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To Oakley and Selma, and the rest of the future

7

THE ACTION OF POETRY

Lori Ryker

Many years ago, I had the romantic notion that I needed to go in search of a mentor to help guide me through my early professional choices. It had to be someone I had yet to meet or read about, given that I had no one specifically identified. Yet, I had in my mind that I would share the discovery of this mentor in a book. The search led to Samuel Mockbee and Coleman Coker. The year I started writing the book, *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process*, was the year Mockbee started Rural Studio.[1] While working on the book I had the opportunity to speak often with Mockbee about his ideas and commitment to Rural Studio. Although the idea of Rural Studio originated from inside Mockbee's practice with Coker, the program was tied to Auburn University from the beginning. What I could not know at the time was how strong an influence Mockbee would have on my life's choices—not so much about the launch of my own designbuild program, but more due to his demonstration of our discipline's responsibility to put beliefs into action to benefit society. An interview Randy Bates and I conducted for the book left a profound impact on me. During the talk Mockbee stated: "If you aspire to a higher, more meaningful quality in your work, I think you can unify your interests and concerns by way of your personal life."[2] Mockbee stood up for and acted on his beliefs. He was eternally in search of the good in humanity and expressed this goodness through his mythic sense of the world, a search I could relate to. The commitment to "take on" is one of the great life lessons I gained from him and that grounded me when I explored the ideas that became the foundation for Remote Studio.

At Remote Studio's core lay two long-time preoccupations of mine. Early in my teaching career, I recognized when discussing the natural world with students that they either employ the word "nature" or the phrase "the nature." The presence or invisibility of "the" when discussing nature seems to present differences in their point of view or relationship to the world. Why would this be, that some people speak of nature around them using "the," such as, *I find the nature is inspiring*?

FIGURE 7.1 Remote Studio, exploring the Beartooth Mountain Wilderness
Source: Steve Harrop

Using "the" in the context of explaining an experience of nature provides a title to the word or phrase, such as "The Tower of London" or "The World Series." I believe that using the article "the" answers to an experienced sense of separation. This practice tends to distinguish people who conceive *nature* to be *us* from those who conceive nature to be *outside of us*, not a part of who we are. When nature is perceived and talked about as something distinct from us, I believe it carries evidence of the practices of an environmentally disengaged society.

Parallel to my preoccupation with nature is the consideration of the practicable differences between beauty and aesthetics. Beauty has an ancient history, recognized as a transcendent, intrinsic quality and partner to poetic expression.[3] From the Enlightenment forward, most philosophers were preoccupied not with the transcendent nature of beauty, but with questions of where beauty lies—with the person, in the object, somewhere between, or in the exchange of the experience.[4] These more recent concerns of beauty arose with the adoption of the scientific method and the shift that privileges objective knowledge.[5] Insistence on measurable facts and the repeatability of empirical knowledge relegates beauty to the unknowable because beauty cannot be measured. And because of this condition, beauty has lost its presence in our considerations of reality, discussions of experience, and what we understand to make up the world.

Aesthetics on the other hand, codified during the Enlightenment era when beauty suffered the inability to be analyzed, provides a way to speak about beauty's objective qualities. Through all variety of analysis of physical form, conditions, and characteristics, the taxonomy of aesthetics has been established to speak around

beauty, shifting the consideration of beauty from an experience to something objectified.[6] People feel comfortable with analysis that provides tangible, observable, and repeatable conditions.[7] Today we speak about and teach aesthetics while we disregard beauty itself. With inquiries and education redirected toward aesthetics that result in distancing from experiences with the world, we lose the ability to understand the origin of poetry.

We teach aesthetics, yet poetry does not come about from the application of aesthetics. Rather, poetry is born from our involvement with and our being a part of the world, an experience that also brings forth the experience of beauty.[8] As long as our conception of reality is dominated by the Enlightenment Era's intellectual perceptions and objectifications, we will continue to struggle with and yearn for a deeper sense of belonging to the world as well as struggle with an understanding of the origins of poetry.

These two preoccupations, nature and beauty, are prime motivations of Remote Studio. Specifically, the program was developed to help students gain experience through the lived inspirations of beauty, poetry, and the sense of being in the world.

