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## Becoming Apprentice to Materials

An Interview with Adam Bobbette, June 2008

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*I interviewed Adam Bobbette one night in June of last year. At the time, Adam had just finished working as curator at the Canadian Centre of Architecture [CCA] in Montréal. He also had just completed an artist residency at Eyebeam in New York City. I wanted to talk to him about his experiences there, what he was producing at the time, and how his practice as artist, curator, and researcher converged and influenced one another.*

*Currently, Adam is working towards a Master of Landscape Architecture at the University of Toronto in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design.*

*The interview began from the middle of a conversation.*

Adam Bobbette: AB

Nasrin Himada: NH

**AB:** I was writing my thesis [Adam did his first MA at McGill University in the Art History and Communications Department], and I was writing about trash housing in the South Western USA, which then got me thinking about garbage, waste, and excess, generally. So I started doing this work as a kind of "mode of investigation" not to make "art works." That wasn't really my concern.

**NH:** How would you go about investigating? From just walking around?

**AB:** Yeah, and from being around a lot of garbage. Something I was going to say earlier is that I was getting really excited about this notion in [Manuel] de Landa, which is incorporated from Deleuze, about becoming an apprentice to materials as a way of relating to materials. The example that de Landa uses, which I really like, is the metal smith. The metal smith enters into a conversation with metal by burning and melting it and pushing it to its limits as a bounded material. You know, you take silver out of a mine, at first you have a discreet object, and then you put it in flames and you burn the shit out of it and you

hammer it until it gains fluidity, then you can bend it, twist and turn it into a tool. But that takes experimentation, working with the material to push it and see what it can do, where it can go, which is not just about you imposing your preconceived plan on the material but it is actually entering into a conversation with the material.

**NH:** I feel that you took this concept of experimentation further when you began your practice and residency at Eyebeam. When you began the residency is that when you started to think about specific projects?

**AB:** Yes, somewhat on a whim my friend Steve Helsing and I decided to apply for the residency. Anything that I had done up to that point was always out on the street, with other people, or on walls (I was doing a lot of graffiti then). I'd never had an art show or really cared to, nor really cared to see them either—the world of art was pretty distant and not appealing. So without any officially recognizable experience I made up a bunch of “official shows”, which really just meant to account for the stuff we were doing in back alleys and parks and what not. And we got the residency at Eyebeam. Then it was like, “I gotta make art” (laughs). I don't know how to make art, I've never made art before and then Steve dropped out of the project and I really had to figure out how to make art now that I was working alone.

**NH:** So did you guys collaborate together on projects first before he dropped out and you started doing your own projects?

**AB:** Sort of, we had lots of speculative projects. We would sit around a lot and imagine the things we would like to build, and we co-wrote the proposal, but it took a turn after it was just myself.

**NH:** How did it take a turn? What did it enable you to do?

**AB:** I started working on my own stuff but I also met Jerry Juarez and we had similar interests. So we started working together and eventually started talking about our projects as Forays. Our work was really more like experiments, and we were attracted to amateur naturalists who would go on Sunday “forays” with their note books, eyeglasses and drawing pads. We started calling our work Forays which was eventually turned into a group name by other people. People love proper names.

**NH:** What was your first project at Eyebeam?

**AB:** I was shoving light tubes in empty holes in a wall at street level. Sometimes in a building there would be an old pipe that would go into the building from the

outside in — like a water pipe or a gas pipe—when the pipe is removed, a hole is left in the brick. It is really common but it is never something that we pay any attention to. Typically when we look at a wall we complete it, smooth it out, or fill in the holes. So I inserted plexie tubes into the holes and inside the tube there would be lights or at the end there would be an image where there could be all sorts of objects, like kaleidoscopes for instance. As you're walking you see this little glow coming out of the wall and you might go take a look inside. It's a very simple way of giving depth to something we might experience as a flat surface.

But if you want a continuation of the garbage theme, one of the projects I did at Eyebeam was to harvest wild yeast from the air. I built these elaborate traps that I would stick on the roof at Eyebeam in Chelsea. Basically, a condition is created inside these traps that lure the yeast in (really it's just sweetened water) and the yeast gets in there, is activated, and starts to reproduce and turns into an active yeast culture. From that yeast you can bake bread, which I never ended up doing. But the initial plan was to bake bread in a solar oven, also on the roof. So it was this way of turning the air into bread using only the elements which are immediately present, which was a continuation of the theme of my interest in garbage. How, for instance, do you work with materials close at hand and how do you push those materials in such a way as to actually produce some kind of new condition or innovation.

