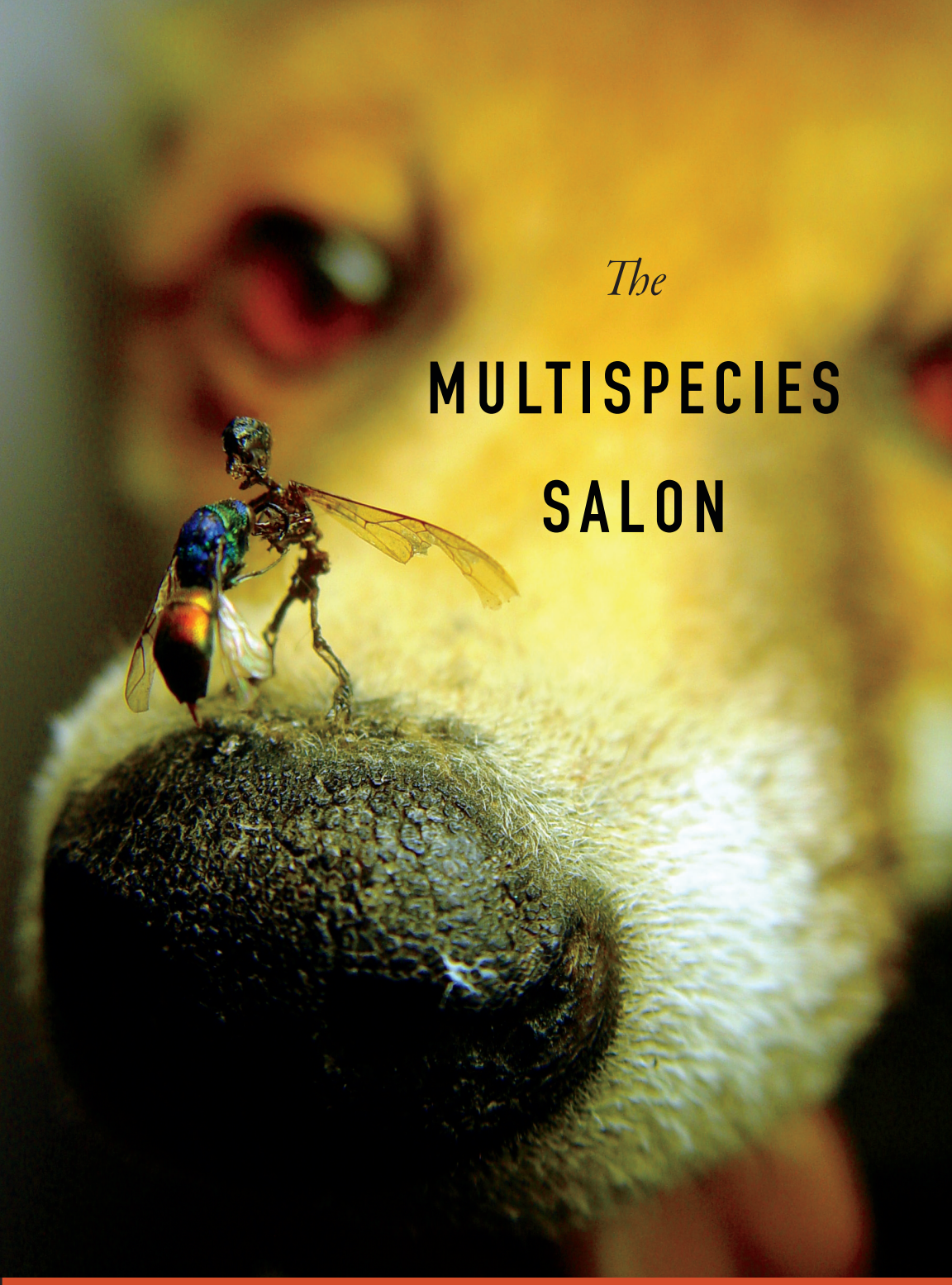

The MULTISPECIES SALON

EBEN KIRKSEY, EDITOR

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RECIPE 3

MULTISPECIES COMMUNITIES

Eben Kirksey

Fuzzy softball-size balls were scattered in the bare dirt of an expansive yard outside the Ironworks, a warehouse that had been hastily retrofit as a gallery for the opening night of the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans. These Technicolor wool sculptures, illuminated by a small desk lamp, were underfoot as small, well-dressed children weaved among them and then hunkered down on the exposed gravel. Knee-high metallic spheres, SWARM orb robots, lurched through the grass a few yards away. Their flashing lights and prerecorded sounds drew the attention of adults. Children were captivated by the smaller, colorful wool balls. They picked the balls up and started rolling them around on the ground. Both the children and the artworks became covered with grit and dust.

These sculptures, Thneeds Reseeds, were created by Deanna Pindell in the hope of exposing and derailing dominant regimes for managing forest life.[1] Imagining a way to reseed the clear-cut forested landscapes near her home on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, Pindell began collecting multicolored wool sweaters—old and funky things that were no longer fashionable to wear. Pindell posted a message on Freecycle, a website promoting waste reduction to "save the landscape from being taken over by landfills," to gather raw materials. "Wanted: Old worn-out 100% wool sweaters. I will cut them up for ECO-projects. . . . Holes and stains are okay. Any color, any size."[2] Refashioning the form of wooly commodities, the excess of late capitalism, she shrank the donated sweaters in her drier. Using a time-tested process of "felting," she made brightly colored habitat for forest plants

RECIPE FIGURES 3.1 (*above*) and **3.2** (*opposite*) Thneeds Reseeds were small woolen sculptures displayed by Deanna Pindell at the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans (2010). Photographs by Eben Kirksey. See multispecies-salon.org/communities.

and animals. Chicken wire, leached of rust-preventing chemicals, became the matrix supporting her felted balls. Pindell created small openings in the Thneeds Reseeds so that forest mice, voles, and salamanders might live inside. She also hoped that the wool balls would become moth-eaten; that they would become food for the insect community.

