



feral feminisms

The General Issue

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## Systems of Pain/Networks of Resilience: (Santa Fe) and (Portrait) (2017)

Meghan Moe Beitiks

*Systems of Pain/Networks of Resilience is a creative exploration of observation and entanglement as tools for negotiating pain comprised of two parts: (Santa Fe) and (Portrait). In Santa Fe, Meghan Moe Beitiks researches human relationships with the Santa Fe river. Informed by local interviews, the piece performs a choreography and material arrangement of the Santa Fe river and was on display at the Santa Fe Art Institute. (Portrait) depicts a collection of things which consistently appear in the artist's work. Artist Beitiks positions their body as one of these performing objects within a still life and discusses her relationships to the objects within the exploration of pain and resilience.*

### (Santa Fe)



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/233765595>

Please note: MOE refers to artist Moe Beitiks. AUDIO DESCRIPTION is the voice of Adam Harvey. All other names are interviewees with their full names indicated at the end of the article. All *Santa Fe* photos are by Jane Phillips.



*Piñon logs, a looping video of piñon branches, masculine wallpaper, a lamp, a chair, two tablecloths, a cornucopia of oranges, laser cuts of pine branches from the masculine wallpaper, clear vases full of water from the Santa Fe river south of the wastewater treatment plant, with floating oranges in them. When unrelated materials become a modified beaver dam. Where the articulation of order is not pleasant, beautiful, or what is expected.*

*MOE sits in a chair, slouching.*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The room is a perfect square, divided in the center by a diagonal seam in the concrete floor along which broken piñon branches are scattered. Half the room is lit naturally by vaulted skylights which face one corner. At the opposite corner, lit primarily by artifice, the event's technical liaison. At an adjacent corner, the event's audio describer, and near the center, a person wearing a backbrace, seated in a wooden chair facing the piñon arrangement, slouching forward, with elbows on knees.

THERESA: Vulnerability is, it's not just a topic in climate science—

*MOE slouches and straightens.*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The person alternately slouches and straightens. At the chair's base are seven glass vases containing Santa Fe river water. Resting atop each vase, an orange. Another vase with riverwater and an orange is against the wall to the person's left with a bright orange nylon strap ratcheted to its base.

LIGHT CUE 1: The lamp flickers. MOE stares at it.

ANDY: So, once an aquifer is depleted, it doesn't come back 100%. There's some compaction of the soils that happens, and so, maybe it only comes back at 85%.

*MOE gets up and picks up tablecloths, folds unfolds and places them on the branches.*

LIGHT CUE 2: LAMP OUT

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The person regards a tall flickering lamp against the wall to the right. At its base are a scrap of torn beige wallpaper, an orange, some wooden cutouts traced from the wallpaper's pattern, and a vase containing river water, algae, and two small fish. Now adding tablecloths to the arrangement.

JOEL: Constantly putting together little bits of information to eventually get some sort of, idea, or, uh, a visual, a visual, that isn't really there, I mean, it's created by my brain out of little pieces of information.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The lamp is no longer flickering. On the opposite wall, a flat screen television displays the top portion of a Santa Fe piñon. A white tracing of the wallpaper pattern is intermittently superimposed over the image of the tree.



MELISSA: Water is just not that available. At different times of year we have, uh, some rainfall, but it's becoming more intense and less frequent, more of it at one time, and, uh, it's creating some ecological issues for sure, because plant material prefers to have a little bit more consistency, and we're really getting into extremes now.

*MOE begins dropping the logs onto the branches.*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: On the wall between the describer and the lamp are thirty piñon latillas. The person carries them two at a time, one in each hand, over to the center arrangement. And drops them.

DAVID: Everybody wants a healthy river, but they really don't think, they really honestly feel that it's impossible.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Dropping latillas two by two onto the arrangement. Two additional scraps of beige wallpaper can be seen attached to the room's two unoccupied corners.

EMILY: To reinsert yourself in a society that doesn't look like anything or feel anything like the one you've lived or known or studied, but you want to, because you know that you need to have a place called home—

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The pattern on this wallpaper bears a slight resemblance to the piñon branches on the floor and television screen, but is more geometrical in form, filling the negative space in a consistent and even style.

JESSICA: So, a lot of times we warn people that there's an ugly phase to restoration—



AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A charcoal line has been drawn at eye level along the wall, interrupted only by two large metal doors on either side of the room, the television, and a place where the charcoal line blossoms into an ornate pattern in the same style as the wallpaper tracings.

ANDY: A couple things with Beavers, they they change their environment. And so, um, they do things like the classic beaver dam, which holds back the water, and they do it so they can build a lodge in the middle for defense and that sort of thing, but what it does help do is increase that infiltration into the aquifers.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Working from left to right along the diagonal, the arranger has continued to drop latillas onto the branches and tablecloths. This was done with little regard to where exactly they may fall. The arranger pauses.

