

Maintaining Utopia

Old Economy Village & Preparing for Eternity

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Abstract

From 2017–2018, I spent six months at Old Economy Village (OEV) to learn more about historic maintenance. Located along 18 miles northwest of Pittsburgh OEV “preserves and presents the life, thought, and material culture of the Harmony Society,” a religious, utopian, and socialist separatist community that settled in Pennsylvania in 1805.

This paper examines the turbulent creation of the National Historic Landmark in 1916 and the site’s contemporary preservation practices as a larger meditation on the logic, inadequacies, politics, and failures of historicization.

Focusing on a humorous self-portrait of John Duss, the final Harmonist trustee, this thesis presents Duss’s story as a central figure in the creation of the historic site and the memory of the Harmonists. Duss’s narrative serves as a reminder of the flawed nature of museums at large and the politicized role of the State in constructing history and national mythology.

Through site-specific fieldwork, the paper develops the term “accidental parody” to describe moments in the OEV collection, such as Duss’s portrait, that are productive for challenging dominant systems of power and categorization. Such moments reveal how historical narratives are constructed and make visible the holes, breaks of character, and collapsing myths. Accidental parody can highlight the failures and impossibility of reproduction, existence of deterioration and decay within historic preservation, and the inadequacies of the systems we live in to do what they proclaim.

Ultimately, the paper argues for the necessity of a politic of care and social responsibility within historic preservation. Environmental and ideological conditioning collapse within practices of preservation. National mythology is naturalized and propped up by places demarcated as worth the labor of remembering. Care advocates for a more critical and flexible system of historic preservation that forefronts the ability to adapt and accounts for change, incongruity, and bias. This ethic of care realizes the impossibility of replicating the world that was, and utilizes history to speak to the past in relationship to the world that is.

Acknowledgements

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I am especially grateful to the staff and volunteers at Old Economy Village. Thank you for welcoming me, listening to my questions and proposals, and sharing your investment in the historical site.

As always, thank you to my family, friends, and cohort.

Privacy

Names have been changed throughout the text to protect individual privacy.

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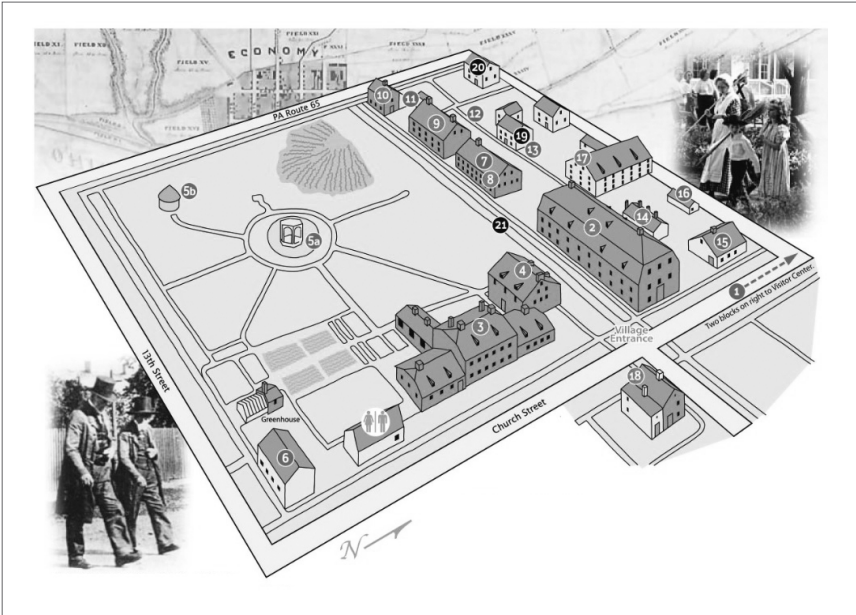
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Old Economy Village, a National Historic Landmark, tells the story of the Harmony Society, one of the oldest and most successful religious communal groups of the nineteenth century. The Society sought to create a utopia inhabited by German Lutheran separatists who subscribed to the mystical religious teachings of their leader George Rapp (1757-1847). In Economy¹, they waited for the second coming of the Messiah.²

Historical synopsis as described on the Old Economy website

1 The Harmonists' settlement was called Economy. In 1916 after the community dissolved, the name changed to "Old Economy Village" when some of the remaining property became a historic site managed by the State of Pennsylvania.

2 "About Us," Old Economy Village, <http://oldeconomyvillage.org/about-us/about>.



- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Visitor Center | 11. Baker House Garden & Family Shed |
| 2. Feast Hall & Museum Building | 12. Water Pump |
| 3. George Rapp House | 13. Bake Oven |
| 4. Frederick Rapp House | 14. Community Kitchen |
| 5. George Rapp Garden | 15. Cabinet Shop |
| 5a. Pavillion | 16. Blacksmith Shop |
| 5b. Grotto | 17. Granary |
| 6. Carriage House | 18. das Kinderhaus |
| 7. Mechanics Building | 19. Warehouse |
| 8. Wine Cellar | 20. Lenz House |
| 9. Store & Post Office | 21. Cobblestone Street |
| 10. Baker House | |

From 2017–2018, I spent six months at Old Economy Village to learn more about contemporary historic maintenance and the living history of living history.³

During my time at the historic site I shadowed and interviewed staff⁴ and helped with anything they needed assistance with. I joined educational tours, cleaned objects in storage, worked in the maintenance shop, pruned shrubs and trees, planted seedlings, emptied dehumidifiers, created venue-rental and volunteer brochures, assisted the curator in the archives, and developed a series of artworks from the research.

Image: Spending the day volunteering, on their terms, with as many staff and volunteers that would let me shadow, interview and photograph them.

From left to right, top to bottom: Michelle (Curator) & Carol (volunteer); Dennis (Historic Horticulturist); Joshua (Office Manager & Marketing); Diane (Volunteer & Facility Rentals Associate); Mark (Maintenance Repairman); Christopher (Site Administrator); Larry (Facilities Manager now retired); Lisa (volunteer) & Dan (Education Director).

