SPRINGS

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ADVENTURES IN MOCKSTITUTIONS

Jenny Price

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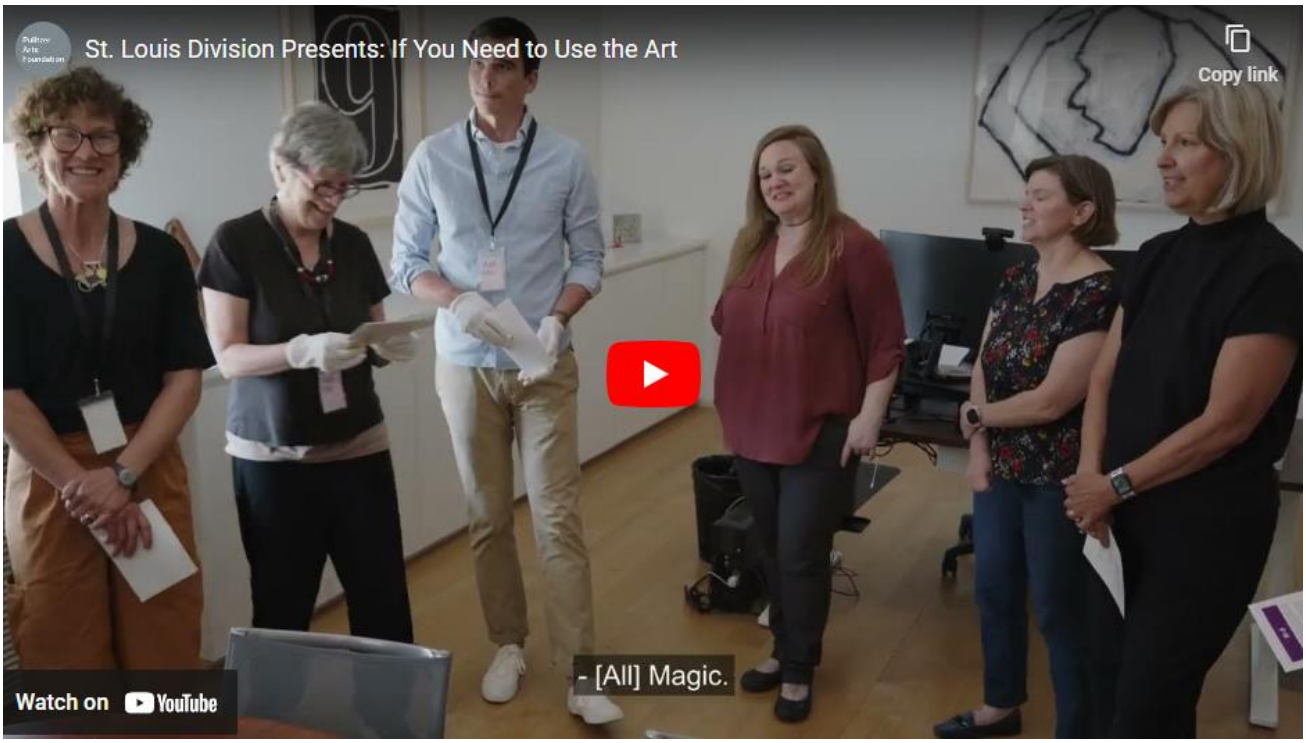
> "Welcome to the next stop on our tour today—TOILET—which is on permanent display in the museum and yet very often gets overlooked. TOILET is a great example of the genre of participatory art, and you can think of it as a tiny portion of a much larger participatory piece—City of St. Louis Water Infrastructure."

So I explained as I co-led a tour of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation museum. The tour, titled "If You Need to Use the Art," was designed by my creative-practice collective St. Louis Division; it was commissioned by the Pulitzer, and it entirely and intentionally ignored the art.

"If You Need to Use the Art" is an alt-institution public art project—or a mockstitution, to use artist Gregory Sholette's moniker. These projects mimic the language, iconography, and norms of established entities—a public agency, a museum, a digital platform, a global corporation. They challenge accepted ideas and policies, while deputizing the entity's acknowledged powers to document, mandate, and communicate. Mockstitutions evoke the familiar, and then turn it on its head. Are you trying to explode deeply rooted assumptions about environment or history or both? An alt-institution might prove useful. Are you asking people to think differently about definitions of the environment, public conservation policies, or even (gasp) the institutional norms in the environmental humanities? Your inner artist might be calling.



Alt-institution projects have exploded in the 2000s. Think Yes Men, as an especially well-known and brilliant example, and by all means check out their "Coal for the Rich" project, which mimics the Chicago power company Midwest Generation—and announces the siting of a coal-fired plant in the wealthy South Loop. Or look up The Natural History Museum, which aims to radically transform how we think and talk about nature. Shouldn't mockstitutions be especially useful for environmental-humanities scholars, who challenge such deeply entrenched cultural assumptions and such broadly consequential public policies? These projects tend to be a lot of fun—and also deadly serious. Some projects are solo, but most are collaborative.