JILL: One knee, my left knee on the ground, and my right knee folded up, and I'm sort of scooting along hunched over, doing the same motion over and over again.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The lamp, which is topped by a smudged and crooked shade, pulses on and off. Having completed a full pass with the latillas from along the arrangement, the arranger starts a second pass with the remaining latillas.

LIGHT CUE 3: The lamp pulses. MOE pauses.

KATE: Well I guess, understanding their motivators is important to understand why they're behaving the way they are, so I guess when I get a call, I ask them, I ask the person, so what do you think—it's like, if a dog is being aggressive, what do you think is triggering that dog, and is it scary to them, and do we need to counter-condition—

LIGHT CUE 4: LAMP OUT

*MOE begins to place logs more deliberately, in the places that seem to need them.*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: This second pass is much more considered than the first. The arranger is no longer dropping the latillas haphazardly, but more deliberately, placing them onto the arrangement in what appears to be direct relation to where the others had been dropped.

JOEL: I'm not aware of a blank area, or a dark spot or a black hole, or a shadow or anything, the brain just fills in with the ambient colors from my periphery, it just fills in the space that it doesn't see with either a color or a pattern.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION:

The final two latillas are dropped at one end of the arrangement.

The arranger now turns to several wooden cutouts located beneath the ornate charcoal drawing. These cutouts are fragile and prone to breakage, so the arranger now works even more delicately, placing them in the center arrangement with a steady and even distribution.



*MOE begins to place the masculine trace branches on the pile.*

MELISSA: This last summer we've been working on creating swale systems along banks that uh, we, that will slow the water, we're planting, uh, cones, and trees uh, to hold the banks, uh, we are removing invasive vegetation where it conflicts with native vegetation, we're being mindful of, uh, erosion conditions when you remove trees, so we're, we're being very careful about how we remove trees.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The cutouts are of the same pattern mentioned before: curlicue branches accented by small tufts of what might be pine needles. It is difficult to know for sure what these tufts are specifically meant to represent, however, because the wallpaper design is too small to allow for that kind of detail, and the tracings, though much larger in scale, remain faithful to the abstract nature of the source from which they came. The arranger pauses.

JESSICA: Bringing in more diversity in the hopes that there will be a greater resiliency to climate change.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Having completed this stage of the arrangement, the person then gets up and returns to their seat at the wooden chair, regarding one of the seven vases. The lamp turns on and off slowly, but the person does not look to see, rather returning to the exercise of slouching, straightening, slouching, straightening.

LIGHT CUE 5: The lamp pulses slooowly.

ANDY: They were recognized as being an issue, but then they disappeared. And so, you know, some of the ranchers admit that they removed some, they, they shot em, and trapped em, uh, some, like some of the game and fish folks have said yeah there's been some diseases that have come in and gotten beavers.

*MOE is sitting in chair, different motions.*

LIGHT CUE 6: LAMP OUT

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The lamp is off. At its base, the fish continue to swim in the alginated riverwater where they were collected just downstream of the Santa Fe wastewater treatment plant.

DAVID: My norm is, that natural river trumps the bypass channel.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The person moves the vases into a "V" formation towards the piñon arrangement. This is done not by picking them up, but rather pushing them along the smooth concrete floor. At no point does a vase lose contact with the floor.

*MOE is moving the vases filled with water.*

KATHLEEN: It was, in terms of riparian restoration terms, it was a pretty trashed, beat up, river. Too hot, not enough shade to cool the river, um, you know, many many problems, you



know, not to mention the fact that it was effluent, so, we were depending on what the city's doing to treat the water. So it really was this um water that was under a lot of threat.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Having arranged the vases into a more or less straight line, the person starts to push the vases into the piñon arrangement, which now resembles a beaver dam, with twigs, poles, and curlicues accented by blotches of orange.

*MOE sits alongside pile.*

JACK: I just had this very momentary flash of

LIGHT CUE 7: The lamp come on. Flickers.

JACK: . . . experiencing the world as it really is.

LIGHT CUE 8: LAMP OUT.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Having sat for a moment, spine erect, facing the wallpaper in the corner,

*Pause.*

The arranger now picks up the orange nylon strap and starts to walk away, seemingly unaware that it is attached to the vase, for once the strap tautens, the person hesitates.

DAVID: We will, we will give water to the river, um, and in a normal year, a normal year as defined by at least 80% of normal rainfall, we will give 1000 acrefeet of water, roughly um, 20% of the river's normal flow, we'll leave in the river. Now if we get less than 80 in an abnormally dry year, which we have many, then the river has to sacrifice proportionally, so that we have to have less water, the river has less water.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Carefully dragging the vase to a spot near the describer where a wicker cornucopia, another vase with riverwater, and several oranges are arranged on the floor in a still life. The person removes the orange from the vase being dragged and places it in the still life.