³ Living History, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is a method of presenting information on history and culture, in which the living conditions, working methods, styles of dress, etc., of past eras are recreated and often re-enacted by performers, typically in a museum setting or as part of an educational program. Old Economy Village utilizes this technique through costumed-tours, craft demonstrations, and special events which present Harmonist history. My goal was to gain a better understanding of the contemporary lived experience of reenactment and historic maintenance at Old Economy Village.

⁴Names have been changed throughout the text to protect individual privacy.





I first saw this quintuple self-portrait of John Duss while spending the day with Michelle, the Old Economy Curator. A recent donation, the photograph sat in a box of images waiting to be scanned, accessioned, and officially codified as historical record. John Duss was a musician and one of the last surviving members of the Harmony Society. In 1892 at 24 years-old, he became the sole Harmonist trustee. Duss was involved in the closure of community in 1905, the transfer of property to the State of Pennsylvania, and the creation of the site as a National Historic Landmark in 1916.

The portrait, seen here, utilizes a visual trick that was popular in early photography to double, or in this case quadruple, a subject. Donning a pinstripe suit, tie, glasses, and a distinguished and styled mustache, Duss sits around a table with his own likeness. Two mirrors fracture his image into four reflections. He presents himself as a resolute businessman of stature and impor-

tance. In Duss's mind, it seems, he is the only person fit to be at the table. I was initially attracted to the humor of the portrait. It is well documented that John Duss was fixated on gaining celebrity in his lifetime. Is the portrait playfully self-aware or painfully oblivious – just another one of Duss's many attempts to proliferate his image? Throughout my time at Old Economy Village, I kept returning to the photograph. Its comedy became an entry point into deeper analogies and served as a reminder of their history's humanity.

In the self portrait, John Duss appears a leader with few disciples. Or, perhaps, he is simply ignoring them. Duss is his own captive audience. The portrait calls to mind a board meeting crossed with a seance. Poised to communicate with spirits of the past, he is inevitably only speaking with himself. It is an image of homogenous insularity. From this perspective, the portrait points to the Society's ongoing challenges with leadership and reflects some of the museum's contemporary struggles. During the community's final years and transformation into a National Historic Landmark in 1916, different entities fought to serve their financial interests and personal legacies through a series of fraught lawsuits lasting longer than a decade. John Duss paid off aging Harmonists to consolidate his power while former members denounced him claiming he was "not a real Harmonist".⁵ Factions fought to liquidate the community's assets and litigiously grappled for their 'fair' share before what remained collapsed completely. The Harmonists' commitment to collectivity at the site ultimately evolved into contentious

⁵ Christopher (Old Economy Site Administrator) in conversation with the artist, March 2018.



tribalism, disputes for financial profit, and control of the Harmonists' legacy. The Harmony Society was a commune composed of the religious followers of the German Separatist George Rapp (1757-1847). Rapp was a Christian preacher and self-described prophet whose teachings combined early Christian practices and mysticism. He was a non-violent pacifist that supported individuals' ability to engage in religious practice without the authority of the established, Lutheran church. His public criticism of this institution (and "strong personality"⁶) caused friction with the larger community in Germany and put him at odds with religious and state authorities at the time. In 1804, threatened with prison and exile, George Rapp and roughly 400 followers left Germany for Western Pennsylvania.⁷

Economy, was the Harmonists' third and final settlement. From 1804-1824, the Harmonists followed Rapp and his prophecies from Western Pennsylvania to Indiana and back to Pennsylvania again. In Pennsylvania and Indiana the Harmony Society lived and worked collectively sharing their goods in common. The community was both agricultural and mercantile. Their settlement included farms, orchards, greenhouses, vineyards, schools, community gathering spaces, a natural history museum, library, post office, doctor's office, and more. Community members produced goods including wool, silk, linen, furniture, clothing, wine, and whiskey. Among the Harmonists there were no wages; members received food, clothing, housing, and medical care in exchange for their labor. While the community was communal in its internal relationships, it embraced capitalism in its outward ones. The Harmonists sold material goods to surrounding communities to support their commune. As its members aged, the Society increasingly invested in technology of the Industrial Revolution and began amassing wealth.⁸

6 Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785-1847* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 17-18.

7 Ibid.

8 "Harmonist History", Old Economy Village, <http://oldeconomyvillage.org/learn/history/harmonist-history>.



Convinced by Rapp and his prophecies, the Harmonists worked tirelessly to prepare for the second coming of the Christian Messiah. Believing this event was just around the corner, the community adopted celibacy. This was not a sustainable practice and quickly provoked frustration. The community's strict moral guidelines and a series of false prophets and prophecies, exacerbated some members' discontent with leadership. In 1832 German mystic and preacher, Bernhard Müller, visited the society and claimed to be the Messiah Rapp had been waiting for. Recognizing the community's wealth and growing tension and dissent, Müller exploited existing discord to start a new settlement that did not require celibacy. Attracting disillusioned members and those wanting to abandon abstinence, Müller left with approximately one third of the Society and a legal settlement of \$250,000 to start a new community.⁹ Müller and 250 followers claimed they were the "true Harmonists" and that "all others were seceders who had departed from the Society's original purpose."¹⁰ Many members decided they had waited long enough – this savior would do. Others abandoned the philosophy all together.

George Rapp did not welcome Müller's affront to his authority and became increasingly uncompromising after the schism.¹¹ In some ways, he became similar to the religious and governmental authorities he criticized in Germany: unwilling to accept challenges, dissent, change, and new ways of being. The Harmony Society never recovered from the schism. Historians and oral accounts speculate that the remaining members became more insular and self protective as a result.¹² They allowed fewer and fewer new members to join over time. George Rapp died in 1847, and the community grew continually smaller as members aged and died.

During their lifetime, the Harmonists were celebrated by American politicians for their "financial success and self-sufficiency."¹³ Their philosophy however, especially that which might challenge the economic status-quo, was generally left out of the praise.¹⁴ Such omissions are a precursor to the later shifts in the Harmonists' historical narrative, both purposeful and accidental. The official end of the society in 1905, was not a slow fade. In a form fitting John Duss, it was bombastic. The Harmony Society folded amidst a series of highly publicized lawsuits about who had the right to inherit and control the community's financial, historic, and symbolic legacy.



⁹ Daniel B. Reibel, *Old Economy Village: Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2002), 20–21.