**NH:** When you wrote the proposal for Eyebeam did you write about a specific project you wanted to do?

**AB:** We were going to work with steam coming out of the ground from the network of the steam pipes that heat a lot of Manhattan. We were going to build this crazy mobile shadow theatre that was powered by the steam. Again, our proposal was to work with the elements that are immediately there.

**NH:** At the same time you were doing this residency at Eyebeam you also began working as a curator for the CCA. What did you do at the CCA and did you find affinities between the two projects, the one for Eyebeam and the one for the CCA? How did your work between these two places coincide?

**AB:** Yes, certainly. One was a historical practice, working with archives and libraries which is its own kind of trajectory, and the other is building and working with a whole set of different materials. A lot of the research I was doing for the CCA was based on the initial research I had done for my thesis though it expanded on the theme of energy in relation to housing. So at the CCA, I was working on the history of energy, especially during the oil crisis and the architectural response to the oil crisis, for their large scale exhibition *1973: Sorry out of Gas*. While in New York, I was working with ambient energy, trying to think

about energy and what the hell it is; at the same time, I was also trying to distance myself from certain bad kinds of sustainability and nefarious environmentalisms.

**NH:** How did you want to distance yourself? Or can you explain the difference between what you wanted to do or think about and experiment with versus what you just referred to as nefarious environmentalism?

**AB:** At the CCA we were looking at the effects of the 1973 oil crisis on the built environment. This research really helped me formulate critical questions for the present. When oil prices sky rocketed in '73 in Europe, North and South America, a really interesting opportunity opened up. The basic infrastructures that made everyday life possible were suddenly under threat of total collapse. Unique things started happening: people riding their bikes on the interstate, pedestrians crowding down-towns, people pulling out the old horse and carriage to ride to work. The basic separation of functions that determined post-war urbanism came under threat. Moreover, people re-discovered solar panels, wind power and the insulating properties of the earth. There emerged what seems to us like a tremendously exciting moment of experimentation with alternative infrastructures. This experimentation cut across numerous sectors of society: from homesteader DIY'ers, universities, the architectural profession, even to President Carter propping up a solar panel on the roof of the White House. I had to start asking, what is all of this change for? Superficially, these experiments often encountered the "crisis" as a technological problem to be over come. When you leave the level of questioning here it all seems quite straightforward, and also optimistic. We can simply produce technological solutions to what are ostensibly technical problems. Architecture, as a discipline, is so often mired in this naive optimism — the disciplines myopia. It became clear to me that there were other forces driving technological experimentation. For instance, people started shoving their suburban homes underground in order to save on heating bills. The temperature below the surface of the earth is much more constant than above, eliminating the drastic temperature swings brought by seasonal changes. There were plans for entire suburbs built underground. A number of these houses were built (and still exist today) especially in the Midwest. Moreover, there were plans to build town house complexes, subsidized housing, prisons, offices, universities, all shoved underground. In one sense this is a radical gesture. For instance, the formal arrangement of the landscape would be quite different, but they are still prisons, suburbs, and hospitals. This was precisely what was fascinating to me: what motivated so much "experimentation" during the oil crisis were forces seeking to find more economical means to preserve already existing and dominant social forms. So in reality, technological and formal inventiveness in this crisis is put in the service of conservation, the suburbs remain the same, the social organization of the suburban house remains in tact: two,

three or four bedrooms, kitchen, living room, tv room, garage. People can afford to drive to work now because they have no heating bills. The suburb remains an enclave of middle class reproduction. The oil crisis is exemplary for displaying the voracious ingenuity of middle class suburban self preservation.

This has informed my own scepticism towards sustainability; there is a re-emergence of discourses of "crisis" along side technological triumphalism, but what is actually going to change, or what social relations are we trying to maintain when we ask for technological and infrastructural change? Finding cheaper and renewable sources of energy so that we can recharge our cell phones, drive cars, watch television, and keep buying cheap stuff, is nothing interesting; it transforms infrastructural organization without touching social form. This is why Forays has been interested in the end of the world, as a way to imagine and live through a real crisis that opens up the possibility of experimenting with social form.