CHRISTIE: You know, or how that particular plant propagates, you know, usually people are, they're fascinated. I think there's a genuine curiosity, I think there's a deep hunger for that connection, and for, for understanding.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Now dragging the vase towards the exit.

LIGHT CUE 9: The lamp slowly fades on. Stays up.

MELISSA: Want to encourage the natural state of the river. So rather than channelizing, we always seek to be where the water wants to go.

*MOE exits.*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The lamp is now consistently on. With the sound of the motorcycle the person drags the now orange-less vase out of the room, carefully so as not to tip the vase as it travels over the taped power cable.

END



(Portrait)



*Systems of Pains/Networks of Resilience (Portrait)* (2016). Previously published in *Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain* (Beitiks 2022, 81). Photo by Meghan Moe Beitiks.



(Portrait)

How does the observation of pain help surpass it?

*Systems of Pain/Networks of Resilience* was a creative exploration of observation and listening as a means of overcoming pain. It began with research on systems and ecological theory, continued in conversation with individuals, and it looked to observation and performance as a means of connection. The work explored methods for the restoration of mutually entangled ecologies and human bodies. Interviews with local people with personal and professional experience with trauma and recovery provided the basis for a series of works. Performances, installations, and videos emerged in response to different sites of the works' development, and the words in the local interviews. The work has been documented in its entirety in the book, *Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain* (Beitiks 2022).

Within this project, pain is understood as trauma, loss, disruption—everything from polluted landscapes to neglect, from abusive relationships to work stress. Recovery is sometimes a process of observation and description, of reminding ourselves where we are, and what our relationship is to the place and things around us. Without assuming a normative or universal healing process for our many and varied pains and traumas, how can interrelatedness assist in our recovery processes? How does observation become an act of listening, a key tool toward understanding, and a way of building resilience?

Several objects emerged as co-performers: a cornucopia, a tablecloth, clementine tangerines, knives, orange ratchet straps, a floor lamp, wood and wooden panels, tables, and chairs. Throughout the arc of the work, a table is broken apart, reassembled, disassembled, burned, and its ashes scattered at the base of a tree. The hardware from the table is included in the (*Portrait*) photo, along with the jar that carried the table's ashes.

Throughout the other chapters of the *Systems of Pain* project, the objects appear in videos, performances and installations, as a kind of disrupted domestic space, or broken still life. Oranges arrive in piles, in corners. Tablecloths are both laid out on tables and crumpled into piles. They are waved in front of bulls' noses and draped over branches. Glass vases later appear, filled with water from one river, but from multiple sources, different in their quality. The vocabulary of the still life is persistent but fractured.

In this photograph, called (*Portrait*), my body is placed with these objects in a still life tableau. This image is the only moment in the greater body of the work where these objects are together in a single composition. In other forms of the work, they are isolated, in their own spaces, assembled into unrelated or unexpected imagery. Here we see them as they might exist in a source-space, or original composition, a reference point for their connotations throughout the work. It is a still life, but with some objects we might not expect. It is a resting place, a potential starting point, for/from the imagery in the rest of the work.

The objects do not operate as a metaphor or symbol in the work. Instead, they are themselves, loaded with the associations and connotations we bring to them as viewers. I attempt to engage with them as both “live” matter and as embodiments of human associations. My own androgynous body occupies a similar space.

A persistent presence in the work is that of beige wallpaper with patterns of pine branches. Inexplicably categorized as “Masculine” by the Johnson Wall Coverings Company, located in Galesburg, Illinois, this gendered rendition of the wallpaper speaks to the greater processes of categorization, stereotyping, stigma, and prejudice. These barriers to understanding were articulated by many project interviewees as blocks in their healing processes: to be heard and understood is an important aspect of recovery. *Systems of*



*Pain/Networks of Resilience* asks us to consider objects in relation to each other in an attempt to comprehend the inaccessible “other”—the marginalized, different, misread, oppressed, forgotten, or ignored.

In the *(Santa Fe)* chapter of the work, the materials in the work occupy an expansive role. They include local and industrially sourced charcoal, various objects like tablecloths, vases and oranges (which are commonly found in still life imagery), piñon pine log “latillas,” which have a healing sap and are common in local fencing, and water collected from two different points along the Santa Fe River.