Nature and beauty can be experienced in most places—cities and wilderness alike. However, the distractions of the modern world, particularly urban and suburban environments and all of their trappings, combined with the investment we make in abstract intellectual and physical constructs, have a powerful impact on our psyche, making an unmediated experience with self and nature nearly impossible. This difficulty affects how we understand ourselves, why we make the choices we do, and our faltering ability to understand and create poetic, integrated, and place-based environments. To provide students direct and unmediated experiences

FIGURE 7.2 Remote Studio, hiking into Pine Creek Lake, Absaroka/Beartooth Wilderness
Source: Lori Ryker

of nature and beauty, Remote Studio occurs in a unique area of the Northern Rockies. The Greater Yellowstone Eco Region is a remnant of wild landscape that holds some of the last large great predators in North America, a place where the modern world is mostly absent. A place you can truly get lost in and never return from.

For most people who have never experienced an *untrammeled landscape*,[9] it is difficult to comprehend the feel of such a place. To gain some understanding of the *lived* experience of Remote Studio, it is helpful to consider the conditions where most of us live and work every day. Most of our lives are negotiated and held between and within buildings with very definite boundaries. Consider how often or how many hours a day or a week we leave these environments to be out of doors.[10] What is the quality of these places and experiences? What are we doing when we are outside—jogging, playing tennis, or golfing? Or are we in the forest, ocean, desert, or mountains, just *being* with nature?

Consider the differences between the more articulated cultural out-of-doors experience that we refer to as recreational and the experience of *being* with nature.[11] Imagine if the constant experience of walls, roofs, and mechanical systems that enable us to presuppose that *we do not need to know what is beyond the walls* were to disappear. And instead of elaborate articulations, separations, and distinctions, we only had a thin piece of cloth between nature and us. Imagine this feeling for a

FIGURE 7.3 Remote Studio students on the Ridge of Gallatin Mountain Range
Source: Lori Ryker

night, a week, or for two months. The experience of walls and the definite separation from nature disappears, reliability is tested, and conditions are constantly changing.

The lived experience of "thinness" between what could be called civility and wildness provides students with the immediate and dynamic *experience of place*, not simply *thinking about place* through mechanisms that separate and abstract. The intent of experiencing the "thin" distinction between civility and wildness during Remote Studio is not to demonstrate that the world is unstable, but to provide opportunity for students to gain an intimate relationship with nature and to learn the difference between experiences "about" from experiences "of." *About* and *of* convey two different mindsets for how we conceive self and interact with the world. *About* indicates thoughts, feeling, and/or actions in relation *to* a place, person, or thing, while *of* connects us to something else. *About* is external and discursive (separate from) while *of* is intrinsic (connected to). *About* suggests that the world is perceived and known through analysis and abstractions that become objectified facts presented as verifiable knowledge parlayed into information to understand and apply. *Of* suggests rich, interrelated, and connected experiences with place, person, or thing. These different ways of thinking, speaking, and understanding ourselves in relation to the world concern me because I believe that the overreliance on the *about* mindset undermines our ability to be *of* (connected to) the world.[12]

The *about* mindset results in shallow thinking and feeling and is evidence of being disengaged from the world. Disengagement results in the collection of possessions that stand in for relationships and experiences with the world. The loss of the sense of being a part *of* the world also contributes to the loss of sensed value, specificity, and necessity of the world. From the *about* mindset the world is comprehended in generalized terms—earth, plants, and animals—easily becoming resource and amenity that make palatable and acceptable our activities that destroy the world. To live in a reality that is only understood in terms of *about* is to live in a reality in which poetry is seldom made or experienced.

Remote Studio's pedagogical experiment provides the opportunity to counter the overreliance on abstraction and disconnection, and encourages connected life practices and living *of* the world to experience all its roughness and refinement. The program is structured to provide experiences from which students learn of self and the world simultaneously as a continually lived relationship of the foundation for poetic inspiration and expression.[13]

The current configuration of Remote Studio runs for eight weeks every summer with eight to twelve students from universities throughout the United States. Any given semester, students from Montana to Bahrain, from Louisiana to Japan, from Korea to Mexico, from Texas to Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, attend the program for their "off campus" semester experience.

Remote Studio begins with two weeks of exploring, reading, discussing, making, camping, and hiking in some of the most physically challenging landscape of North America, not in order to become an accomplished hiker, but to provide students the opportunity of personal experience with the world. In preparation for what can be gained from these experiences, and the semester overall, three concepts are employed from which to discuss the philosophical core of Remote Studio and introduce the idea of a personal worldview.

