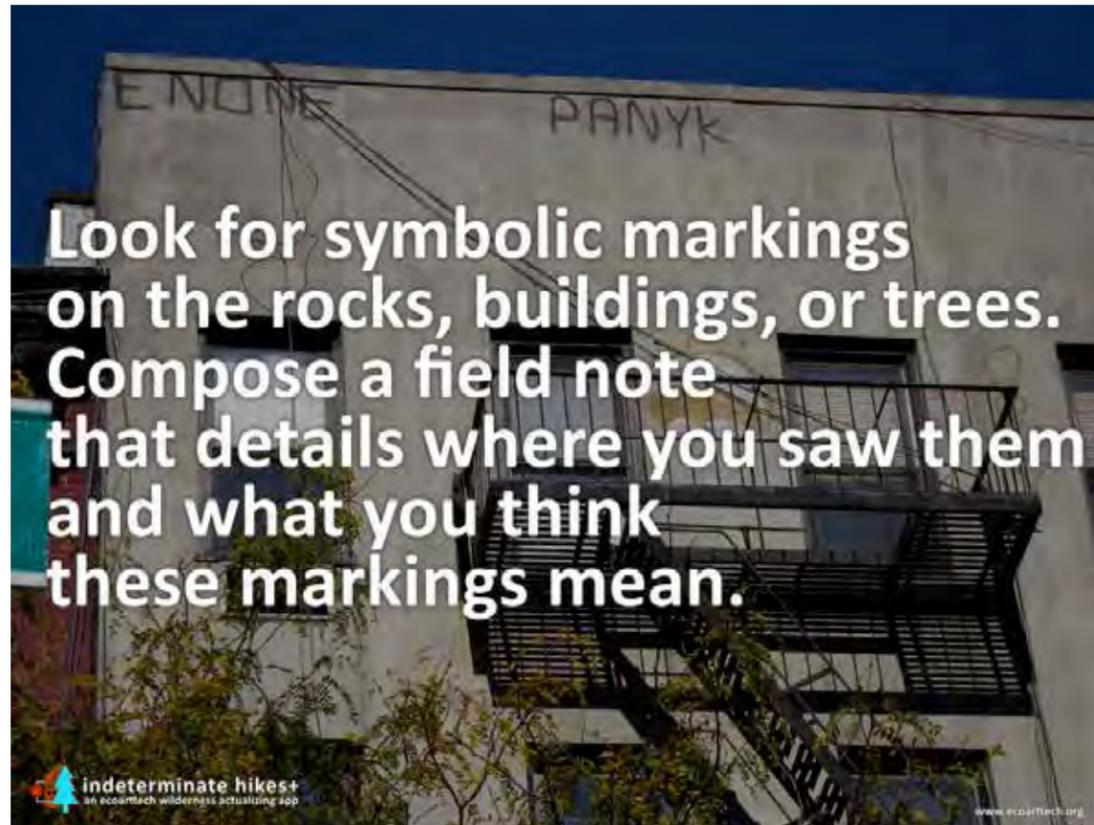
In 1961, four years after he coined the term, Fluxus artist Allan Kaprow described happenings "as events that, put simply, happen." Unlike theatrical performances, happenings are improvisational, with "no structured beginning, middle, or end." "Open-ended and fluid," they dissolve the artist-audience hierarchy through interactivity, "melting the surroundings, the artist, the work, and everyone who comes to it into an elusive, changeable configuration." Kaprow noted that happenings should take place faraway from galleries and museums and instead occupy places such as artists' studios or the "sheer rawness of the out-of-doors or the closeness of dingy city quarters." The more "un-artiness" the context, the better. Adopting a metaphor with ecological and natural history resonances, Kaprow suggests that the most "radical Happenings flourish" require an appropriate "habitat": that is, "the place where anything grows up… giv[ing] to it not only a space, a set of relationships to the various things around it, and a range of values, but an overall atmosphere as well, which penetrates it and whoever experiences it." This atmosphere of inter-connectedness produces new forms of awareness for all involved—but without any particular, intended goal: "nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences to which we are more than normally attentive." The only assured result of such a performance is the possibility of becoming attuned to any number of vague "occurrences" (Kaprow 16-18).

New media art in general—due to its ephemerality, performativity, interactivity, and use of everyday computing devices—cannot be understood without Kaprow's concept of the happening (Wardrip-Fruin 83). Yet we would like to show how IH+ performs a particularly ecological, psycho-geographical kind of happening, adapting Fluxus guidelines for performances to the democratization and re-imagination of nature and wilderness. IH+ can be performed in two capacities: (1) as an interactive public event led by artists with audience interaction—an open-ended hiking excursion, with no clear beginning or conclusion, conducted by "guides" who facilitate an interactive, un-arty, improvisational tour; or (2) as a private event, involving a solo user and her/his smart phone. If we return to Kaprow's 1960s writings, we find that both manifestations qualify as typical happenings: there are "guided tour" performances, but with most happenings, he explains "there should not be (and usually cannot be) an audience" (64). Providing examples of such solitary happenings, art-as-life activities with no public staging, he includes "the unconscious daily rituals of the supermarket, subway ride at rush hour, and tooth brushing every morning" (87). During an age of ubiquitous computing devices, walking by oneself and using a smart phone for its guiding and mapping tools is surely a new "unconscious ritual" of everyday life.

