

# CASCADING MEMORIALS: URBANIZATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN SAN DIEGO AND BEYOND

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## ABSTRACT

*Cascading Memorials*, <http://www.ruthwallen.net/cascade.html>, offers a public space to mourn the devastatingly rapid changes to terrestrial environments due to the combined effects of climate change and urbanization. Memorials to specific sites are designed to capture the viewer's attention, ignite curiosity, and provide questions for reflection. The work provides a vitally important public space to grieve the immensity of our losses. Having opened our hearts, this grief can inform the values by which we design technologies and build socio-political institutions for sustainable futures where all species may flourish.

*In indigenous Africa, one cannot conceive of a community that does not grieve. In my village, people cry every day. Villagers believe that Westerners are afraid of emotion because they are afraid of a loss of control. Until grief is restored in the West as the starting place where the modern man and woman might find peace, the culture will continue to abuse and ignore the power of water, and in turn will be fascinated with fire." -Malidome Some, The Healing Wisdom of Africa*

Forests are dying throughout the western United States and Canada, and throughout much of the world. In the mountains north of the conference site and beyond, drought bark beetles are devastating Lodgepole, Pinon, and Ponderosa pines. Many forests are not only brown, but blackened in the wake of huge fires.

*Cascading Memorials* offers a place to grieve the astoundingly rapid changes and losses of wild spaces brought about by climate change and urbanization. Memorials focus memory. The work calls viewers/participants to attentiveness, to appreciate the splendor of their surroundings, to listen to the wisdom of scientists and the memories of elders, and to contemplate the rapidity at which the environments in which we live are changing.

The initial focus of *Cascading Memorials*, developed as an installation and web site, is San Diego County, my home for many years. Characterized by diverse habitats and extremely rapid population growth, from 60,000 to over three million inhabitants in the last one hundred years, San Diego is home to more threatened and endangered species than any other county in the continental United States.

The installation consists of memorials to particular sites indicative of habitats that are rapidly changing or

disappearing due to the present and potential effects of urbanization and climate change. Each memorial presents layered text and image designed to capture the viewer's attention, ignite curiosity, and provide questions for reflection. Immediately visible upon entering the space are large elaborate photomontages. Like memory, these montages fragment and recombine images, compressing or expanding space to evoke a feeling sense of each locale. Simple poetic questions along the gallery wall, above or below the montages, invite contemplation about the images on view. These questions are amplified in the sketchbook pages that combine text, drawings, and photographs, providing scientific and historical context and more detailed questions for consideration. In the web site and future installations, I also plan to add audio, mixing ambient sound and interviews with those intimately familiar with the sites.

## A Closer Look: How do we fully nurture each seedling?

Let's take a closer look at some of what I've found in San Diego. Huge fires devastated San Diego County in 2003 and 2007 burning most of the conifers in the county. Overzealous fire suppression in the past was a major contributing factor, but drought and bark beetle infestation, brought about at least in part by climate change, made trees more



Figure 1 "Cuyamaca Forest" archival pigment print, 42"x24"



Figure 2 "Cuyamaca Forest" archival pigment print, 40"x24"



vulnerable. All of these events foreshadow even more perilous future conditions.

As I explain in the sketchbook pages, some believe that the 2003 fire burned so hot that it destroyed conifer seeds, even though they are adapted to sprout after fire. Arguing that the only way that the forests can be restored is through clearing the underbrush and reseedling, private foundations are raising money to support this activity. Other scientists contend that the forest is best left alone, that the nitrogen-fixing ceanothus now covering the hillsides a necessary first step in regeneration. Regardless of how foresters now intervene, except for one mountain in the northwest of the county that was spared in recent fires, most of us who were adults at the time of the fire won't experience mature conifer forests again in San Diego County during our lifetimes.

### Can we contain human influence?

In San Diego County, wild lands are concentrated in the border region. Otay Mountain, the subject of the sketchbook pages below, is home to approximately twenty threatened and endangered species. Here, I try to communicate the complexity of factors leading to the decline of wild places.



