

# ANTENNAE

The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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# IN AND OUT OF PLACE

*They were discussing performance of the transit system: one third of the buses arrive late; drivers don't show up for work fifty to seventy-five percent more frequently than at other transit systems; its hundred-million dollar deficit will continue to grow. Uh Oh! Transit in danger; it needs help! I wondered: why no one has said the buses are ugly? Aren't such impressions part of performance? Such big objects; what should buses look like?*

Text by **Todd Gilens**



**Todd Gilens**

Mission Blue Butterfly, photo Thomas Wang/Mission Blue Butterfly Project; Bus templates courtesy SFMTA.  
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**E**ndangered Species began as a response to the "Transit Effectiveness Project," a broad re-evaluation of efficiency in San Francisco transportation networks. (1) I've wanted to work with bus wrap for years, feeling that buses were not well served by the ads put upon them, and that the wraps could do so much more if the dynamics of the bus were part of the design concept. Currently a project of Community Initiatives, *Endangered Species* is raising funds and working out technical and administrative agreements with the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency. (2) With luck, the project will roll out in the San Francisco Bay Area next winter.

### Eye and Mind

Visual perception dominates our culture over other modes of sensing. Things we really see tend to make deep impressions and to lodge in memory, returning sometimes, in thought, as crisp as the original. There is the saying "seeing is believing" as if other senses are somehow less believable. Alan Watts wrote "color and light are the gift of the eye to the leaf and the sun," as if color were in the eye, not in things. (3)

Is it because the eyes are outgrowths of the brain? Does visual dominance follow from bipedalism, that upright posture which, while freeing hands to carry tools and legs to run, provided our eyes a vista across the open grassland beyond the forest? There are cultures in which craft - sense of touch, time, song and play - weave contiguous and elastic, textured and embedded in world images. Still, and perhaps notably in conditions where resources accumulate, there is a craving for strange or grand sights, an imperial sort of vision. The climbing of mountains, the construction and control of vast buildings and landscapes certainly owe some debt just to the visual effect such projects provoke. At the turn of the twentieth century, tour books in the eastern US guided visitors to waterfalls and rock arches in the same pages as they located the great industrial factories and processing centers. Around the same period, large-scale canvases and mammoth plate photographs of western landscapes were the propaganda sent from the newly-encountered West to Washington, advocating for conservation and the establishment of a national park system. These were to be scenic parks, viewing preserves, linked to each other by a network of scenic roads.

### The Environment is Us

Vehicle Wrap is a print technology used to adhere graphics over three-dimensional curves. Digital files are printed on adhesive-backed rolls and applied to surfaces. Films are stretchable, printable plastics - chemistry in action; adhesives are pressure activated, the films conform to surface irregularities and air bubbles can be slid along under the surface and squeezed out the edges. Both glues and inks are stable for several years outdoors. Over vehicle windows a sixty-percent open perforated material is usually used, which allows light to enter and riders to see out. The film can be applied to almost

anything. The environment becomes a menagerie of armatures, receiving, concealed by, coated with images. Billboards as such are no longer needed. The identities of things shrink, hidden by corporate identities, each draped image competing with another for a moment of regard.

Publicness is a category developing out of the structure of society, tied to individual and group identities, the organization of work and leisure, and the valuation of goods. (4) Ownership, like publicness, is also a social construction, equally subject to dispute, negotiation, appropriation, deception and so on. In urban places, whose is the space of light poles, sidewalks and building facades? What values are generated and destroyed as bits of space are wrapped and repurposed? I recall the character in Italo Calvino's *Mt. Palomar* whose discipline it was not to read. To live in the modern world but refuse to engage writing is conceivable - but not to look?

Since we are visual creatures, maybe printed skins are the best bet for transforming our impoverished urban scene, makeup being quicker to change than bodies. Maybe we have come to an extreme - even the reversal - of classical perspective, our supposed stable autonomous viewpoint is vanishing into vortices of corporate sleight of hand. But whose values should these vortices support?