"A thneed's a fine something that all people need," in the words of the Old Onceler, a haunting specter of dead capital in *The Lorax*, the classic childhood tale by Dr. Seuss. "It's a shirt. It's a sock. It's a glove, it's a hat. But it has other uses, yes, far beyond that!" By knitting thneeds, multipurpose sweaters, the Old Onceler hopes to get mighty rich. Speaking for nature, the hero of the story persistently tries to interrupt these plans: "I'm the Lorax, who speaks for the trees, which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please. But I'm also in charge of the brown bar-ba-loots, who played in the shade in their bar-ba-loot suits, and happily lived, eating Truffula fruits."

Bruno Latour has recently rearticulated the refrain of the Lorax. Calling on scholars of science and society to give democratic rights to "nonhumans," Latour has suggested that we construct *speech prosthetics*: "millions of subtle mechanisms capable of adding new voices to the chorus."[3] The Lorax attempted to speak for a multitude of creatures living among the Truffula trees. But ultimately, this tragic figure failed to save the forest from being clear-cut.[4]

Rather than simply repeat failed truth-telling strategies or construct speech prosthetics for particular species, Pindell has worked to generate livable futures in the aftermath of ecological disasters. Multispecies ethnographers have recently taken an "ontological turn," departing from a foundational distinction between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, at the base of Euro-American epistemology.[5] Tracing the vector of a parallel turn, Pindell and other artists operating in biological and ecological domains have begun to explore novel modes of care for beings in multispecies worlds.[6] The Thneeds Reseeds are intended to be agential things in the world, tools for enlisting multiple species in the healing of damaged ecosystems or even generating new kinds of flourishing.[7] Pindell's work is a proposal for living in blasted landscapes—a proposal intended not to say what is or what ought to be but meant to destabilize dominant regimes of calculation and control, meant to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems, desires, and situations mobilizing us and our companion species.[8]