Figure 3 "Otay Mountain Sketchbook," archival pigment prints, 23"x10"

### Are we willing to heed the cry of the dying oaks?

Oaks are more common in San Diego County than conifers, and are capable of regenerating after fire, as the entire tree is rarely killed. But in recent years oaks have begun to die, mysteriously. The culprit has been identified as the Goldspotted Oak Borer, probably introduced on firewood from Arizona or Mexico. While in its former range, populations were held in check by predators or climate, borers are rapidly spreading throughout San Diego and potentially northward. Meanwhile sudden oak death, another introduced pathogen, is moving southward through forests in northern California and Oregon. Drought, pollution, frequent fires, and other stressors increase the susceptibility of oaks. To slow dispersal, in the southlands visitors are admonished not to move firewood, and in the north to be careful to clean their shoes. In sketchbook pages I ask, are we willing to think more expansively and address all of the underlying conditions that make trees more susceptible to new pests and diseases?



Figure 4 "Pine Creek 1," archival pigment print, 80"x30"



Figure 5 "Pine Creek 2," archival pigment print, 78"x30"

### A Public Space to Grieve

I realize that haunting images and disturbing information alone simply leads to mind-numbing hopelessness. Such is the case, I believe, with many photographic exhibitions addressing environmental devastation. Instead of invoking passivity however, I invite the viewer/participant to actively reflect and respond. Instead of sinking into despair, I encourage viewers to open their hearts, to share personal experiences, and read those of others. At the center of the installation and prominently placed on the web site, is a place to grieve. In installations the place to grieve might consist of a pile of leaves, or a low pedestal with cushions, always accompanied by journals where participants can share their personal recollections of places or particular plants, birds and animals that have perished. On the web viewers are asked to contribute to a blog.

I believe that public grieving is an essential step in acknowledging the current ecological crisis, and working toward a future where all species may flourish. In the process of grief, when the flow of life feels temporarily halted, and one

faces the ache of loosing loved ones, hearts open. Compassion arises. Sense perceptions are heightened. One is touched by the full poignancy of the living world. In this opening it is possible to feel not only heartbreak, but also the vital interconnectedness of the living world.

Unfortunately, there is little place for mourning in a fast-paced consumer society that constantly offers new aids towards the quest for continuous pleasure. Furthermore, there is no space for mourning losses of non-human beings, save perhaps pets. Moreover, in an increasingly globalized society, where human technological prowess is ever more evident, we are bombarded both by images of trauma from around the globe and of apocalyptic warnings of wartime or ecological disasters brought about by the very technology that has in so many ways improved human standards of living. For many, the extent of losses to real or imagined trauma feels so overwhelming that grief seems impossible.

In contrast, in *Cascading Memorials*, I make the subjects of grief tangible and manageable, offering memorials to specific places. I begin in my community, in San Diego, where I have lived for years. Having moved away for the current year, I am now extending beyond only to other places where I have also lived or visited repeatedly. So as not to objectify places, in addition to the visuals I provide complex and sometimes contradictory information about the changes occurring and their many probable causes, while also raising unanswered questions. Just as I have formed my personal relationship with the places I share, I invite viewers do the same, sharing their personal feelings about the places they've lost or their interactions with plants and animals that are disappearing.

In a public space of grieving, one is not alone. While Aldo Leopold writes that the consequence of ecological awareness is living, "alone in a world of wounds," collective sharing breaks this isolation (Leopold 165). It has the potential to offer not only solace, but greater possibility of meaningful action.

In her essay, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," Mortimer-Sandilands describes the lack of grieving, prevalent in the postmodern or anthropocene age as living in a state of suspended melancholia. In this state grief is internalized. Objects of loss are displaced or fetishized. She contends that this process of displacement gives rise to "nature-nostalgia," manifesting in such activities as ecotourism and even campaigns to preserve a particular species or wilderness area. Such practices, although well-meaning, tend to deify a mythic-idyllic view of the natural world. Nature becomes a commoditized fantasy. In such actions environmental destruction is incorporated "into the ongoing workings of commodity capitalism" (Mortimer-Sandilands 333).