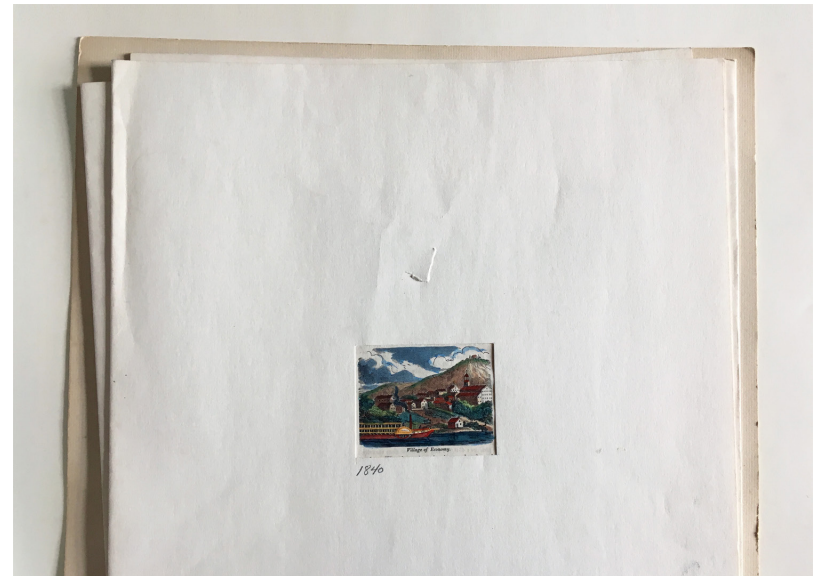
¹⁰ Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785–1847*, 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "About Us, "Old Economy Village Website, <<http://oldeconomyvillage.org/about-us/about>>

¹⁴ Ibid.





There are more portraits of John Duss than anyone else in the Old Economy Village Archives: 168 in the digitized archive alone. I imagine the quantity of portraits was his doing, an attempt to seal himself permanently into the historical record. Duss wanted to be known, and his efforts to be remembered were extravagant. His entire music career seemed to be more an attempt to be remembered than a commitment to the craft. There is evidence that he spent the majority of the community's funds financing his self-described "short but brilliant"¹⁵ career. His endeavors were bankrolled by communal coffers, including an opulent concert in which he transformed Madison Square Garden into a replica of Venice, Italy to serve as the self-appointed guest-conductor of the New York City Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.¹⁶ During his tenure, Duss reduced the community's assets from about \$30 million to just over \$1 million.¹⁷ There is a small Harper's Weekly clipping in the OEV archives about the Madison Square Garden turned Venice concert. All that remains of the \$100,000¹⁸ replica (equivalent to about \$2,873,693.00 in 2018¹⁹) is a news clipping of roughly six square inches.

In 1905, about a century after the Harmony Society was established, the community disintegrated. John Duss was there for its demise and aftermath. He played a key role in transitioning Harmonist property to the State of Pennsylvania and the creation of the historic record. In 1916, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania stepped in as the Society's new self-proclaimed savior. The State acquired six acres and 17 buildings from what remained of Economy and changed the name to "Old Economy Village". With that the life, thought, and material culture of the Harmony Society were designated as history. There was an embattled lawsuit between the Duss family, remaining community members, former member's offspring, and the Commonwealth. Ultimately, the State inherited everything that the family did not want. The Dusses kept what was most valuable to them and donated the rest.

¹⁵ John S. Duss, *The Harmonists: A Personal History* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Book Service, 1943).

¹⁶ Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Religious Communities, 1732-2000* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 44-45.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Snedden, "From Economy to Ambridge: The Marvel City", *Beaver County Times*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.timesonline.com/article/20160426/Opinion/304269912>.

¹⁸ Arndt, George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785-1847, 25.

¹⁹ According to inflation rates, the website officialdata.org estimates that \$100,000 in 1903 is worth about \$2,873,693.18 in 2018. "Inflation Calendar US Govt Data", accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.officialdata.org/1903-dollars-in-2018?amount=100000>.



J. P. Pearson



96 FIFTH AVE.
43 & 45 FEDERAL ST.



J. P. Pearson



96 FIFTH AVE.
43 & 45 FEDERAL ST.

The collection at the historic site – paintings, furniture, decorative arts, household items, everyday tools, industrial equipment, personal correspondence, and the Society’s official documents – therefore, became composed of objects cast off by the Duss family.²⁰ From the onset, the museum collection was skewed and determined by the family’s personal interests, sentimental objects, and financial goals.

John Duss wanted to be a central figure in the development of the museum and National Landmark. He advocated that the historic site represent the community as it had been in 1905: with him at the helm, what he assumed was the community’s obvious pinnacle. Believing the Society’s golden era was at a different moment, the State of Pennsylvania and Duss quickly butted heads.²¹ The Commonwealth wanted the museum and buildings to represent the Harmony Society in the 1830s before the major political and ideological schism.

The fledgling Pennsylvania Historic Commission²² aimed to crystalize the utopian community during their time of economic prosperity, embrace of industrial capitalism, hopeful idealism, and faith in the ‘Great American Experiment’. The Commonwealth molded the narrative into a story that would feed the American mythos – one that bypassed the complicated politics to profess American exceptionalism. For the State, Economy could be a ‘City Upon the Hill’ and demonstrate the value of particular narratives: colonial settlement, freedom of religion (for some), Protestant work ethic, and evidence of the eventual and rightful success of capitalism over experiments in collectivity. The Pennsylvania Historic Commission chose to memorialize the Harmonists at a time before many young members rejected the founder’s teachings and before the stubborn strongholds aged, became feeble, and died waiting for promises unfulfilled. It is telling that the State chose to represent this historical moment. They want their narrative to exist as John Duss wanted to remembered: a complete image, no cracks in the veneer.

20 Christopher (Old Economy Site Administrator) in conversation with the artist, March 2018.

21 Idib.

22 Eventually became the Pennsylvania Historic & Museum Commission or PHMC

There is a lesson of very great importance in the history of this society which for sometime flourished on this site and now has become a memory. It was composed largely of honest, God-fearing people seeking larger liberty for themselves and their fellow-men and greater prosperity and happiness for all. They were frugal and industrious and yet they failed as all similar undertakings based upon like principles [socialism and communism] have failed and must inevitably fail as long as human nature is what it is and what it will continue to be until the millennium.