Worldview and personal motivation are difficult subjects to broach in modern society because it is easier to operate from a less reflective and intimidating place. Yet, awareness of our experiences in the world, learning to express ourselves and understand the intentions that guide our actions, is critical for creative practice.[14] Jim Harrison's essay, "Nesting in Air," offers a glimpse into his worldview: "I think it was Santayana who noted that all people seem to have a secret religion hidden beneath, perhaps surrounding, their more public worship."[15] Harrison continues, "I wake as a mammal . . . as my consciousness begins its paintjob I frequently, but not always, go outside and bow to the six directions, mindful of the ironies involved. I don't mind if the gesture would appear absurd to someone else as I eventually have to die all by myself."[16] The honest and unapologetic words of Harrison stir something within us encouraging the consideration of our own beliefs and actions. His words provide a way to understand mindfulness, the halting of actions for a moment before going forward—physically and mentally.[17] Engaging in mindfulness while hiking and camping connects us to an expanded sense of the world, resulting in greater awareness of the consciousness of life itself without reflection or words.[18]

"Twenty minutes from my house, through the woods by the quarry and across the highway, is Hollins Pond, a remarkable piece of shallowness, where I like to go at sunset and sit on a tree trunk."[19] Annie Dillard is telling her story about meeting a weasel. "I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it."[20] So much of our lives are focused on the retention of information and facts leading us to believe that without objective knowledge we cannot operate properly in or *know* the world. Replaying them in our mind requires reflection and projections, disengaging us from the immediacy of the world. Forgetting, in the way that Dillard suggests, brings us into the present and benefits creativity and the creative process.[21] "[I] might learn something of mindlessness," she writes, "something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive."[22] Mindlessness, the state of preconsciousness, is required for poetic intuition, the unity of mind with spirit. The philosopher Alfred Whitehead refers to this experience as "participating in the extensive continuum," the practice of being "present in another entity."[23] We most often experience mindlessness when we stop worrying about the facts and reflecting on our experience, and instead simply move through the world. The unmediated moments of being in the world lead to the spark of creative intuition and self-discovery, the "flash" of inspiration, that becomes the idea we make into poetry.[24] We all know what these moments feel like, but we seldom recognize their role in our creative process. Mindfulness also

FIGURE 7.4 Remote Studio students encamped
Source: Eric Lundeen

has a role during these experiences, providing pause to recognize the power of the feeling and the spark of creative intuition. This momentary pause creates a memory of the experience and the feeling that serves the crafting of poetic intuition, what we call poetry. However, if we ignore the spark, we lose the potential for the expression and making of poetry.

The experience of the world also results in bruised feet, sore muscles, and hunger. The unhappy voice inside our heads after a long day on the trail can result in trudging. A state of mind that is not unique to hiking, but easily recognizable when carrying a heavy backpack on a trail. Trudging, we all know. When the voice inside our head tells us that what we are doing is too hard, that we cannot do it, that we do not want to do it. Trudging is the loss of engagement and the death of *being* in the moment, the lack of valuing where you are and being *of* the world. A straightforward reminder to keep ourselves from simply trudging through the world ensures that we do not miss the beauty that is always around us, and that we do not miss the potential spark of creative (poetic) intuition.

Mindfulness, mindlessness, and trudging serve to illustrate three ways of *existing* in the world, and support an understanding of how engaging in two of these experiences cultivates poetic intuition and creative expression. Discussions of these modes of existence are supported by the students' own experiences in the first few weeks of the program. Somewhere between blisters, moments of awe, miles on feet, and learning how to cook on an open fire, we read, we talk about what we read, and students begin to think about themselves and come into their own country. Who they have been, who they want to be, where they may go in their lives commingles with mindfulness of where they are—in reflection at the end of a day or during a pause for water next to a creek.

These experiences are translated into the student's expressions of self in relation to the world through the making of vessels, hand-crafted material "containers." In an effort to support the connection between experience, mindfulness, and the creative spark, vessels are often created in the backcountry, in the moment, without the opportunity to reflect or project, but simply to make. Situating vessels in the landscape where we hike, live, or work supports the immediate expression gained from the sensed intimacy of place. The making of vessels is typically restricted to found materials, bare hands, or hand tools to teach about the critical relationship craft has to the expression of an idea, and the necessary connection between mind and hand. Asking each student to explicitly relate their sense of the world through the vessels they make helps them gain an appreciation for the value of honesty and integrity, as Jim Harrison so gracefully demonstrates in "Nesting in Air." The discussions also provide an opportunity to learn how to speak about crafting intentions. This *out-of-the-box* and *out-of-the-classroom* approach lays the foundation for understanding that creative intuition and creative process are alive in all creative work, and not only in a studio process.