Similarly, I worry that the title of this conference, "Machine Wilderness" could be interpreted as reinscribing, a problematic dichotomous thinking that idealizes both machine and wilderness in irreconcilable opposition. As William Cronon explains in his influential essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,"

dualistic perspectives that idealize wilderness create an irresolvable conundrum, placing humans outside of the desired state: "If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not" (Cronon 80).

While my work does include images of wild spaces, instead of the heroic sublime, I present a fragmented, layered perspective, not of an idyllic, static wild, but of dynamic systems undergoing unusually rapid change. I try to share not an idealized aesthetic but an intimate personal expression of the rich and wondrous experience of these places.

### A Place to Imagine

Fear of grief, fear of facing the immensity of environmental devastation, fear of unending despair, is understandable. But not meeting this fear has significant consequences, a psychic numbing, or as Richard Anderson asserts in a widely circulated op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*: "the alternative is a sorrow deeper still: the loss of meaning" (Jan 7, 2001). Instead, allowing sadness to flow can reawaken our empathic relationship to all living systems, human and non-human, and reignite imagination. My work not only offers a place to grieve, but "A place to envision a future where all species may flourish." While Kubler-Ross's well-known five stages of grief may end with "acceptance," a better term might be integration. Part of the process of grieving is to make meaning or sense of the loss. Just as many who've lost loved ones to cancer or senseless violence support organizations or research designed to address the causes of their loss, so to grieving for losses of wild places can lead to ethical action. In the installation of *Cascading Memorials*, I not only offer a place to grieve publicly but I invite participants to share their images of the future by responding to several prompts, including those asking for visions of individual and collective responsibility, on leaves to be placed on bare trees painted on the wall.

To turn to the conference title again, it is important to interrogate not just the meaning of "wilderness," but of "machine." Modernist mythology is based on the assertion that machines will somehow emancipate humans from the drudgery and capriciousness of nature, but just as postmodern insight suggests that humans are embodied in the natural world, so too it implies that technology and nature are increasingly intertwined. Technology and "nature" are both integral and interrelated parts of the systems within which we live. As human beings we must take responsibility for how we employ and care for both plants and animals, our fellow beings and the technology we produce.

I assert the importance of grief in the context of this conference because I feel that it is vitally important to mourn the rapidity of change of natural ecosystems of which we are part. The experience of grief must inform the development of technological alternatives so that we can create sustainable futures based on empathy and compassion. The language of sustainability is largely written in human reference points: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly Mar 20 1987). While this language is a necessary reminder that ecological responsibility must include social justice, experiencing grief over the rapidity of diminishing populations



of non-human creatures and devastation of habitats affirms the sanctity of non-human life and compels one to re-imagine a future where all species may flourish. Many scientists have stated that we possess the technology to make changes to quell global warming, but lack social/political will. Touching our grief can help mobilize that will. Our sorrow demands an ethical system, economy, and technology based on sustaining all life forms.

The title of my work, *Cascading Memorials*, echoes the present day realities, where stories of current and potential ecological devastation seem to mount with each news report. The title is intended as a call to attentiveness, to place in public memory the rapidity of present day changes. However the title is also meant to be a call for hope, to offer the possibility that instead of sinking into despair and resignation, through the public sharing of grief, we can generate new vision so that memorials of the future may look very different than those I am creating in the present day.