Perhaps in the future such building-clothes will provide other functions besides a change of image - photosynthesis, insulation, filtration, music. There are good precedents, established processes for borrowing structures and increasing complexity: birds' and bees' nests, pockets of moss, lichen and grasses are often seen multiplying the functions of little shelves and crevices around town. For me this gives a clue about the proper ownership of space. It is dynamic, inter-scalar, and always shared.

### Without Advertising

Vertigo can be marvellous rather than malignant, gracious instead of manipulative. A bus goes by - or was it a butterfly? Turning to look, a somatic response, the effect registers in a body movement. Prolong the connection? The back of the bus carries a clue:

**Mission Blue Butterflies now live  
only in a tiny corner  
of San Francisco**

A note of nostalgia, as if referring to our own historical future. Below the text is a phone number, which will get you to a website where, by following links you can find out about the project, and also about urban design, species survival, development projects, conservation opportunities, and transit performance. The initial vertigo should astonish and seduce, shaking out new readings of the everyday event of a bus on the street.

Or you don't turn, and there is just the bus: a flight of pelicans amongst the taxis, a garter snake caught in traffic, an express mouse disappearing just as you reach the stop. The hope of the project is also to return



**Thomas Moran**

The Canyon of the Yellowstone, ca. 1911 Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress

the pleasure of elegant, beautiful street furniture to the transit system. Beauty ennobles, just as care does. In San Francisco we have restored trolleys and historic cable cars, practically synonymous with the city itself. But if transit is to become central to our lives (I believe this will be a requirement within the next infrastructure horizon), then we will need contemporary, even futuristic vehicular iconography as well. (5)

### What is transit anyway?

Species and public transit are both commonwealths that struggle for resources, both subjects of marginalization and vulnerability. *Endangered Species* specifically addresses the animals at urban fringes whose habitats have been displaced by our habitats.

A way to think of settlement patterns would be: how can mutual needs for living space be courteously accommodated? Just as we do when crowded around other humans (as on a bus for example) being close enough to all fit while everyone gets at least somewhat the space they need. In the framework of regional settlement, this means checking to see if the streams, the coyotes, the polliwogs or ferns, are not getting trampled, and if they are, maybe shifting over a bit to give them some room.

A kind of natural resource akin to minerals, air and water, species exist in a contended commons, their ownership governed by common law, markets and so on. Species' vitality depends on a tangle of anthropogenic and other processes. A fundamental right to existence is registered in the US, most notably within the Endangered Species Act, but State level legislation may have its own criteria.

The presence of listed species on a site leads sometimes to peculiar, counter-intuitive consequences. In one project I worked on - the stabilization of soil along a small stream near an urban park - landscape designers were selecting plants for the stream banks. One appropriate choice was Blue Elderberry, *Sambucus mexicana*, a plant also known to host the federally listed endangered Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle. The beetles were known in the area but there were none on site at the time. The design team decided against using the plant: it might have attracted the beetles, establishing new habitat for them, initiating a chorus of restrictions for humans' use of the site.

Transit is also endangered in the Bay Area. (6) Road-building subsidies and use fees, gasoline pricing and tax systems conspire against its economy. Operating



**Todd Gilens**

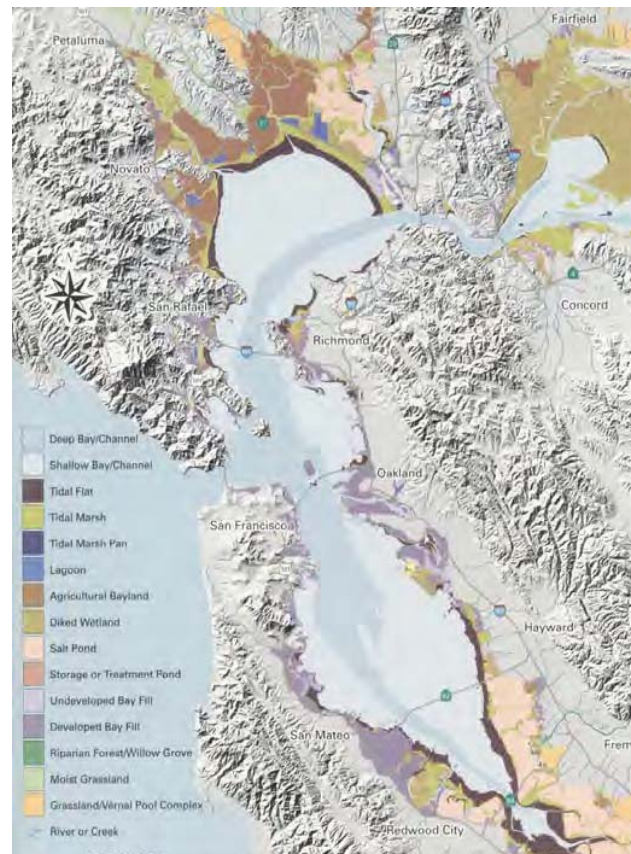
Top images: Waiting at the Bus; below: Birds on a Line. Photographs by Todd Gilens © Todd Gilens