**NH:** Following on that, I think a good example that illustrates well what you are just describing is the hot dog oven at Eyebeam. I am interested to know about how it was made and about the process.

**AB:** It was a continuation, obviously, of these themes. The hot dog oven is basically a small oven, six by six inches square and two feet long, made of sheet metal and dryer tubing from home depot. You connect it to a man hole cover where the steam is coming to the surface and the oven simply captures that steam and in it you can cook basically whatever you like. I did it in Grand Rapids, Michigan for a show that was there, and I did it as part of a collaborative project with Jerry. Jerry and I had cooked using steam before on this night that we camped in Manhattan on New Year's Eve. It was for this end of the world project that we did and for which we had made a more basic prototype of the steam oven out of the light bulb cages used on construction sites. We filled it in with foil and put a hot dog in it, then you dip it into the cone (in Manhattan they have these cones that stick up 8 or 9 feet to keep steam away from street level so people don't walk through and get burnt). So we had a rod, it was almost like a fishing thing, and then we dipped it into the steam. The steam oven was a slightly more sophisticated version than that but ran the steam directly from the ground into the oven. So I cooked hot dogs in it. On top of the oven there is a glass container that when a steam goes in it re-condenses on the top of the container and then drips back down as water into a cup. And then you can make tea.

**NH:** Can you talk more about the location. Where it was set up exactly or why you chose that location?

**AB:** For Pragmatic reasons. Forays was invited to show in Grand Rapids. I was there and the plan was to do a new piece. Jerry and I had a bunch of ideas we were working with and weren't sure exactly what to do, and we decided to go with the steam oven largely because Grand Rapids has a really extensive steam network or steam infrastructure which is pretty rare for American cities. It runs through all of downtown and heats buildings, but also restaurants use it for hot plates in the kitchen. Sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes, the steam is actually generated in Grand Rapids by burning garbage. So the incinerator and the steam, the garbage incinerator, and the steam are connected. They put all this garbage in there and burn it, and the heat from the burning garbage boils the water and sends the steam running through the whole city. But there are these certain low points in the steam network where water collects, and at these points the water gets shot out of the system and re-converted into steam when it hits the air. That's why it's coming out of the ground.

**NH:** What other projects did you work on with Jerry?

**AB:** We collaborated before the steam project on the cocoon project.

**NH:** What is the cocoon project?

**AB:** Well, the cocoons were these portable sleeping devices, basically hammocks that were built out of stolen material, hacked from construction sites. Jerry and I were talking about the re-purposing of infrastructures, like steam, and the re-purposing of materials. And this again, is also related to de Landa's concept of the becoming apprentice to materials, which means entering into an experimental relationship with it. Also, we were into exploring open-source architecture, or what it would mean to create open-source architecture. For us, that meant things like hacking, stealing, and thieving, breaking and entering—basically, transgressing notions of private property and real estate. The cocoons were made out of a bunch of materials through different iterations. One of them was postal envelopes, which you can get for free from post offices in the US and they're made out of Tyvek. Tyvek is really an amazing material, and it's generally really expensive. The postal envelopes are free and you can go and take however much you want. Jerry would go and take piles and piles of these envelopes and we would open them up and flatten them out and sew them together. Jerry was also making dresses out of them and we made a cocoon out of them. So a cocoon is a one person sleeping arrangement that can hang from basically anywhere and that will hold your weight. We used Tyvek, but also construction netting, which is what they put on scaffolding on construction sites to keep the dust down. We would just climb into the scaffolding at night and hack out a chunk. We also made them out of one dollar beach mats that you

can get in any Chinatown shop, and they're plastic. Because we were interested in pushing materials it also then turned us to process. We started thinking about process and less about objects. Creating an aesthetic object—something that is pretty or appealing, or anything like that—stopped mattering. It was less interesting. What did matter was where materials take you. Where do you go to find them? Who do you meet? What kinds of situations do you get in? You enter into this creative relationship with the infrastructure of the city. It takes you to places like post offices, construction sites, abandoned buildings, or websites where people give stuff away. So Jerry ended up in these interactions with people in midtown, talking with crazy old ladies because they're giving away cotton batting, tons of cotton batting, so she actually enters into a relation with somebody that otherwise she never would by virtue of trying to escape a commodity relationship, or a relationship based on monetary exchange. As we're thinking more and more about process and where the material is taking us, where are we going to find the material, we really start orienting our projects around that to the point that when we show projects we would try to even shrink away from showing objects and just show process. When we showed the cocoon project at Eyebeam, we had the cocoons but they were rolled up and mostly hidden, otherwise it was photographs and a map of every step that we took to create them—every place we went to, every material we used, the knots that we used to tie the ropes, all that just to show that this is a process, and to open up that process to people.

