

The Contemporary “Foolish” Men
Re-thinking Our Relationship with Nature

As we enter the Anthropocene, it has become increasingly critical that we address environmental problems such as global warming, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem destruction. In the contemporary art domain, what is the role of artists in raising awareness of environmental justice, and how do they contribute to ecological sustainability? In particular, how can performance art help us understand the complexity of our relationship with nature? Madison, Wisconsin-based artists Jeff Chelf and Derek Kiesling offer insights into our bodily connection to and collective memory of the ever-changing natural environment, centering on the waterscapes of the Midwest, United States.

From 2020 through 2021, the two artists have produced four performance works in Madison, WI: *To Cut a Lake in Half* (Feb. 2020), *Field Day* (Aug. 2020), *To Bring Water to Land* (Nov. 2020), and *Dispute the Watershed* (Feb. 2021). Although not intentionally planned as a complete series, these four works span different seasons and delve into meanings of labor, resource extraction, and play. Rather than addressing environmental concerns with straightforward statements, their work offers an open, nuanced reflection on the subject.

Collaboration between Chelf and Kiesling is an essential feature of the performance series. As an artist, Chelf's socially engaged practice emphasizes collective participation in public spaces. Their collaboration represents a departure from single authorship and establishes new connections during each ephemeral project. While both are currently pursuing their MFA degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, their artistic trajectories differ from those of many others with traditional art education backgrounds: Chelf has been a woodworker for over a decade, while Kiesling was professionally trained as an engineer. Their shared hands-on experience and physical contact with tools infuse their works with layers of embodiment, materiality, technology, and labor. For Chelf in particular, who used to design wood furniture and build boats in a commercial setting, this performance series is a return to his ongoing engagement with natural materials with a new set of inquiries.

The four performances revolve around a timeless question: What is our relationship with nature? Over-exploitation of natural resources resulting from the industrial revolution and population explosion have exacerbated environmental disturbance. It also creates a hierarchy between people and the ecosystems on which we depend. Nature's value is reduced to its utilization and service functions, which ecologist Georgina Mace identifies as *nature for people*.¹ Chelf and Kiesling's performance piece *To Cut a Lake in Half* (Feb. 2020) demonstrates such a power dynamic and questions our technological intervention in nature. In the performance, the artists

use two ice saws to cut the frozen Grass Lake in southern Wisconsin in half. Starting on either side of the lake, they cut a line towards each other and eventually meet in the middle, leaving a visible scar on the surface. Can a lake be cut in half? What would it take for two people to achieve this almost impossible goal? The cutting of the lake is a symbolic gesture, presenting a human-induced interruption of nature while reminding us that global warming contributes to the melting and thinning of the ice.

One may notice that waterways are at the heart of the performance series. Indeed, as a state with over 10,000 lakes, water resources have become an integral part of Wisconsin's industrial development. The latest work from the series, *Dispute the Watershed* (Feb. 2021), draws inspiration from the socioeconomic value of ice and ice-harvesting history in Wisconsin. Following an increased demand for meat storage and transportation, the state's ice-harvesting industry boomed in the 19th century, before the invention of modern refrigeration technology. *Dispute the Watershed* (Feb. 2021) directs our attention to the action of ice harvesting itself, highlighting the gravity and transportability of ice. In the performance, the two artists dig out a large ice block from Lake Monona with saws and then transport it to Lake Mendota. Separated by the Madison Isthmus, the two lakes form a unique geographic feature of the city. Audiences, along with the artists and photographers, follow the artists' journey with the ice block, crossing the streets of Madison city and eventually reaching Lake Mendota. Upon arriving at the destination, Kiesling and Chelf dig up another block of ice of the same size and replace it with the ice from Lake Monona, with a label that reads: *This ice is from Lake Monona*. The replacement of ice replicates the disruption of water resources by external forces. The newly arrived ice will eventually melt and become part of Lake Mendota, revealing an essential connection between the two lakes.

In an ancient Chinese fable, *The Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains* (aka. *Yu Gong Yi Shan*, 愚公移山) tells the story of a 90-year-old man *Yu Gong*, who is determined to dig up two mountains in the north with his families, in order to create better access to resources in the south for his villagers. Gods in heaven are deeply moved by his perseverance and eventually help him remove the mountains. *To Bring Water to Land* (Nov. 2020) reminds me of the fable. As shown in the performance photographs, the two artists transport water from a lake to a nearby lakefront with only two buckets. Both *Yu Gong* and the artists' actions have a mentality that man can prevail over nature. Indeed, with modern technology, large-scale water projects, including dams, are redirecting water flow to maximize its usage for our benefit, despite the threat the alteration has posed to other species. Are Chelf and Kiesling the contemporary "foolish men"? Unlike *Yu Gong*, who endeavors to aid his villagers, the artists are probably aware that the water they pour on the ground will eventually flow back to the lake, leaving their efforts in vain. *To Bring Water to Land* suggests that nature has its resilience and will reach equilibrium despite

human intervention. On the other hand, it questions the meaning of our motions: Would we be like Sisyphus, eternally damned to roll rocks up steep mountain slopes?

Can we imagine an equal relationship with our environment, a shift from *nature for people* to *nature and people*? How do we achieve a relationship that goes beyond an extraction-oriented capitalistic approach?ⁱⁱ What if our labor does not necessarily translate into capital but pure playfulness? In their performance *Field Day* (Aug. 2020), the artists enact a tug-of-war game between a person and a winch. Chelf pulls the rope on one side of a creek while Kiesling adjusts the winch on the other. It is a power play between manual labor and machinery, which ends with Chelf falling humorously into the creek. The work leads us to think: How might climate change reshape our body memories of the water? Will playfulness only remain in our past?

In our email interview, Chelf noted that "[Derek] and I share a unique appreciation of the futile and absurd gesture." Perhaps the futility and absurdity presented in their works mirror the ongoing catastrophic damage that we are causing to the environment. Their performance invites viewers to reimagine a sustainable future with nature.

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ⁱ Mace, Georgina. (2014). *Ecology. Whose conservation?*. Science (New York, N.Y.). 345. 1558-60. 10.1126/science.1254704.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.