

## Signals from Another World (i)



*'Signals From Another World'* was a collaborative project with artist Darren Ray. The project took place between 19 July / 13 August 2018 at the Roja Art Lab, Latvia.

“What are the forms of culture still capable of assuming the shape of a chorus, an assembly? Which cultural forms might help build communities in which a multitude of diversities might be expressed as a collective force, as a voice able to articulate its discourse, its desires, and give shape to its politics, even if just for a specific period of time?” Andris Brinkmanis

“When the present has given up on the future we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potentials of the past.” Mark Fisher

“In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are.” Walter Benjamin

### Rationale

In the final scene of ‘A Silent Running’ (1972) a mournful Joan Baez track accompanies a long shot of the forest geo-dome as it is seen softly drifting into deep space, perhaps a metaphor for failed and fading utopian hopes, the seemingly inevitable slow cancellation of future desires. This sovereign vision of the forest geo-dome and its slow, inevitable demise seems prescient as less than 5 years later the once acclaimed utopian geo-domes at Drop City, Colorado had all but been abandoned by the Dropper community, the site quickly falling into ruin, utopian dreams literally and metaphorically crumbling. Such imaginaries were perhaps representative of how wider visionary counter cultural desires, experimental utopias in America and psychedelic consciousness of the time were perceived as ending.

Official narratives promoted such stories as evidence that counter cultural ideals, rural hippie communes like Drop City could never be viable – that failed dreams, disenchantment and wide spread disillusionment were inevitable. As counter culture ideals receded, the relieved mainstream, and dominant narratives suggested that the communal livers should now grow up, go back to work and behave like respectable, honest citizens. There were, however, alternative but lesser known narratives which reverse and challenge these attitudes.

Intentionally shying away from public scrutiny, and otherwise completely ignored by the mainstream were an unnamed collective who had emerged from the ruins and debris of Drop City in the late 70’s. Very little is known about the collective as there is almost no record of the existence of the group beyond anecdotal stories, local rumours, and a few unverified relics and poor quality fogged images of group members and partially constructed dwellings. However, the story is compelling and still represents a counter narrative to official reports, and a way of speculating with ideas suggested above by Brinkmanis, Fisher, and Benjamin.

What is known is the unnamed group came together following the closure and abandonment of Drop City. They collected quantities of materials from the original site, salvaging timber, metal sheeting, and basic tools and repurposed the materials to fabricate their own community of shelters, establishing a transitory community based between Elkhart and Ulysses, downstate Kansas.

In contrast to Droppers and the utopian ideals that had inspired the original members of Drop City this new group were fuelled by darker, more dystopian imaginaries. They rejected the peace and free love narratives associated with hippies as naïve and redundant, and were instead proto punks, anarchists interested in sci-fi, afro-futurism, negation, and darkness. They were no longer inspired by visionary utopian futures but by bleaker scenarios of impending collapse – their dwellings were designed as temporary escape pods which could float or roll in response to a pending but as yet unnamed catastrophe.

Rather than forming a visible extrovert community of dwelling places, the pods were scattered throughout the landscape, intentionally hidden from public view in ravines, crevices and wooded areas. If discovered by locals the pods would be disassembled and moved to a new location ensuring that the collective would be impermanent, portable, almost impossible to locate and identify. The collective mainly built pods as shelters but also as pop up schools, in particular to educate the community in methods of resilience, foraging, fire building, and water purifying – preparations for future scenarios.

The collective met regularly to share information, music, and to read stories and poetry together – they were obsessed with storytelling, with reimagining the future through Sci-fi, afro futurism, and electronica. They avoided the mainstream, the well-known path and were inspired to share materials that were obscure, off-beat, typically ignored. Even during bad weather and winter storms they continued the storytelling by using CB radio to broadcast information and stories. Occasionally these broadcasts would be picked up by Truck drivers travelling between Kansas and Colorado, and the collectives weird and futuristic stories became a talking point amongst Trucker communities, even being given their own handler 'Signals from Another World'. The last reported broadcast was heard in 1978 and no sighting of the group has occurred since.

## **Project**

40 years later the story is little known, and exists today mainly as anecdote and rumour, as such almost erased from public consciousness. Ray & Webster proposed to use this partial, hidden story as the starting point and catalyst for the project at Roja Art Lab, Latvia.

Their intention was to practically explore this little known dystopian narrative by re-fabricating a full-scale escape pod structure, experimentally replicating structures from documentary photos and utilizing the building processes used at Drop City. They basically repurposed a geodesic structure so that it became a pod, an escape vehicle of sorts. Once built, they used the escape pod as a site from which to broadcast stories, songs, readings, to generate new narratives.

Writers, musicians, and artists from Latvia, USA, UK, and Germany were invited to contribute materials for the broadcasts. Initial thoughts about the content of the broadcasts was that they would be recordings of song, spoken word, film and audio, somehow relating to “unactivated potentials”, materials that have been overlooked, relics that have been forgotten and ignored. The aim was to broadcast playlists of unofficial stories of and for the marginalised and disappeared and to transmit these daily as “signals from another world”.

One inspiration for this was the story of Latvian Writer, Theatre Director, Educator and Thinker, Asja Lacis whose work, ideas and influence were, through much of the 20th century, intentionally ignored, and in the case of her contribution to texts by Walter Benjamin erased. The ignorance and erasure of Lacis from dominant narratives acted as a catalyst and motivation to speculate upon her thinking and other, alternate stories erased or neglected by official histories.

The resulting playlist was composed of many forms including: poetry, yoga lessons, political analysis, hypnotherapy, history, cooking recipes, labour protests, drawing classes, birdsong, field-recordings, meditation, resilience training and even love declarations! The content of the broadcasts became an open-ended opportunity to playfully bring together diverse forms, and materials, to assemble these in the shape of a chorus, an assembly to speculate upon how one might think differently, perhaps towards an alternative world, different times and imaginaries.

The live stream also included performances including readings by Elita Kļaviņa (The Riga New Theater) of texts by Tim Okser.

The sculptural construction remains sited on the edge of a wooded area in Roja.

## **Signals From Another World (ii)**

Ray & Webster have been invited back to Roja to undertake the second stage of the project which will commence during the summer 2019. The structure will be transported to the RojaArtLab and in collaboration with Riga based architect Oskars Redbergs and curator Maris Grosbahs, will be transformed into a pod dwelling/shelter. The pod will become the future home for micro-residency projects.