#### ENDNOTES

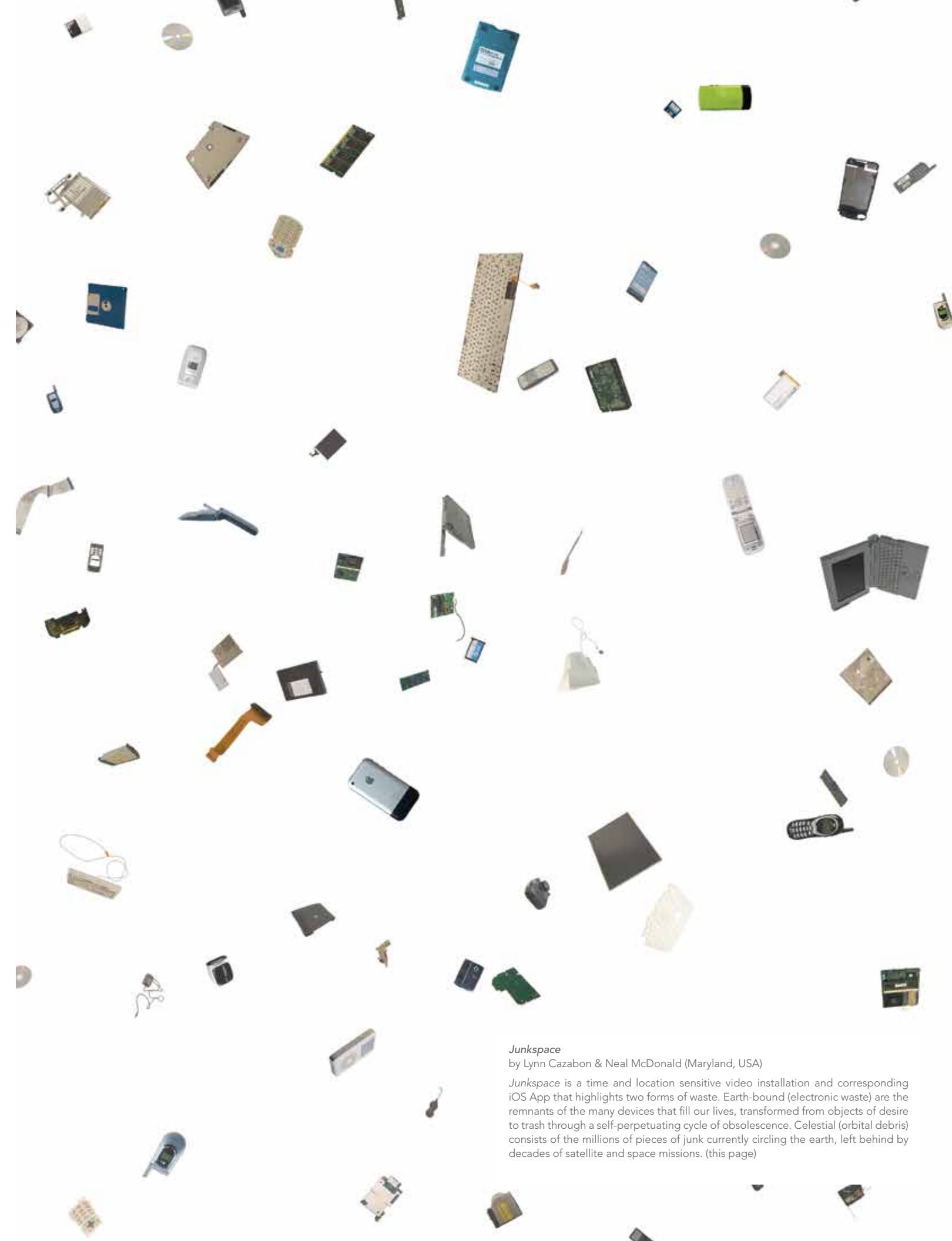
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*Junkspace*  
by Lynn Cazabon & Neal McDonald (Maryland, USA)

*Junkspace* is a time and location sensitive video installation and corresponding iOS App that highlights two forms of waste. Earth-bound (electronic waste) are the remnants of the many devices that fill our lives, transformed from objects of desire to trash through a self-perpetuating cycle of obsolescence. Celestial (orbital debris) consists of the millions of pieces of junk currently circling the earth, left behind by decades of satellite and space missions. (this page)