The attempt of these good people was to try and form each member of their community in the same mold. To this end their primal principle was that all must labor for the common good and all goods must be in common. This inevitably tended to crush out individual ambition and initiative. The man of enterprise and resource found that his reward was no greater than the most sluggish dullard.

There are some people here in this free America of ours still to be found advocating communistic ideas, which they claim should be found in a pure democracy. These are ignorant of the foundations upon which our fathers laid the structure of this republic, the greatest and purest democracy the world has ever seen.²³

William H. Stevenson, Pennsylvania Historic Commission Chairman, excerpt from his public address at the dedication of OEV, June 26, 1921

23 “Third Report of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission: Created by Authority of the General Assembly and appointed by the Governor,” (New Era Printing Co, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1922), 29-30.

THE PITTSBURGH PRESS

EARLY SATURDAY MORNING, MAY 28TH, FOR THE MARVEL CITY ECONOMY

We might add that of all the masterly musical triumphs achieved by John Duss, the world's famous bandmaster, none towers higher than the music of prosperity which he has permitted to be established at this Marvelous New City of Economy, through the transfer of mills of level plateaus to capitalists who are erecting thereon the only large Smokeless Industrial Metropolis in the world.

Don't forget that our lot will be sold until 9:30 on morning of sale. Come late to the business street will go at auction.

Excursion trains are all free at Economy long before 9:30.

Trains there will be extended to all large cities living off the face of excursions and will in the cities.

There is no question but what the grand spectacle of a rising new population manufacturing city, which is destined to be the most populous community in Western Pennsylvania outside of Pittsburgh itself and Allegheny, will appeal with irresistible force to persons who have investigated similar propositions. There never was a similar proposition that approached it. Since several men have existed no new town was ever laid out on such a colossal scale. Many a new town has been started small with big pretensions and fortunes has grown to all that was promised, but here is a new town that begins big, and not withdrawing its towering figure as but the least of the mighty giant the future will make it.

It was the fact that there was ever sufficient results in the country to show such an enormous amount to be agreed to in a town in a single locality. It is the fact that the future music to call to everyone has been backed up by several periods of war money.

Pennsylvania Lines' Time Schedule

| Line | From | To | Days |
|-----------|------------|------------|---------------|
| Allegheny | Pittsburgh | Allegheny | Mon, Wed, Fri |
| Allegheny | Allegheny | Pittsburgh | Tue, Thu, Sat |
| Allegheny | Pittsburgh | Allegheny | Mon, Wed, Fri |
| Allegheny | Allegheny | Pittsburgh | Tue, Thu, Sat |

OUT-OF-TOWN REPRESENTATIVES

Allegheny: J. A. ...
 Erie: ...
 Harrisburg: ...
 Philadelphia: ...
 Washington: ...

MILLIONS OF DOLLARS FOR THE WAGE EARNERS!

100 CASH PREMIUMS TO BUILDERS OF DWELLING HOUSES

ASK SALESMEN

BUY YOUR REAL ESTATE WHERE YOU GET 4 PER CENT INTEREST ON YOUR PAYMENTS

WILL BE THIRD LARGEST CITY IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA!

NO LOTS WILL BE TICKETED FOR NEW PLAY CALLING-OUT SYSTEM

REAL ESTATE TRUST COMPANY OF PITTSBURGH, AGENT.

REAL ESTATE TRUST BUILDING, 315 FIFTH AVENUE, PITTSBURGH, PA.

The State of Pennsylvania used the creation of the historic site to condemn the foundational communal component of Harmonist history while praising their entrepreneurial ingenuity. The State depicted the Harmonists' downfall as justified and natural. In 1921 William Stevenson, then Pennsylvania Historic Commission Chairman, strategically invoked the Harmonists' memory to make this point. Socialism is doomed, and the Harmonists' collapse was inevitably for the best he says;²⁴ we cannot deny the divine prophecy of profit. Economy could exist as both a model and a warning.

For those visiting the historic site, it is easy to wonder how communal and equitable the society truly was. A tour of the original buildings quickly reveals the vast disparity between the members' sparse, shared living spaces and the opulent quarters of Rapp and the Trustees. During a visit to the site, my tour guide Chris revealed a perspective that did not appear in the official museum. She speculated that Harmonist leaders took advantage of the members' religious beliefs to naturalize the imbalance. The museum never articulates or suggests any possible manipulation or tension that arose because of such disparities. Rather, they prefer a success story.

From the onset, the establishment of Old Economy Village as a National Historic Landmark presented a conflict about who would be remembered and how. During my time on site, the Director described the lawsuit between the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and John Duss as a "colliding of ego and vision"²⁵. It is easy to dismiss Duss as a narcissist; the quintuple self-portrait could support this assumption. However, the State's own ego should also be considered. The Commonwealth believed that they, not the former member, were the rightful heirs to the property and the story. It took confidence in the State's political agenda to believe that they could perpetually freeze the memory of the community in a contrived golden moment when in reality it teetered at the "peak" for four years of its century-long history. It was only a matter of time before it toppled over the edge and revealed its problems. It seems fitting that Duss's reproduction of Venice, Italy – a model city – financially sealed the Harmonist's fate. His elaborate replica at Madison Square Garden seems witty narrative foreshadowing. The State's attempt to signify American success parallels Duss's charade: built worlds of fantasy that eventually crumble.

24 "Third Report of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission", 29-30.

25 Christopher (Old Economy Site Administrator) in conversation with the artist, March 2018.



Today, those that labor at Old Economy Village are employees for the State of Pennsylvania. Curators, docents, historic reenactors, and facilities staff work to keep up with the backlog of historic maintenance. Everyone currently working at Old Economy has an opinion on Duss. Most are critical, though some are conflicted: employment at the site is indebted to his legacy or they have become captivated by his fleeting attempts for celebrity. This is notable as several staff expressed few opinions about the history at all. It's a good, state job with benefits a few told me. Their labored commitment to the memory of the "cult"²⁶ is either secondary or coincidental. Beyond George Rapp, Duss is one of the best remembered Harmonists. His name was sprinkled in newspaper articles sensationalizing the community's collapse and exalted as a "musical wonder"²⁷ in an expensive and expansive self-initiated advertising campaign promoting the Duss Concert Band. Yet for the public visiting Old Economy Village, Duss and the schism are only chapters in the story – a few images in the exhibition space. Disillusionment, failure, and decay are made secondary to the Society's successful height.