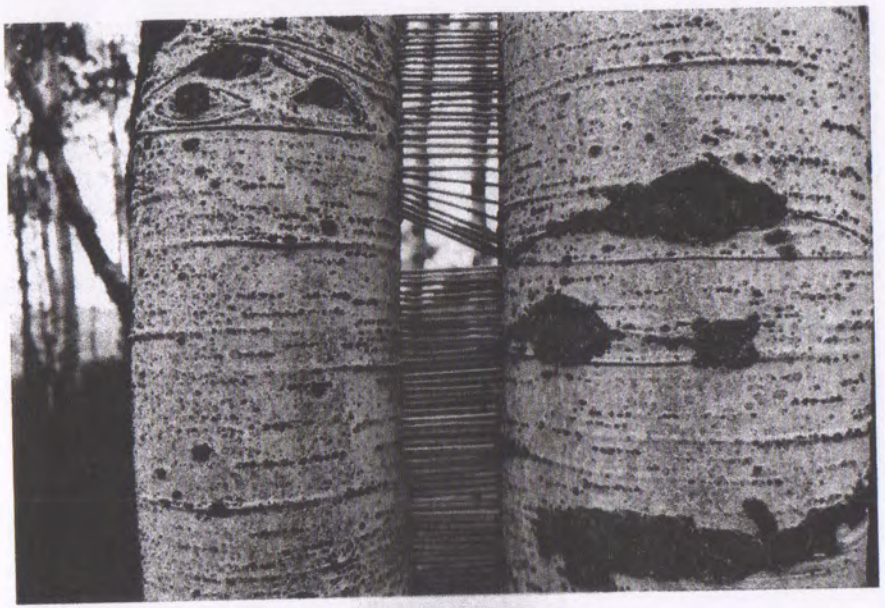

FIGURE 7.5 Vessel of Aspen and grass by Patricia Flores
Source: Patricia Flores

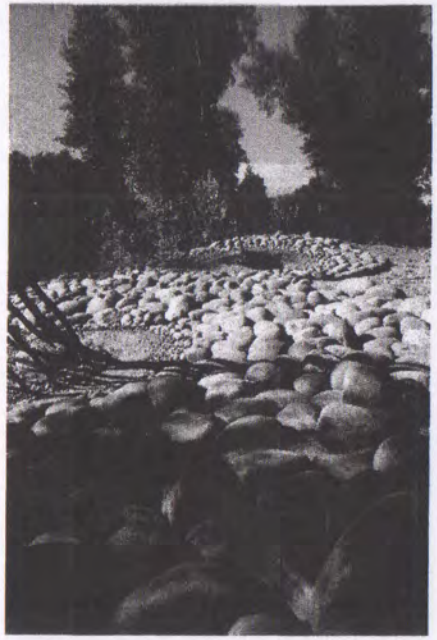

FIGURE 7.6 Vessel of river rocks and driftwood built by Charlie Dickson, Eva Hughes-Rodriguez, and Alek Hoffman at the West bank of the Snake River for the Inaugural Rendezvous Park project supported by Jackson Hole Land Trust and the LOR Foundation

Source: Hance Hughes

Some years after completing Remote Studio, Nash Emrich wrote of his experience,

> reading environmental essays, and simply sitting, reflecting by the riverbank, I felt like I was seeing the natural world through new eyes. I became acutely aware of my surroundings, and in turn, extended that awareness to what I was doing at Remote [Studio] and would be doing in my career. By immersing myself in nature, I not only formed a deeper appreciation for it, but more importantly, learned that our built environment must live in harmony with the natural world. To this extent, Remote Studio inspired my passion and responsibility to ensure that our future impact on this landscape is a sustainable one.[25]

While Nash's observations may seem straightforward, for most students, who have only ever known the creative process through formal architectural education, this realization can be expansive and liberating. For many it changes how they live in the world and the focus or method of their creative work. For some, the result may be poetry.

For the remaining six weeks of Remote Studio the students shift from the wilderness and making vessels to a community designbuild project that allows them

to put into practice their recent experiences and inspirations. The "thin" separation between wildness and civility continues as they sleep in wall tents and eat as a group, sometimes with a full indoor kitchen, but most often out of doors with a grill or Coleman stove. The earlier experiences gained from backpacking and hiking as a group not only serve to ground their consideration for the community project but also provide context and support for the collaborative working conditions required of the project. Their design explorations occur in flexible places such as community rooms of coffee shops or out of doors.