Take a picture of a cloud. If there are no clouds, improvise as you see fit.

indeterminate hikes+

Here is a technical description of how the app works, which we will follow with a discussion of its theoretical implications. Once IH + participants have downloaded the app, they provide their locations—whether in a mega-metropolis, a remote small town, or a traffic-jammed suburb—as long as it is identifiable through Google maps, and in turn, the app suggests a "hiking trail." As the hikers move along their trails, either alone, in a group, or as part of a designated ecoarttech performance, they are notified when they reach a "Scenic Vista," where they are encouraged to pause and contemplate the view, much as they would during a mountain climb or a national park excursion, or at one of those pull-off stops along a scenic highway. At these stops, the app asks participants to engage in three activities. First: to take 30 mindful breaths during a five-minute break. Second, the app provides a series of directives, such as "Follow the path of falling water," "Listen to the mood of the walking path," "Note the trees bursting from the ground," or "Wander the caverns on the surface of the earth." However, Indeterminate Hikes Scenic Vistas have a decidedly different character than what one might expect on a traditional wilderness excursion. Rather than the stereotypical breathtaking, sublime panorama, where cameras are inevitably pulled from pockets (often among many like-minded tourists) to document one's arrival at a meaningful landmark, IH+ is programmed to choose "Scenic Vistas" entirely at random. Therefore, these directives—many of which are provided by prior performance participants—take on meaning relative to their location.

Through backpacking terminology combined with Scenic Vistas' "chance operation"—a term associated with Fluxus performance artist John Cage, with whom Kaprow studied—the performance weds wilderness vocabulary to the most "civilized" spaces. This is not an ironic or sarcastic gesture. A "walking path" may be a nature trail or it may be a well-traveled concrete sidewalk; wandering "caverns" may require spelunking through caves or taking the stairs or elevators into the vast depths of basements or skyscrapers; "falling water" may be a brook flowing over rocks or the stream coming from an apartment supervisor's garden hose watering grass. No matter the shape of

the improvisational moment, both the artist-guides and the audience-hiker are encouraged to give these chance spectacles the attention they would give a sublime natural wonder. The sense of ecological wonder usually associated with sublime, "natural" spaces, such as isolated national parks, is applied instead to often-disregarded locations, such as alleyways, highways, or garbage dumps—just as the avant-garde worked to take art out of academia and the privileged art-world and into the ordinary. What if we redirected the sort of awe and respect normally reserved for museums, art galleries, wilderness parks, and nature preserves toward the rituals and places we experience every day? What if we call a sidewalk "wild" or tooth brushing "art"? How does this change our sense of ethical imagination?

For anybody invested in the purity of wilderness or unable to see the ecological "otherness" that exists all around us, IH+ can seem to have made a wrong step, and we have had participants leave our hikes in frustration. One man who found our performance nonsensical exclaimed that there were no "wild animals roaming around" as he stood at a NYC intersection busy with human pedestrians jostling their way into a subway entrance. It is also interesting to watch some participants' agitated expressions when the app asks them to "make friends with a tree"; apparently, this directive is a bit too "treehugger-ish". As with Kaprow's happenings, some hikers "are not sure what has taken

indeterminate hikes +

new york, ny > east village hike:

This is a IH+ Scenic Vista:
1. Stop here and say aloud:
"non-human animals are people too."
2. Scan the horizon for an animal that has a tail.
3. Ask the person with a tail what day of the week it is.
4. Text whatever response you get to someone you love.

place"; however, "when something goes 'wrong,' something far more 'right,' more revelatory, has many times emerged. This sort of sudden near-miracle… [is] made more likely by chance procedures" (20). With this in mind, the app asks all participants to capture and upload an image of their "near-miraculous" environmental observation to the IH+ website. This is the app's third, and last, directive. The images are archived in the Scenic Vista database, where they are browsable by online visitors. The growing collection of indeterminate nature photography demonstrates the de-hierarchization of environments, bringing domesticated, sometimes desecrated landscapes, to the level of consideration usually accorded only to "nature."

To download the Indeterminate Hikes+ app, visit http://www.ecoarttech.org/indeterminatehikes/index.html.
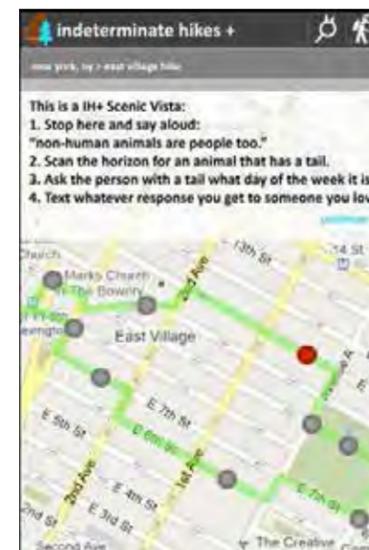
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