deficits and fares increase while readership, service and performance slowly decline. Focusing human habitat around transit systems has been an ongoing struggle in most municipal areas, as both agricultural, wetlands and other wild-lands are drained, filled and graded for urban and suburban expansion. Using transit networks to guide new construction means putting more people on less land, building more densely in areas already settled, and leaving space for others.

In dense settlements such as cities we invent circulation systems for bodies and waste that allow, if not flourishing, at least functioning. Collective transit is

one of these circulatory systems and as far as motorized transport goes, such aggregation is a great application of the technology. It also means economies of movement: living closer or consolidating access to necessary resources and lowering pollution loads generated by transportation. (7) Transit is a structure that is about pooling and sharing resources.

Buses and vans also model aggregation at the next scale up, the neighbourhood. Perhaps we might think of them more like pocket parks or cafes, borrowed places for informal, temporary gatherings. (8) Each



Bay Area Maps, Past (left) and Present (right). Maps courtesy Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Project, SF Regional Water Quality Control Board, 2000.

individual uses it with others, and leaves it to others still. It is specifically not ubiquitous but limited, leaving room for systems beyond its purview. Of the furniture of urban space I submit that public transit most acutely suffers from appropriation by advertisement. These are machines we enter into, abide in and depend upon to carry out our day. Such vessels should be ennobled images of collective life.

**Art: activism?**

From a broadly ecological point of view we know there are advantages to having diversity within and among systems because alternative pathways and materials may be called on as circumstances change. (9) Innovation is the ability to direct materials, processes and ideas to new ends, to modify and rearrange them and, occasionally, to invent new ones. It is a sort of younger sister to diversity. Where diversity is low, options are limited and innovation may become critical. Where diversity is high, materials for innovation are available but the need may be low.

Much of culture continues, as Thoreau said, to provide improved means to unimproved ends. (10) After two hundred or more years of furious productivity, our task may now be one of reinventing our goals rather than cleverly attempting to 'sustain' our current conditions. At the base of change is identity, our idea of who we are in relation to those others out there.

We need to lean hard into questioning how we are made, and what our duty may be to those rocks and animals and other people with whom we compete and upon whom we also depend.

While our actions are increasingly global, cities and citizens still retain decisive influence over regional policy and individual priorities. These activities and the assumptions which direct them can bridge between scales, just as patterns of family relationships underpin our interactions with strangers and our experience with others reframes the meaning of family. The ability to envision or understand the consequences of our actions makes the dialogue between information and imagination essential, determining which choices and systems we cultivate. One example is the question of lawn watering in California's climate. An ordinance against watering lawns in a drought will cause people to put their hoses away, and when the ordinance is lifted watering will start up again. But a contiguous image of snow pack, reservoirs, groundwater and weather, makes water at the hose a different thing. Many responses are possible – though none are predictable.

I have the feeling as *Endangered Species* becomes more prescriptive that it loses the part of its potency that supports contagious innovation. What prescriptions are needed now? We are living in a time of accelerating change, whose direction, speed and scope is uncertain. There is nothing new about good intentions based on



***Endangered Species***

is an artwork that uses photographs of locally endangered animals on public buses to remind us that transit is a system in which both people and their environments participate.