Reflection on their experiences in the wilderness supports the student's growing comprehension and integration of mindfulness, mindlessness, and the engagement of creative intuition during the design process. The exploration of the specific location for their project is enriched from practicing mindfulness, resulting in a more inclusive consideration of local plants, animals, people, land, water, and phenomena, combined with the full landscape context and the community's sense of place. From their experiences of immersion in the place, a more immediate and tangible understanding of environmental responsibility influences the student's consideration of the qualities of the site and search for material expression of their ideas. While not all Remote Studio projects achieve poetic expression, those that do, develop from the organic flow of the student's subconscious combined with the group's openness for a process that cannot be fully explained in rational terms. Allowing their creative intuition to guide them during design explorations pushes out preconceptions and assumptions of architectural outcomes and the post-rationalization of ideas recede from both their work and discussions. The formless inspirations that come about through intuition are engaged with mindfulness to develop form and materiality that embodies the student's sensed experiences of world, place, and landscape. From the beginning of the design process to the end of construction, the student's core architectural ideas that come from creative intuition grounds the final expression and provides the greatest potential for poetry.

In the search for material expression of their ideas, students learn what is available in lumber and steel yards as well as which materials are local and what is immediately available from the environment. Discussions of materials available in the surrounding community and landscape—willow, stone, reclaimed timber from a local mill or hand collected—expand their understanding of how these materials can reduce the labor and time required for the construction process while also generating an embodied tie between idea and place. Their expanding knowledge of materials provides a framework from which they gain the specificity of expression for the design. The search for appropriate techniques of construction encourages them to consider what unique abilities they already have that can be incorporated into the process. Over the years, weaving, knot tying, climbing, or a certain comfort in bartering for materials with a local resident have all played a part in each project's design. This work, a scaled-up version of the vessel process, results in the environmentally specific and often handcrafted aspects of Remote Studio projects.

Revisions and alternative solutions to the determined expression of the materials and details occur as the students are confronted with time constraints and the unanticipated realities of construction. These experiences can provide some of the best

FIGURE 7.7 Meghan Hanson and Tyler Swingle weave rope on the enclosure of the Tree Fort built by Remote Studio Summer 2012 for St. John's Episcopal Church, Jackson Hole, Wyoming
Source: Lori Ryker

lessons for creative practice and manifesting poetry if the students are reminded to return to their initial inspirations before acting. During this process, considerations of being in the world combine with the recent experiences of making vessels. They gain understanding for how to best express their idea when selectively choosing what to include and what to leave out.[26] Through this process their idea transforms into a physical expression, and perhaps poetry emerges.

There is a difficulty in demonstrating the success of a process that aspires to manifest poetry, much like the difficulty in objectively demonstrating beauty. Photographs of work, so often used as proof of certain evidence for architecture, only provide second-hand experience, and at their best may conjure some poetic presence. Perhaps a perceived sense of beauty transfers across the image when combined with the viewer's empathy and imagination. Yet, I believe, as Jacques Maritain does, that poetry (beauty) is not in the object or held by the perceiver, but arrives from the experience.[27] If, as Maritain asserts, poetry can only be known directly, what I offer is an invitation to visit the work, a few photographs, and some observations.

Years ago when the students were completing a shelter for watching quail in the mountains of West Texas a visitor came up to me to tell me of his experience. He told me that the evening before when the sun was setting he came to sit in the shelter to watch for birds. When sitting in the carved out place and experiencing the surrounding landscape from eye level he said he felt as if he were a part of

FIGURE 7.8 Fall 2012 students installing the shade trellis under the polycarbonate roof of the Reading Pavilion at the City of Livingston Yellowstone River park
Source: Lori Ryker

the place. His explanation was stated simply and straightforwardly, and accurately described the students' intent for the design of the pavilion: to help people feel they are a part of the place, not simply observing.[28]