When she first moved to the Olympic Peninsula, Pindell found that struggles by environmental advocates to save particular patches of forest were taking place alongside struggles by loggers who were trying desperately to keep

RECIPE FIGURE 3.3 Silvery bryum moss growing with multiple other plant species between cobblestones on a street in France. Courtesy of Abalg, an avid user of the Wikimedia Commons. See multispecies-salon.org/communities.

their jobs, to heat their homes. As activists lost steam, timber companies cut the forest and moved on—leaving devastated ecosystems and unemployed people in their wake. "Every time I passed a clear-cut forest," Pindell told me, "I felt a sense of loss, a sense of mourning."

Rather than dwell on tragedy, Pindell has added a sense of irony into her artwork. Seeing that the oppositional politics of activists were failing, she began reworking the ideas of metamorphosis, remediation, and sanctuary.[9] Dreaming about seeding abandoned lands with multicolored wool balls, she began thinking about how to enlist multiple species in enlivening devastated spaces. Pindell played with the tale of the Lorax to invent a novel technology of interspecies care and cultivation.

Initially, the Thneeds Reseeds were designed with one particular species in mind: *Bryum argenteum*, silvery bryum moss, one of the most tenacious and widespread mosses in the world. It is found in all sorts of seemingly hostile environments—from the tarmacs of New York City airports to the tiled roofs of Quito, Ecuador. Pindell hoped that giving this moss a moist substrate would enable it to become a "first responder" from the plant kingdom

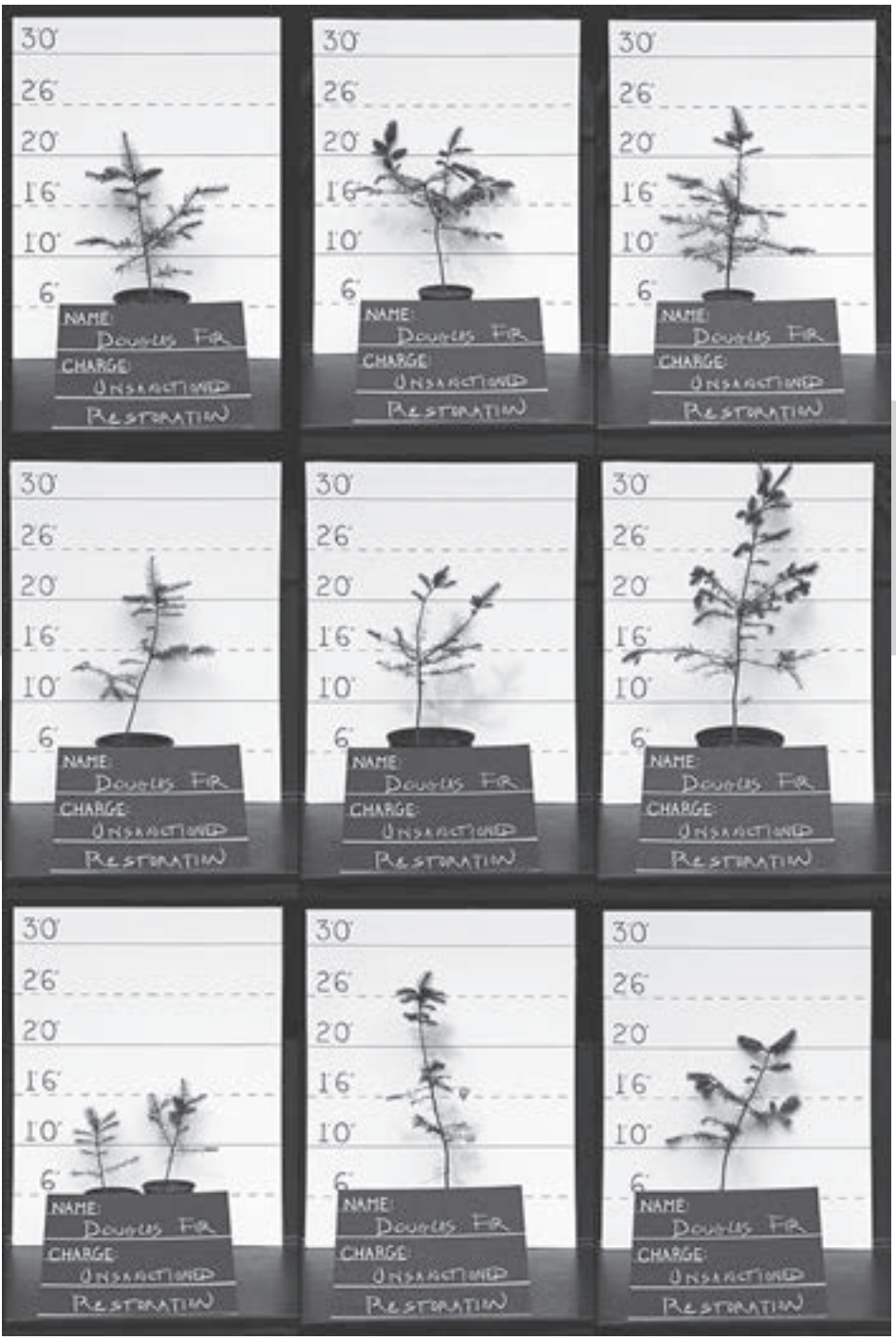
in clear-cut forests. The spores of silvery bryum are abundant in the aerial plankton—the cloud of spores, pollen, and insects that circulates the globe at altitudes up to fifteen thousand feet.[10]