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***Brown Pelicans***  
 were close to extinction but  
 are now commonly seen  
 in the Bay Area  
 (415) 226-3000

**Instructions**

Cut the bus out of the grey and make slits at the yellow lines. Fold the bus sides down around the roof. Insert tabs into the side slits, bending them back inside the bus to secure them.

solid evidence driving changes that (Oops!) produced toxic consequences. We need to be both quick and provisional about our solutions. The difficulty is not technical but social. Technical approaches are needed, but as we crowd together on shrinking islands, we especially, increasingly will need empathy, an ethic of curiosity.

Beauty is a powerful force, directed toward stilling, openness and ambiguity. These qualities also describe a relationship to nature at its most essential: wonder, awe, an unsettling, diffident attraction, a feeling that the things in the world exceed our capacity for understanding, knowledge and cognition. Such beauty is able to contain contradictions, to delicately hold together contrarities without resolution. Beauty is a method that both art and nature wield. It is a generative transformer. Image, symbol, can change minds but not determine them.

Both species and art traffic in thick images, specific physical constellations which both reveal and stand apart from the world. Andre Leroi-Ghoran spoke of the un-worked geometric rocks, fossils and crystals collected by prehistoric humans as "congealed reflections of thought in nature" (11). It is this particular kind of form-image, both unique and quotidian, which may charm us into curiosity and encourage a widening experience. Buses, now as social affirmations, also sustain the interactions of animals as much in danger as we are.

## Notes

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1. <http://www.sfmta.com/cms/mtep/tepoever.htm>

2. Project support has been partially provided by: Adobe Foundation, Potrero Nuevo Fund of the Tides Foundation, San Francisco Art Commission, San Francisco Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation. For information on Community Initiatives see [www.communityin.org](http://www.communityin.org)

3. Watts, Alan W., *The Joyous Cosmology*, p.29, Pantheon Books, New York, 1962

4. Habermas, Jurgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989. (Trans, Thomas Burger)

5. For a discussion of infrastructure investment in the US see Todorovich, Petra, "An Infrastructure and Economic Recovery Plan for the United States" in *Land Lines*, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. The report may be downloaded at <http://www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/PubDetail.aspx?pubid=1558>

6. San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, *Muni's Million Dollar Problem*, accessed at <http://www.spur.org/documents/20060228-MunisBillionDollarProblem.pdf>

7. For relationships between transportation, climate change and urban form see Ewing, Reid et al, *Growing Cooler*, Urban Land Institute, Washington DC, 2008. For environmental impacts of transportation in the San Francisco Bay Area, see [http://www.mtc.ca.gov/planning/2035\\_plan/](http://www.mtc.ca.gov/planning/2035_plan/)

8. Thanks to Caroline Chen, researcher at University of California at Berkeley, for the park/transit metaphor.

9. See, for example, Gunderson, Lance H. and Hollis, C.S., *Panarchy, Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, Island Press, Washington DC 2002.

10. Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden*, 1854.

11. Duchamp, beaten to the Readymade by thirty-thousand years. See Leroi-Gourhan, André, *Gesture and Speech*, p.369, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993 (Trans. Anna Bostock Berger)

9. See, for example, Gunderson, Lance H. and Hollis, C.S., *Panarchy, Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, Island Press, Washington DC 2002.

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11. Duchamp, beaten to the Readymade by thirty-thousand years. See Leroi-Gourhan, André, *Gesture and Speech*, p.369, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993 (Trans. Anna Bostock Berger)

Todd Gilens works as a visual artist, curator, and landscape architect. Since the late 1970's his projects have been seen in abandoned factories, in storefronts and on people's refrigerators, in rock crevices and in condominium courtyards, among other places. In 1995 he co-curated "Prison Sentences," an exhibition of site-specific artworks in an abandoned Philadelphia prison. Now on the National Register of Historic Buildings and a popular tourist destination, artworks have remained part of the penitentiary's interpretive program. Todd received funding in 2001 from Harvard University to research redesigned industrial land in Mexico, Netherlands, UK, Germany and the United States. His research was presented at Harvard's Graduate School of Design as the exhibition "Brown Fields and Grey Waters." He is currently working on spatial design with urban kids, a bicycle stand, and several collaborative sculpture projects in the San Francisco area. For more of his work, see [www.follywog.com](http://www.follywog.com)