Similar stories of belonging or being a part of place have been told to me from visitors to the Pine Creek Pavilion, built for the United States Forest Service at the edge of the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness in 2006. There are many aspects of the pavilion that provide a feeling of being a part of the place, including the articulation of the structure that follows the angling of the surrounding tree trunks, the use of wood milled from the site, and soil for the rammed earth wall that came from the edge of the Yellowstone River. But the transforming experience recounted by visitors comes from the roof form. When developing the roof, the students were attentive to the boundary that could be experienced between the Forest Service campground, where their structure was sited, and the wilderness that lay just beyond and in view from the site. The students' aspiration was to bring about an experience of "awe" for visitors, and to make the sense of place tangible with the spectacular mountains visible from the pavilion. They accomplished their aspiration by lowering the roof at the entry and raising it up toward the mountains. The roof, while powerful on its own, exists as part of the whole. The pavilion is a response brought about from poetic intuition and the students' intimate experience of the place articulated through choice of material and brought into a sensed relationship between structure and landscape. These

FIGURE 7.9 *Pine Creek Pavilion*, Remote Studio Fall 2006, USFS Pine Creek Campground, Park County, Montana
Source: Audrey Hall

relationships are where poetry exists, when the spiritual and physical qualities of the world come together to be experienced.

I have had my own experiences of the students' work, similar moments to those described above. In these instances, when I return from having been off site to retrieve a missing bolt or broken drill bit, what was a pile of wood and metal, or hand-collected sticks or rocks, or spool of rope, has been brought together to create an experience of the place that is magical. What exists is more than what was present in the place when the students began. The idea of a wall is now physical and vibrates at the end of the day with light slipping through woven willow, or a steel frame wraps a tree with a floating feeling for those who travel across its open weave, or the sketched shape of a simple shed form comes together to hold the harvest of a farmer's garden while collecting bits of the mountains beyond through sliding screen doors.

The presence of poetry during these experiences feels similar to those Rick Bass describes in his book, *Fiber*.

> You spy a fallen tree just a little bit out of your reach, and at the bottom of a steep slope. You have to cross a tangle of blowdown to get to it. It's a little larger than you should be carrying and a little too far from the truck—you've already hauled a day's worth—but all of these things conspire within you, as you stare at the log, to create a strange transformation or alteration: they reassemble into the reasons, the precise reasons, that you should go get that log. And always, you do, so that you will not have to go to bed that night thinking about that log, and how you turned away from it.[29]

The making of poetry comes from engaged living in the world and can only be known through immediate experience. Poetry is always ephemeral, momentarily physical, and lives in our memories.

These are the concerns of Remote Studio and the ongoing experiment of each student's life.

FIGURE 7.10 A portion of the Reflection Point on the Yellowstone River, Remote Studio Fall 2008, City of Livingston Yellowstone River park
Source: Lori Ryker

Notes

1 Lori Ryker, *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 1995).
2 Ibid., 91.
3 James S. Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 39.
4 John Hospers, ed. *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics* (New York: The Free Press, 1969).
5 Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge*, 93, 112–113.
6 Hospers, *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*.
7 Ronald N. Stromberg, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), 427.
8 Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge*, 15.
9 The word "untrammeled" is employed in the 1964 Wilderness Act and used by the United States National Forest. "The word 'wilderness' represents this social condition, one in which an area is untrammeled and free from human control" www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/wilderness.
10 Richard Louv, *Last Child In the Woods* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 2005).
11 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Balantine Books, 1966), 261, 269–272.
12 The contemporary social practice "about" is inherited from the abstracting and objectifying Scientific Method of Inquiry.
13 Albert Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1958), 501, 512.
14 Lori Ryker, *The Creation of Second Nature: The Problem of Making for Students of Architecture* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000), 136.
15 Jim Harrison, "Nesting in Air," in *Northern Lights: A Selection of New Writing from the American West*, ed. Deborah Clow and Donald Snow (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 262–264.
16 Ibid.
17 Christophe Andre, *Looking at Mindfulness: Twenty-five Ways to Live in the Moment Through Art* (New York: Penguin, Blue Rider Press, 2014), 8–9.
18 Ibid., 9.
19 Annie Dillard, "Living Like Weasels," in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 12.
20 Ibid., 15.
21 Paul Shepherd, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1982). In this book, Shepherd supports the idea that creativity is not a chief characteristic of the human species, but a characteristic of all species.
22 Dillard, "Living Like Weasels," 15.
23 Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World*, 501–503.
24 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 76–77.
25 Nash Emrich, "Benefits of Remote Studio," unpublished essay.
26 Rick Bass, *Fiber* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 18.
27 Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 83–84.
28 Ryker, *The Creation of Second Nature*, 175.
29 Bass, *Fiber*, 27.

PART 3

Process

Methodology and the Tectonic Imagination