The cocoons were for different purposes. Initially, they were built for squatters in New York City who were protecting community gardens that were going to be destroyed by the city, and the cocoons made an easy way to get up and into tree-sits, so that if the city was going to demolish a park somebody with a cocoon could climb up into a tree, pull it out, sling it up, and then you're in a tree and the city can't bulldoze anything because you're in the tree. But it was also used to sleep in construction sites, scaffolding — it could be used for anything. And it could be made from just about anything. It's really a very flexible object. The materials that we chose, the sites where we installed it, emerged from our own interests but in no way are meant to dictate any future iterations of the cocoons. Tree squatters could use them but also someone might be more interested in the techniques of shoplifting, or putting on a harness and scaling a building or a tree. Someone else might use a different material entirely, a tarp for instance.

This is the reason why we began thinking of them as cocoons in the first place. A cocoon by nature is an organism in an intense state of transformation, in a deep state of transformation. The whole structure of this bug—its body—is liquefying as it is re-configuring into a new form. The new form it is going to take is not determined but is quite open. We know that a butterfly is going to come out but

we don't know what the butterfly is going to look like, how many spots it's going to have on its wings, the exact place of its legs. It is in a state of transformation, an open state of transformation.

**NH:** Did you have people, strangers,, want to try and cocoon themselves, go cocoon in the trees? Did anyone approach you and ask questions about what you were doing?

**AB:** Well, I mean New York City is fucked up and doing something like that in the park you don't get people wanting to try it but you do get people taking pictures; people feel like there is something "arty" going on, or some kind of event, so they'll take out their iPhones and snap a photo of it, and if they see it in the paper the next day they'll be like "I was there." The intention behind it was to build it as a tool that can be spread to other people, and it was like "look, we found out this way to do this, we've used these methods, they are not perfect, but they open some exciting possibilities."

**NH:** So you gave them—

**AB:** We didn't actually end up giving them to people, but I mean that's part of the problem we're not great technologists[ laughs]—not yet.

**NH:** Talk a little bit more about what Forays is doing now?

**AB:** Well, after we cooked stuff in the oven, we did a project about dumpstering. We created an icon—these stickers that label edible trash or edible excess. We would go out and put these stickers on sites where there was edible food and we would put the stickers there so that the sites were identifiable by foragers. And yeah, there were a whole bunch of things afterwards. But we've been in a state of wondering where our practice is at right now. But something that we're working on now has to do with real-estate but it's a bit too premature to talk about.

**NH:** I am wondering what the collaboration is like or how do you guys work together?

**AB:** Good question.

**NH:** I guess it depends on the project too—

**AB:** Yes, it does depend on the project—

**NH:** And how it changes.



**AB:** I can't speak for both of us at all, in this, but collaboration is really—I don't really know about collaboration. I am always torn about whether it's a lie or not, in the sense of an ideal sense of true collaboration. Where does collaboration actually happen? Is it a matter of some kind of Platonic union between two souls, the creation of a unity, helping out, skill sharing, etc? Sometimes it resolves pragmatic issues; if somebody has got time to do something that person does it. It's helpful working on large scale projects, a project that requires people with different skills, because we obviously work across media, from building structures to doing design to graphics, we're totally all over the place with materials. We both have different skill sets, and sometimes it's like if you can do this you do it because I can't do it as well. It also includes sharing ideas, pushing each other, getting stoked about what we each care and think about and sometimes calling each other out on their shit. You know, perhaps the most interesting thing about collaboration is conflict, how the fuck to deal with conflict, and how do you think about conflict or what conflict is. What we might naively think of as collaboration is often actually the honeymoon phase of collaboration, where it's like two people, three people, etc, who are really excited about working together and everybody is really totally willing to compromise — it's not even a question of compromise, it just works, as you are like new lovers, and all excited to touch each other, and so you hop right into it. And then you get over this honeymoon period, and then it's like "ugh, I don't want it that way", "but, I do", and then well, what do we do, what do we do about that? That's precisely when collaboration gets interesting and really difficult and often is the point where I think to my self, "there's no such thing as collaboration, it's bogus".