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I myself accidentally careened down the alt-institutions rabbit hole in 2004 when my friend Emily Scott—then a student and now a much-lauded art historian—asked me to join the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, which we intended as a one-off project. We would remain on duty for 10 years. Why dress up as park rangers—green pants, khaki shirt, hiking boots, and the iconic big hat—beyond the fact that the hat was so much fun to wear? We deputized a historically beloved US character—an expert on nature, and the guardian of "America's great public spaces"—to challenge assumptions about "nature," to reclaim public spaces, and to showcase the inequities of access to both public sites and healthy environments. We deployed the ranger's iconic qualities—expertise, inclusiveness, gee-whiz curiosity, and infallible good cheer—to inform and persuade, as well as to defuse conflict in contentious spaces.

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As ersatz park rangers, we led expeditions to the contested Malibu public beaches, where private homeowners have historically chased public beachgoers off public sands. We organized "corporate peaks and meadows" hikes through Los Angeles's highly privatized downtown commercial center, where we tried our best to explain the Byzantine public easements. We hosted a "Pop-Up Water Bar," with two flights of water varietals—one tap, and the other bottled—to showcase the highly inequitable geographies of who drinks the cleanest and most polluted water in the LA area. Why *not* be Ranger Jenny? I learned so much from my first alter ego—and from wearing the hat—which I've since tried to apply to a range of solo and collective mockstitution adventures.

Which brings me back to St. Louis Division, my newest collaboration, which I cofounded a few years ago, with two new partners, in crime after I moved back to my hometown St. Louis in 2016. We aim to explore hidden social and environmental geographies in a metropolis that's famous historically both for racial divisions (Dred Scott, Ferguson, the list goes on) and toxic manufacturing (Monsanto, uranium processing for the Manhattan Project, and much more). Why dress up as an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator—black pants, plain shirt, black sweater? Our launch project, "Superfun!," is a darkly satiric mockstitution. It closely mimics the website of the federal Superfund program—the EPA initiative that facilitates the cleanup of the most supremely toxic sites across the country. Our "Superfun!" program, by contrast, "measures, documents, and promotes the substantial everyday FUN facilitated by the widespread manufacture and use of toxic industrial products, and by the clean-up of ultra-toxic chemical and nuclear waste."

"Superfun!" aims to showcase common fallacies about industrial toxics. By connecting Superfund sites to quotidian fun—think cars, toys, clothes, paints, and basically every industrial product—we emphasize how extreme toxicity, while highly inequitably distributed, is in fact endemic to everyday life in the US. We also showcase how the Superfund program actively fuels our grossly inequitable and sky-high-polluting economy, which generates the jaw-dropping toxicity in the first place. If you're familiar with the official Superfund site, you'll understand why the Superfun! site includes four goals, a site map with candy icons, and a How-Fun Ranking System, as well as a background Fun Story for each of a dozen Superfun! sites in the St. Louis region.[1]

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Why dress up as an art-museum docent—black pants, nice black shirt, big arty jewelry? St. Louis Division's next project has been my most recent mockstitution adventure. "If You Need to Use the Art," though, doesn't actually mimic a tour of an art museum in order to critique the institution itself. Rather, we deploy this familiar guided-tour genre, along with the well-known trope of art appreciation, to ask people to think critically about the city. The tour visits five "artworks"—the air filter in the mechanical room, a toilet in the bathrooms, our W-9 tax forms in the director's office, the break room, and the redevelopment district (land art!) you can see from the outdoor mezzanine. Why is the air so polluted? Where does the water come from, and where does it go? How do our artist fees become Exxon stock? Who empties the trash? How do redevelopment policies remake urban environments, and for whom? Air, water, money, labor, governance. We ask museumgoers to visualize and appreciate these often highly problematic networks. How do they shape the museum and how you experience it—and also how you experience the city?

My favorite moment on the tour? When we sweep people from the quiet hush of a museum gallery into the clanking chaos of the mechanical room; also, when my colleague Aaron and I don white gloves to carefully remove our W-9s from a manuscript box while our colleague Allana talks about the magical realism of money.

My all-time favorite mockstitution moment? In 2010, when the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, an unusually progressive public parks agency, hired the LA Urban Rangers to teach their own rangers what we knew about public beach access in Malibu.

The real rangers hired the ersatz rangers.

Mission accomplished.

Notes

[1] I'm eager to include here that I performed Superfun! on a 2022 American Society for Environmental History panel, "Institutional Disasters," with two brilliantly funny environmental-humanities friends—both of whom I first met through the Rachel Carson Center. Nicole Seymour spoke as a sales rep for her mockstitution Anxietero—a digital platform that universities can use to outsource the management of students' climate anxiety—which satirized and critiqued the academic-software economy, not to mention

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university priorities writ large. Rob Gioielli, dressed as a 1960s-era Ohio State Highway Department engineer, explained at a public hearing how a new highway was of course going to devastate a low-income community of color.

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