Moss spores are raining down in the air all around us, looking for suitable places to germinate—solid substrates with enough light and water. Pindell designed the Thneeds to trap rain, to hold on to moisture that otherwise would evaporate in a landscape where the forest canopy had been removed. *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History*, by the bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, initially gave Pindell the idea of using silvergreen bryum to help the forest regenerate. At an abandoned iron mine, Kimmerer found that tree seeds grew and survived best on huge mounds of tailings when they lived in partnership with moss.[11]

Pindell sent twenty-one Thneeds to the Multispecies Salon. Her installation was framed by a playful recipe:

> THNEEDS RESEEDS
>
> To restore your clear-cut forest:
>
> 1. Break the mosses into fragments.
>
> 2. Mix the moss with buttermilk.
>
> 3. Place Thneeds in clear-cut.
>
> 4. Keep the Thneeds moist with buttermilk until tree seedlings can take hold.
>
> *Note:* Enough Thneeds for one square meter of forest.

RECIPE FIGURE 3.4 "Unsanctioned Restoration" is a companion project to Deanna Pindell's "Thneeds Reseeds." She conducts this ongoing performance art piece in collaboration with Douglas fir trees. With these "mug shots" she has set out to document the lives of "youthful delinquents" who grew up in unfortunate circumstances—germinating underneath power lines, or in lots slated for development. Pindell rescued and nurtured these yearlings, replanting them along eroding hillsides and stream banks, where trees are needed to protect the watershed. In these new habitats she helps them be successful and useful to their ecosystem and human society. Deanna Pindell, "Unsanctioned Restoration," Archival digital ink print on canvas. 36" × 24," 2012. Photograph by Joann Seiburg Baker. See multispecies-salon.org/communities.


30
26
20
16
10
6
NAME:
Douglas Fir
CHARGE:
Unsanctioned
Restoration

If the scale of Pindell's intervention, one square meter, is a tragic joke, she hopes her piece will help inspire other people to develop their own ideas about enlivening abandoned spaces. If a multitude of people each begin caring for small plots of ecologically devastated land—say, one square meter apiece—the world will certainly become replete with biocultural diversity. It will become a livelier place.