Duss's self-portrait is an analogy for how many living history sites and museums function. They are often posing rather than being, performing as a replication. Preservation rules and standards are passed down from the museum authority in hopes of keeping things still, unchanged, and cemented "as they were". At many historic sites, there is either a trust or resigned acceptance of such systems of preservation despite the fact that they are clearly flimsy – merely a parlor trick, smoke and mirrors giving the appearance of integrity and wholeness.²⁸ Preservation itself often denies the reality of change and transformation within the historic site, the institution's history, and then world outside its boundaries.

²⁶ The OEV Historical Horticulturist's term for the Harmonists.

²⁷ Robert Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience*, 41-44.

²⁸ In "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" Jacques Derrida describes the archive or historic collection as assuming and purporting an idea of completeness. "... Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (secernere), or partition, in an absolute manner." Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.



During my six months at Old Economy Village, the community's literal collapse and symbolic disintegration began to appear everywhere. I sensed that there was never a complete history nor the idea of wholeness that Rapp, Duss, and eventually the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania wanted to present or believed it to be. After learning about the history, I began to see the past reflected in the museum's present. Old Economy's experience of growth and stasis seemed to parallel the Harmonists' story: current employees work diligently hoping for better days to come. Like the portrait of Duss, the contemporary historic site is a similarly fractured entity made to appear whole. The museum is split between a series of demands: the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission's (PHMC) Standards, State dictated collection standards, competing historical narratives, budgetary struggles, and the staff's tireless labor that cannot always add up to their desired goals.

Today, the Historic Landmark is living in the shadow of an alleged golden age. The museum had record attendance and a larger relative budget in the 1970s before the region's steel industry collapsed. Several staff and volunteers worked at Old Economy during this time. They remember the better days fondly and shared their concerns with me. Several were disgruntled with the loss of jobs and the politics of shifting directors and management approaches. They expressed their dissatisfaction that the present does not live up to their past, a past that is fading further into the distance.



... time and its allies are busy twenty-four hours a day assaulting our historic property. With a plan and the right tools, you can hold the line.²⁹

“Housekeeping for Historic Sites” training video I watched on my first day at OEV



29 "Housekeeping for Historic Sites," directed by Fred Woods (1996; Watertown, MA: Fred Woods Productions, National Park Service), VHS.

The philosophy of the Harmonists lives on in the memory of some museum neighbors and the dense volumes of partially translated Harmonist manifestos. Staff works to uphold a new philosophy: the preservation standards of the PHMC. As a living history museum, the lines between historic and non-historic object are continually blurred. The entire site and grounds become an historic object – living plants are part of the collection, an accessioned stand-in and replica of what no longer exists. In general, museum and archival preservation standards often point to their own contradictory logic, non-sustainability and eventual demise.³⁰ Idealized “environmental conditioning” specifications fantasize an impossible reality: a world without dust, decay, bias, human error, or budget cuts. Environmental and ideological conditioning often collapse and enmesh within practices of preservation. National mythology is naturalized and propped up by places demarcated as worth the labor of remembering.

30 As theorized by Jacques Derrida in “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” loss is central to any archive or institution of memory. Decay and destruction of the history are presupposed by the system’s logic. By attempting to keep the memory alive the “death drive” mutates and changes the history through an artificial, generative extension of memory. Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” 10-12.

All bureaucracies are to a certain degree utopian, in the sense that they propose an abstract ideal that real human beings can never live up to.³¹

David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*

31 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Melville House: Brooklyn, 2015) 26.

On August 8, 2017, I wore an Old Economy living history costume and carried, emptied, and displayed 28.5 gallons of water from all of the functioning (13 of 15) dehumidifiers at Old Economy Village since they were last emptied less than 24 hours earlier.³²

³² Erin Mallea, *Continual Conditioning Performance*, 2017. This is daily maintenance at Old Economy Village in the summer and fall. It often needs to occur twice per day during the hotter, more humid months. The domestic dehumidifier models are placed in historic buildings that do not have climate control in a physically demanding and seemingly futile attempt to meet the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's "Environmental Conditioning Standards" for historic object preservation and storage. It took me roughly 50 minutes to empty the 13 dehumidifiers one time.



As is the case in museums in general, there is no exact, accurate history. The process of historicizing is often bound up with the translation and degradation of the past.³³ Archivists and curators record, mediate, and organize documents and objects in ways that frame particular perspectives or rewrite the history. Historical narratives are shifting and fragile. At Old Economy, as with all institutions, archival practices are only as good as the next employee. History and knowledge production are skewed and incomplete – flawed and inscribed by human error and the tools at hand.

Today, the staff works to recreate life in the 19th century to the best of their ability with historically declining financial resources, volunteers, and staff. Educators focus on the tasks that were required to maintain the original utopian project. They reenact outmoded forms of craft and labor for school children while enacting contemporary labor in the hopes of maintaining a more recent humanist project threatened by non-sustainability: the museum itself. While I was on site, it sometimes felt as though Old Economy is stuck in a Sisyphean reality. Staff works in a precarious present to maintain the decaying past, a past that believed in and was committed to a better, coming future.