**NH:** How do you think about politics in relation to your work? Do you consider your work to be political?

**AB:** Well, I feel on the one hand there is something that you might call a political content that's really clear and sort of easy to talk about, you know, there is the politics of open source technologies or the politics of open source architecture, or the politics of grass roots architecture, even the politics of a certain conversation with materials or how to understand a relationship between yourself and materials. That's all kind of easy. But what is more interesting—and I should say it's more interesting because it's difficult—is understanding what the fuck it is to do politics in the context of art, which is not something I have an answer to and that I am always torn about, and feel sometimes like what the fuck, this is just representation, that what I do in my practice is basically a way for me to think through problems that I will then realize in a political sphere, which is the classic model, right. It's like you do drawings about warfare and how terrible warfare is and that mobilizes a political action outside the sphere of art, in the sphere of politics. And then you get wrapped up feeling like art is

always subsidiary to politics, where the real action is. Conversely, I also think that art is this really special place where you can manipulate certain structures, if you're smart enough about it, to make certain things possible which are otherwise not. And you can use your privilege as an artist to manipulate certain things. Like the group Wochenklausur who used their position as artists to create a mobile health clinic for homeless people and street workers in Vienna. They use their funding and resources as artists-in-residence to fill a need and a service that's not being met by the state. And their position is that people can call it art if they want to, but they don't really care as long as it is meeting enough protocols of the art system to keep them receiving funding so they can do their projects; in that case, they'll continue to call themselves artists. What they care about is using their positions as artists to get something done that won't otherwise get done.

Forays has also been interested in these basic concerns. I think that anybody who's been involved in DIY culture for awhile has in a sense "grown up with" a commitment to skill sharing and mutual-aid models: showing someone how the fuck you did something, teaching people how to get away with stuff, how to steal stuff, how to rip stuff off. You spread knowledge because we got it from other people and we need this kind of sharing in order to help us find ways to get along with the lives we want to live. And this is precisely the principle of open-source. But then there is this whole conflict when this methodology enters the art world. There is a conflict between the art world which stresses originality and novelty (which is precisely why this kind of work — instruction based work— often ushered in under the rubric of "relationality" is hip right now, because it's novel) and you end up with situations where you are showing instructions on how to steal something and people respond by saying "what an interesting work of art". And you can't necessarily reproduce it because if you are an artist you are demanded to make something that is "yours", "unique to you". So it's no longer an environment where these instructions can actually flow around. But you know, what is striking about this is how all of these questions resonate so strongly with the instruction based conceptual work of the 1970's where these same tensions over originality were being taken up. Now I am realizing that punk rock culture and activist culture have been good friends with Sol Le Wit for a while now.

**NH:** How?

**AB:** Well, the ethics of DIY and Punk Rock culture actually share concerns with the minimal and conceptual practices of the 1970's and 80's. The DIY or instruction manual is about destroying the cult of the author, a central pre-occupation of post-structuralism as with conceptual art. Where you have it theorized and historicized in post-structuralism you have it played out in a

different form by artists. Sol Le Witt is probably the most obvious example, his wall drawings that are completed by other people according to instructions he sent out. His interest was not in other people completing his work but in how instructions actually produce conditions for unexpected insertions of originality, how the instruction is never carried out exactly as described, there are always divergences and re-appropriations. This is precisely how authorship is contested, through the little openings that allow for re-appropriation.

Punk culture (at least the one I grew up with) did not produce the same kind of experiments but at base is concerned with the death of the author and experimenting with the constitution of other collective infrastructures.

Lately, I have been re-reading Robert Smithson and he is helping me a lot with the relation between "artistic" production and politics. He is turning me much more to questions of perception: how we see, hear, feel, taste and talk about the world, how are these material processes and how are material arrangements always already political. Distorting, re-arranging, or undermining the material processes that produce our "sense of the world" is a deeply political process. What I have been learning from Smithson, and which you find taken up by so many others (including Deleuze and de Landa) is that politics is always enacted through perception. It must allow particular kinds of worlds to be sensible while foreclosing others. Here then, politics crosses the threshold of aesthetics. And so what then might it be to practice on perception, what other kinds of worlds become perceptible? I don't know. Does that make any sense?

**NH:** Yes.