When I visited Pindell's double-wide mobile home, at the end of a short dirt road near a little one-light town on the Olympic Peninsula known as Chimacum, she invited me to take a short walk. While poking along the edge of a busy road, as semitrucks zoomed by carrying freshly cut Douglas firs, Pindell told me that she has not actually seeded any clear-cuts with her Thneeds. Rather than manufacture brightly colored wool balls on an industrial scale, and spread these strange sculptures in landscapes that have been blasted by capitalism, she hopes her art will inspire people to develop new practices of interspecies care. Pindell hopes that her work will inspire others to get involved in do-it-yourself (DIY) bioculture projects.[12]

My stroll with Pindell took us to a recently abandoned gravel pit—a place that has been turned into a public park with picnic tables, a baseball diamond, and basketball courts. Pindell showed me a half-dozen Douglas fir seedlings she had planted around the margins of the repurposed mine. Transplanting the seedlings from places where they were unwanted—under a roadside telephone poll where lawnmowers regularly work, from next to her own house where the growing trees would have shaded out her vegetable garden—she is trying to diversify this municipal park, a landscape that is now dominated by a monoculture of grass. Sauntering out every afternoon with her dog, she routinely inspects and cares for the transplanted seedlings—hoping that they will go unnoticed—or, at least, be tolerated—by the park authorities and maintenance crews. Her modest attempts at "guerrilla bioremediation" in the park offers an opportunity to think about the possibilities contained in microbiopolitical interventions. Establishing local cycles of matter and meaning on a micro scale, subverting standard practices, is a means of reworking dominant strategies for managing life.[13]

Pindell has grounded her visions of biocultural hope in living figures. Knitting particular species into the fabric of lively futures for Pacific Northwest forests, she has congealed her imaginings of postindustrial futures in actual material objects. Her small sculptures prefigure coming changes and contain a radical openness to unruly possibilities involving multiple species. Pindell is cultivating a space for surprises beyond the reach of her own imaginative horizons. The Thneeds Reseeds are an open invitation to a multitude

of other life forms, and creative human agents, who might start exploring new ways of being with others in the world.[14]

NOTES

1. Da Costa and Philip, *Tactical Biopolitics*, xviii.

2. "Jefferson County Washington Freecycle," accessed September 15, 2011. http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JeffersonCoFreecycle/message/25248.

3. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 64, 69.

4. People who speak for nature run the risk of becoming ventriloquists. Other species of plants, animals, and microbes can easily become projection screens for anthropocentric concerns. Perhaps initiatives to build new speech prosthetics, to bring the voices of other species into play, also always generate constitutive outsiders who are unrepresented in realms of human discourse: see Kirksey, "Living with Parasites in Palo Verde National Park," 25–26.

5. Candea, "I Fell in Love with Carlos the Meerkat," 243; Kirksey and Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," 553.

6. See, e.g., Bureaud, "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Biological Art," 39; Dumit, "Foreword," xii; Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, 7; Zurr, "Complicating Notions of Life," 402.

7. See chapter 7 in this volume.

8. Here I am in dialogue with the "Cosmopolitical Proposal" of Isabelle Stengers, who asks, "How can we present a proposal intended not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought, a proposal that requires no other verification than the way in which it is able to 'slow down' reasoning and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us?": Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," 994. See also Despret, "The Body We Care For," 122.

9. Failed oppositional politics of an early environmental movement in Great Britain, a struggle to stop the Thirlmere Scheme to build a dam, has been described by Harriet Ritvo. "The outline of the story has become so familiar as to seem predictable," Ritvo writes. "Once the Manchester Corporation (the city's governing body) set its sights on Thirlmere, the lake's fate was sealed": Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green*, 3. The organized campaign of resistance has become a kind of template for subsequent environmental struggles.

10. See "'A' for Air," in Raffles, *The Illustrated Insectopedia*, 5–12; Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss*, 92.

11. Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss*, 50.

12. Da Costa and Philip, *Tactical Biopolitics*, xvii.

13. Paxson, "Post-Pasteurian Cultures," 40; Kirksey and Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," 560. See also the interlude and chapter 4 in this volume.

14. Despret, "The Body We Care For," 122; Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 16; Kirksey et al., "Poaching at the Multispecies Salon," 130.