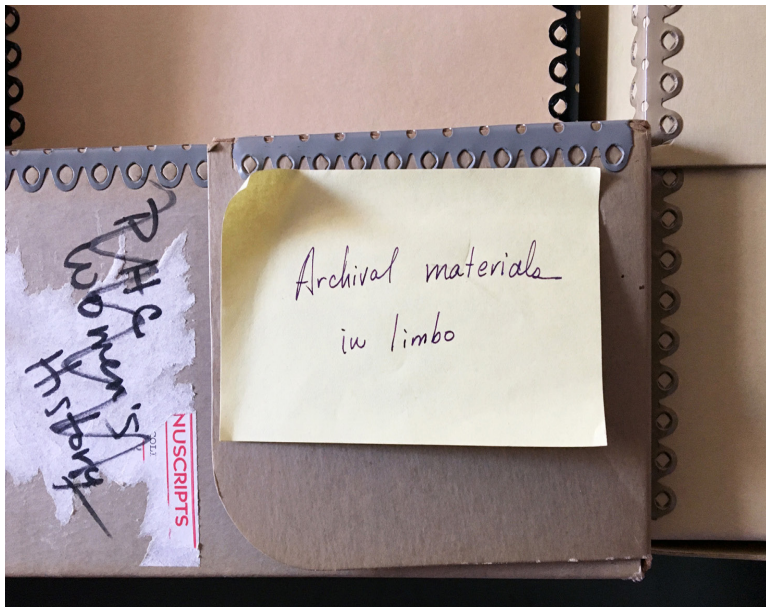
33 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," 10-12.

Michelle tells me about her to-do list. Never ending. It's a practice in humility and a performance in futility. "Check archeology? What was that?" she asked aloud. "File papers" needed to happen since January. It's the end of May. She admitted that there are some things on site that have not been filed since the 90s before she started at Old Economy.

A lot of my projects and goals are in limbo. I want to sort and organize objects in storage, but there is no point until after the capital campaign and the leaking humidity and rust problems in storage are fixed.³⁴

A Living History of Historic Maintenance: Spending the day with Michelle, May 25, 2017

34 Michelle (Old Economy Curator) in conversation with the artist, May 2017.



Goals, projects, and archival materials are in limbo, but until what end? Some staff spoke hopefully about better coming days: the upcoming capital campaign, increased private funding, more community partnerships, and a new initiative called “Bringing History Alive”³⁵. Other long-term volunteers and staff seemed more resigned to accept the current stasis after experiencing the loss of former staff positions, visitors, and funding over the past twenty years. Was Michelle’s use of the term “limbo”³⁶ a subconscious slip or a tragicomic nod to a bleak connecting thread between the Harmonists and contemporary staff? Their parallel narrative arcs seem a cruel fate. Harmonists and contemporary staff diligently working and waiting for promised better days. The Harmonists disintegrated waiting for Rapp’s prophecies to be fulfilled. I imagine Michelle’s job requires coming to terms with lost time.

During my period at Old Economy, I straddled a boundary between insider and outsider. This positionality offered me a distance from the place and history that heightened my sensitivity to the workings of the institution. It prompted me to spend time getting to know staff and made me wary of jumping to conclusions. While I am critical of how some of the history was presented, I empathize with staff and became close with many. The employees would like to make institutional changes and are attempting to do so. However, systems are difficult to overhaul especially for a small organization with limited resources that is caught within the larger mechanism of a statewide bureaucracy. Museum staff were sometimes embarrassed by the images or paperwork I was drawn to. The curator would sigh and reflect on the myriad problems she inherited when she began her job. Of course she wished things were different. She and her colleagues were doing the best they could with the resources at hand and a fluctuating economic reality for the museum and surrounding community.

³⁵ Christopher (Old Economy Site Administrator) in conversation with the artist, March 2018.

³⁶ In some Christian theology, Limbo is the abode of the souls of the just (and unbaptized children) who died before Christ’s coming.

Blank forms work on their face to rationalize work, but they are also one small part of the way that bureaucracy assumes an objective character. Bureaucracy works through what [Max] Weber calls ‘the successful exclusion of love, hate and all of the purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements to which calculation is alien.’ Because blank forms help routinize, they dehumanize.³⁷

Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*

³⁷ Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.

At Old Economy Village there is a self awareness about the ideal and their limitations. Most staff accept this reality and cope in different ways. However, focusing on limitations rather than possibilities can lock staff into a system that does not always work. By attempting to keep up with state-sanctioned preservation mandates, small institutions are often treading water, focused on a backlog of dusting and filing. When caught within a list of never-ending day to day demands, it can become difficult to find the time to ask the larger, crucial question, “What are we preserving and why?”. Some staff articulated that they quickly forget the reality of who and what where here before. The human history easily feels distant. Individual lives are abstracted into documents and become line items in an Excel spreadsheet. Care for a specific memory, ghost, or object can fade and become overtaken by a commitment to protocol, systematic procedure, and data points.

Lisa Gitelman’s description of the dehumanizing capacity of paperwork points to this conundrum. Preservation standards can distance and dehumanize a particular history by abstracting, classifying, and objectifying the human experiences it aims to tell. For me, it was the messiness and moments of humanity, whether sad, infuriating, frustrating, or comic, that made the Harmonists’ story fascinating and relevant. Understandably, PHMC’s Preservation Standards aim for stability. But when do such standards not allow the space for the messiness of human histories? When does stable become conservative stasis? Become stagnation? And when does it become decay?



While it is easy to criticize Duss, his story is central to the creation of the historic site and how the Harmonists are remembered. More notably, Duss's narrative serves as a continual reminder of the flawed nature of museums at large and the politicized role of the State in constructing history and national mythology. He was more nuanced than the character that remains. Duss's story, like that of the Harmonists, is undeniably human. It is difficult to neatly package or categorize. The Harmony Society included the messy, interconnected lives of hundreds of individuals during a time of massive cultural transformation in the United States and Europe. It is a history of idealistic and power hungry leaders, of fervent believers and disillusioned followers. It is a history of mythmaking and false promises, of optimism, lost faith, and collective failure. The history of the Harmonists and the contemporary museum speak to the importance of reckoning with collective failures and fallacies, of the importance of seeking out new ways of living and being in response to such problems.

To me, the portrait of Duss seems more an image of dystopia – a failed experiment in collectivity. It depicts the dissolution of a potentially radical humanist project back into the status quo. The portrait is stagnant. Duss is still and serious. He and his reflections are neither conversing nor interacting but staring into the distance. In fact, Duss cannot make eye contact with his reflection. It simply mirrors the same point of view. In this way perhaps the photograph represents the evolution of the Harmony Society. A commitment to a new form of living concludes in a homogenous boardroom of identical blank stares.