The Santa Fe Chapter, developed during a residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute, began with interviews with a few locals with relationships to the Santa Fe River, and adds their voices to a collection of interviews and explorations gathered over a year and a half. Processes that are specific to each place—such as the care of abused horses at a sanctuary, or the musings of a local naturalist—permeate the work, but expand to take on meaning beyond their site of origin. The performance incorporated local materials, and looked at water as a hotly contested thing, a strictly managed and controlled thing, and as a sustaining source for ecosystems and homes and farms. The work looked at the river as something that survives a diversion through the city and a wastewater process to re-emerge and continue along its path, subject to further diversions and channels.

Audio Description is frequently used to make film and video accessible for low- or non-sighted people. The American Council for the Blind demands that the Audio Describer recount facts, serving a journalistic role (Snyder 2010, 10–11). What those facts are, however, is largely up to the Describer to determine (with some given guidelines: for instance, that all racializations must be described). The describer decides individually what, within an image or moment, is a “matter of concern” (Latour 2004, 231). This Santa Fe chapter of *Systems of Pain* is described by local Adam Harvey, whose words punctuated the live performance, and provide insight to the action for viewers of the documentation.

In creating live performance and art, we often use the term “documentation” to describe the archival life of a work after its creation. The documentation of the work is a mix of photos and video. In the live performance, audio description serves as a guiding of focus, a way of checking our experience against what is being described. In the documentation, the audio description serves as a crucial means of understanding the piece without having to witness its original form. In the work, one legally blind interviewee describes his everyday experience: “I’m not aware of a blank area, or a dark spot, or a black hole, my brain just fills in the information” (from interview with Foster 2017). In sitting with the work and its description, viewers are hopefully alerted to their own perceptual “blind spots”—the gaps between what is described and what they experience—and come to understand how this affects the materials and processes surrounding them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: *(Santa Fe)* and *(Portrait)* are reprinted with permission from Routledge, having previously appeared in the book *Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain* (Beitiks 2022, 120–134 and 81).



## Works Cited

- Beitiks, Meghan Moe. 2022. *Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain*. London: Routledge.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2: 225–248.
- Snyder, Joel. 2010. *Audio Description Guidelines and Best Practices*. The American Council of the Blind. Accessed August 5, 2023.  
<https://docenti.unimc.it/catia.giaconi/teaching/2017/17069/files/corso-sostegno/audiodescrizioni>.

## List of Interviewees

- Armentrout, Alicia. Child Care Specialist, resident of Omaha, Nebraska, 2016.
- Berkeley, Sarah. Artist, resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, 2016.
- Bingeman, Mike. Hospital Chaplain, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2016.
- Blanchard Kraft, Jill Y. Housekeeper and Tribal Community Member, New York, 2016.
- Bradshaw, Kate. Animal Behavior Specialist, Nebraska Humane Society, 2016.
- Bretz, Shelbi. Teacher, resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, 2016.
- Cales, Peter. Artist, resident of Omaha, Nebraska, 2016.
- Fader, Sean. Artist in Residence, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, 2016.
- Ferrer, Alex. Physical Trainer, YMCA Omaha, 2016.
- Foster, Joel. Artist, resident of Wassaic, NY, 2017.
- Goler, Miriam. Farmer, Pine Plains, NY, 2017.
- Jedd, Theresa. Political Scientist, Drought Mitigation Center, 2016.
- Leaverton, Bert. Artist and Veteran, resident of South Omaha, Nebraska, 2016.
- Morra, Jamie. Site Manager and Art Historian, Clermont, NY, 2016.
- Nohner, Emily. Humanitarian Professional, resident of Omaha, Nebraska, 2016.
- Pelletier, Jill. Housekeeper and Volunteer Horse Caretaker, New York, 2016.
- Phillips, Jack. Naturalist, Hitchcock Nature Center, 2016.
- Spiess, Anne-Katrin. Artist and Landowner, Clermont, NY, 2016.
- Stonehill, Mark. Farmer and Educator, Pine Plains, NY, 2017.
- Shoumatoff, Tonia. Writer and Producer, Wassaic, NY, 2017.
- Tucker, Toisha. Artist-in-Residence, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, 2016.
- Toro, Jessica M. Conservation and Restoration Planning Specialist, New York, 2016.
- Winsby-Fein, Jill. Farmer near Wassaic, NY, 2017.
- Yoshimoto, Jave. Artist, Omaha, Nebraska, 2017.

MEGHAN MOE BEITIKS is an artist working with associations and disassociations of culture/nature/structure. She is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Concordia University where she analyzes perceptions of ecology through the lenses of site, history, emotions, and her own body in order to produce work that looks at relationships with the non-human. She was a Fulbright Student Fellow, a recipient of the Claire Rosen and Samuel Edes Foundation Prize for Emerging Artists, and a MacDowell Colony fellow. Find her online at [www.meghanmoebetitks.com](http://www.meghanmoebetitks.com).