Seen with the privilege of historical distance, John Duss's self-portrait reads as an accidental parody. It can be seen as a tongue-in-cheek performance of the creation of authority: a meeting of the minds, a board of directors composed of one "rightful" man and his reflected ego. The austere portrait however, undermines itself. If you look at the center of the vintage photograph, there is a small crack – the location where two mirrors meet. Perhaps the crack is a dismantling of the veneer and the idealized stasis of false promises – a moment of rupture. The crack reveals the method of the image's making.³⁸



³⁸ Ziva Ben-Porat describes how parody functions stating, "The parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices..." Ziva Ben-Porat "Method in Madness: Notes on the Structure of Parody, Based on MAD TV Satires," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1/2 (Autumn, 1979): 247.



During my time at Old Economy, I was drawn to these cracks. I see them as moments of accidental parody, whether images, objects, or practices, that inadvertently reveal the system's structure, assumptions, or shortcomings from within. Parody, Ziva Ben-Porat writes, "...expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message".³⁹ Dressed in historical garb, she makes eye contact with the camera and smiles while posed with a chainsaw prepared to prune a tree. The image collapses codes that signify the past and present together in one image. We are reminded that historic reenactment is flawed and shifting, not an exact replica. Holly's eye contact and grin reveal her own sense of humor and personhood. This reminds the viewer of the subjectivity and plurality of human experiences and thus historical narratives.

Such moments of humor at Old Economy were refreshingly human – a glimmer amidst conservative, assimilating preservation standards. Ultimately, I see these instances as details that, though fleeting, become productive for challenging systems of power. As with the photograph of Duss, the collection of accidental parody can reveal how systems and historical narratives are constructed. Such parody makes visible the holes, breaks of character, and collapsing myths. It can highlight the failures and impossibility of reproduction, deterioration and decay within historic preservation, and ultimately the inadequacies of the systems we live in to do what they proclaim.⁴⁰

39 Ibid.

40 In the context of Martin Heidegger's broken tool analysis, when tools "break", we become aware of their function and existence within a larger apparatus. When the object is operating "correctly" within a system it becomes invisible, disappearing from consciousness. This Heideggerian concept has an important relationship to archives as systems of political power. These systems are more dangerous when they are invisible or taken for granted. They can become impenetrable, their boundaries difficult to discern as they envelop and contain myriad other systems. Graham Harman, "Technology, objects, and things in Heidegger," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Volume 42, Issue 1 (2010): 17-25.

Beyond calling the system into question, parody encourages ongoing criticism. In her essay, "The Reflexive Function of Parody", literary critic Michele Hannoosh cites parody's self reflexivity as having radical potential and the implied possibilities of change and growth:

... the parody actually rebounds upon itself, calling itself into question as it does the parodied work, and suggesting its own potential as a model or target, a work to be rewritten, transformed, even parodied in turn... 'the inferred standards' [Poirier] behind the parody are not allowed to become authoritative, and that self-parody does not merely question the validity of the text, but proposes 'the unimpeded opportunity for making new ones'.⁴¹

The moments of accidental parody can help question the monolith of history by opening space for further criticism, transformation, and multiplicity. Opportunity for continued criticism and developing new standards and systems is vital when examining historical narratives and the institutions that uphold them.

41 Michele Hannoosh, "The Reflexive Function of Parody," *Comparative Literature* 41, no. 1 (Spring, 1989): 114.

Audrey told me that back in the 90s, maybe '96 or '97 she saw the lion head that used to be part of the collection. It had been "destroyed". She remembers seeing the lion and elk in trash bins on the street.

August 25, 2017

The Harmony Society had one of the first public natural history museums in the region. Since the establishment of the historic site, Old Economy has been working on a replica of this museum within the contemporary museum. The process has been sporadic. The collection of natural specimens has grown and dwindled, starting and stopping with changing leadership and resources. Many specimens were not always taken care of. Historic taxidermy was acquired and destroyed years later when staff realized that it had been preserved with arsenic in the 19th and early 20th centuries. One condition report describes a taxidermied duck as "stained, brittle, broken (barbules), dirt/grimy. Duck is dirty, feathers need care – bent and broken."⁴² A Surplus Property Disposition Report formally designates "19 birds, stuffed" as "OBSOLETE (OUTMODED)", "USED - POOR CONDITION" and "SCRAP".⁴³

This deaccession language and ongoing attempts to recreate the Society's museum reiterates the death, decay, loss, and abstraction of the Harmonists themselves. Deaccession documentation reveals the fate of many taxidermy specimens: living beings are reduced to objects and ultimately "deaccessioned by destruction"⁴⁴. PHMC's system of preservation cannot stop the natural process of decay. Visitors sense this slow disintegration. It does not just happen behind closed doors.

The natural history museum is another component of accidental parody. Its story undermines human attempts to control and preserve and challenges foundation of natural history museums to systematically map, know, own and classify the world. At Old Economy, time and its allies are putting up a fight. Environmental systems are not acquiescing to human imposed value and meaning. The natural history museum could be seen as a symbolic caricature. Toxic taxidermied lion and polar bear heads were thrown in the trash and dangerous minerals smashed with a hammer. Death, rot, and decay exist beyond the allegorical. During my time on site, I could not stay in the natural history museum for very long. I became lightheaded and woozy. The musty specimens, traces of arsenic, and lingering remnants of George Rapp's alchemy⁴⁵ drove me out of the museum and into the garden for fresh air.

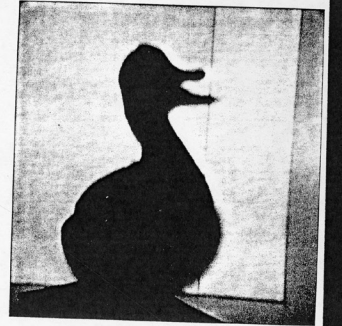
42 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Natural History Specimens Condition Report of Duck (unknown), 6 March 1996, Deaccession Documentation, Old Economy Village Institutional Archives, Ambridge, Pennsylvania, United States.

43 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Surplus Property Disposition Report of 19 stuffed birds, 23 March 1998, Deaccession Documentation, Old Economy Village Institutional Archives, Ambridge, Pennsylvania, United States.

44 The semi-vague, recommended deaccession protocol for many taxidermy specimens by PHMC. The protocol does not often elaborate on how to "destroy".

45 George Rapp was a practicing alchemist that became obsessed with finding the "Philosopher's Stone." Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785-1847*, 19.





Duck (unknowing)



As a visitor the natural history museum and garden seem symbolically and literally opposed to one another. The living plants are meant to become an historic object. However, they defy the classification. The plants are their own beings, a speculative imagining of what was that exists beyond replica. The garden is a vibrant counterpoint to a century of slow decay. Community members and volunteers help maintain the garden and take home herbs, vegetables, seeds, and flowers. It is a space at Old Economy Village that embodies the communal goals of the Harmonists. In the garden the original impulse has grown, transformed, and contemporized. This could become an example for the rest of the museum. Many museums obscure the complex life of the institutions themselves: the cracks, failures, and inadequacies. Something can be gleaned from the Horticulturalist's admission of speculation and lack of information – from his attempts to speak to and share the history while responding to present conditions: changing seasons, rainfall, community interests and needs.

The garden at Old Economy activates the past to speak to the present. It acknowledges the inherent impossibility of replication, welcomes changing voices, and encourages growth over precautionary stasis. Further, its survival requires an active give and take between staff and the history – in this case living plants. The evolution of Old Economy Village speaks to the processes and politics of historicity. OEV's story is a reminder of the efforts of communities to be known and remembered and the power of the State to silence, change, or speak for them. It is a reminder of the tendency of some institutions to absorb and homogenize individual and collective experience.



Snipe?



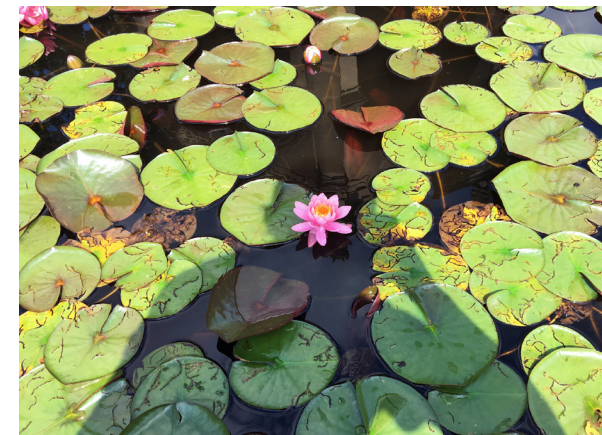


The spirit of collective and informal stewardship in the garden is reflected in Old Economy's community of dedicated volunteers. Volunteers participate in historical reenactments, give tours, and assist staff in a variety of projects. The historic site could not function without them. Like the garden, the volunteers can live outside some of the museum's restrictions and regulations. My tour guide Chris, for example, went off-script and shared her political perspective and personal investment in the history. Many volunteers have familial connections to the history. Their ancestors were hired to work for the Harmonists, were former members, or can recollect John Duss's public charades. These are important voices for reflecting on and making the history relevant. However, more than a dedication to the Harmonists' narrative, most volunteers retain a strong belief in the humanist project that is the museum. During my time on site, I noticed that the Visitor Center served as a gathering and community place for local volunteers. I wondered how this could be opened up and made more inclusive of the larger community beyond those that have the interest and capacity to volunteer.

Small, regional museums such as OEV do not have the resources of the Smithsonian, nor do I expect them to. While the scale of small historical museums can pose difficulties, it also presents opportunities. Because of its size, Old Economy Village was accessible to a visitor such as myself. Staff welcomed me and my questions, actions, and metaphors within the exhibition spaces, grounds, and archives. I was able to engage with objects, documents, architecture, outdoor spaces, and staff in a way that would have been more difficult in a larger museum. Smaller, regional museums can be valuable resources for local communities, especially those that do not have a breadth of larger, cultural institutions. That being said, smaller institutions are often more precarious. Funding, community buy-in, and sustainability are often threatened. These institutions need to continually work to remain relevant to their constituents.

Old Economy's size and role in the community are important to acknowledge because these elements can help provide flexibility and opportunities for different museum frameworks. The inner workings of small institutions are often more apparent to the public – if only this were the case in other problematic, cultural systems we find ourselves in. When the larger historical context is presented, the institution of Old Economy Village becomes like the crack in the facade or the garden – a moment of generative rupture that allows life to expand outward. By making the workings and historical complexities of the institution more apparent, I wonder how museums can embody a different political framework and relationship to the history they present. What could be accomplished if historical sites began explicitly with the assumption that museums are flawed and acknowledged the often politicized nature of historicizing? When the larger context and moments of parody are made more prominent, they are an important reminder and mission statement. They reiterate that such systems of human creation need to be continually revisited, examined, and revised.

In many ways, the history of Old Economy is not set in stone. Museum staff and scholars continue to learn more about the history and the lives of those it stewards. It is impossible to preserve things “as they were” partially because of the staff's ongoing process of discovery and the continual transformation of their contemporary lives in relationship to that history. Duss's portrait symbolizes a potential pitfall for many historic sites: an insular attempt to communicate with the past that ends up reaching inward rather than outward. How could the museum enliven the original utopian community's dedication to working for a collective future in the present? Being a steward of the site demands a responsibility and commitment to an ethic of care that moves beyond maintenance. Care should spur action and activate the objects to live new lives. It should forefront past failures and successes, advocate for the realization of the impossibility of replicating the world that was, and utilize history to speak about the past in relationship to the world that is. To let histories breathe rather than suffocate.



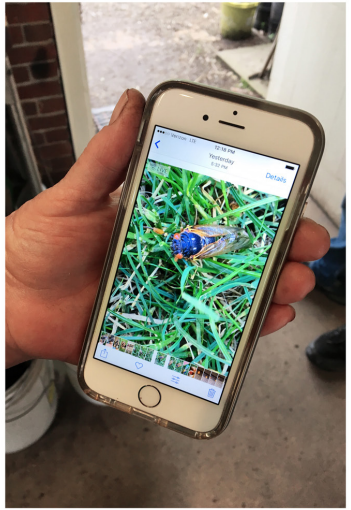


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