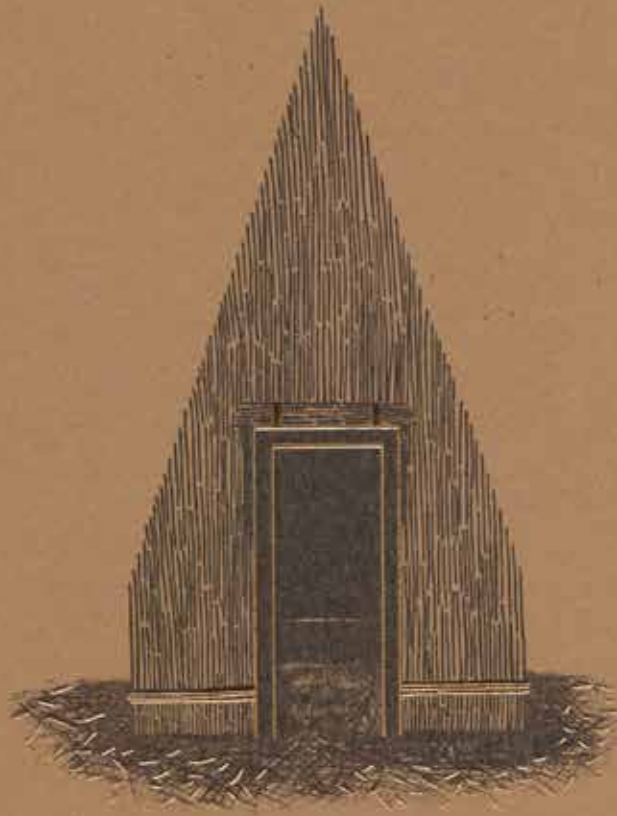


The Hissing Folly



Cole Swanson

# The Hissing Folly

by Cole Swanson

Curated by Sandy Saad Smith

Visual Arts Centre of Clarington



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The Hissing Folly by Cole Swanson  
Curated by Sandy Saad Smith

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## Notes

The mill burned down in 1904, two years after John MacKay's death (presiding owner of the mill at that time, McKay was known as the "Barley King of Canada") . It was quickly replaced with the present red brick structure and before long business was booming again. The mill evolved into Cream of Barley Mills, named after its breakfast product.

# About the VAC

The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC), is a non-collecting, public art gallery situated on the traditional territory and treaty lands of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. Occupying a 1905 former barley mill<sup>1</sup>, the VAC has been dedicated to the delivery of contemporary arts programming in a safe and inclusive space since 1976.

The building now houses a pottery studio, a painting studio and multiple exhibition spaces including a Loft Gallery. With concrete walls, wooden beams, and vaulted ceilings, this attic space is the least altered room in the facility, lending itself to the most direct response to the site's place and history.

In 2019, the VAC launched the Loft Gallery Commission Program to activate the space and commission annual site-specific installations by contemporary artists with varying practices. Artists re-envision and transform the space by producing new and ambitious works that ask questions and imagine alternative possibilities.



Images: (Left) Original timber based structure of the mill, date unknown, photo courtesy of Clarington Museums and Archives, (above) present-day red brick structure, 2010, photo by Jean-Michel Komarnicki.





Image: Detail of *The Hissing Folly*, photo by Cole Swanson, 2020.

But a thick growth of whispering reeds began to spring up there,  
and these, when at the year's end they came to their full size,  
betrayed the sower,  
for, stirred by the gentle breeze,  
they repeated his buried words

Book XI: Ovid's Metamorphoses







# Foreword

**Sandy Saad Smith,**  
Exhibition Curator

**F**or almost two decades, Cole Swanson's practice has included the investigation and extraction of natural materials. His cross-disciplinary practice explores their socio-cultural and biological histories, revealing complex relations, histories, and biologies entrenched in consumer and cultural industries. *The Hissing Folly* is part of Swanson's ongoing body of work that examines biosystems in direct negotiation with human life at a time of social, political, and environmental change. His installation poses critical questions around human relationships with invasive species, specifically phragmites (European common reed). This is a perennial grass that spreads quickly, out-competing native species for water and nutrients, and has damaged ecosystems in Ontario for decades, including areas of Clarington and the wider Durham Region. *The Hissing Folly* is a result of Cole Swanson's meticulous research on phragmites, its ecological implications, and its historical uses.

*The Hissing Folly* is his response to the 2020 iteration of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington's (VAC) Loft Gallery Commission Program. The annual program invites contemporary artists to create site-specific installations in the unique attic gallery space at the VAC. Operating out of a 115-year-old barley mill, the VAC is situated on the traditional territory and treaty lands of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. Many features of the building hint at its long history, specifically in the Loft Gallery, its most untouched room. The gallery is supported by wooden pillars, enclosed with vaulted ceilings, and lined with concrete walls; close inspection reveals names and dates carved in various crevices and corners. Artists are invited to reenvision and transform the space through producing new and ambitious works that ask questions and open our minds to possibilities we had not imagined before. The works often become part of the community's locale, engaging VAC visitors with topics related to our community, region, and times.

Image: Cole Swanson at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, photo by Jamie A. McMillan, 2019.





In order to produce the work, Swanson established community partnerships to enlist stakeholders and community members as active participants in his installation's development. The phragmites plants used to create *The Hissing Folly* were harvested from the Thickson's Woods Land Trust of Durham Region, a conservation area that has seen this species' rapid growth. Working with the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority (CLOCA), a harvest was facilitated by the group to offer guidance on how to best remove the reeds while reducing their potential for spread. Volunteers were sought from across the community to aid in the harvest. In fall, 2019, a team of artists, foresters, arts workers, youth, and environmental advocates extracted 220 yelms (bundles of reed of standard lengths) of phragmites. The extraction made an imprint in Thickson's

Wood Land Trust, creating space for air, birds, insects, and other creatures to flourish. Through this redemptive and restorative act of extracting the phragmites and involving the community, Swanson rehabilitated the land and invited community members to become co-creators and agents in forming his work. Additionally, the act of bringing people together offered opportunities for personal exchanges bypassing the capitalist economy's framework that Swanson decisively critiques.

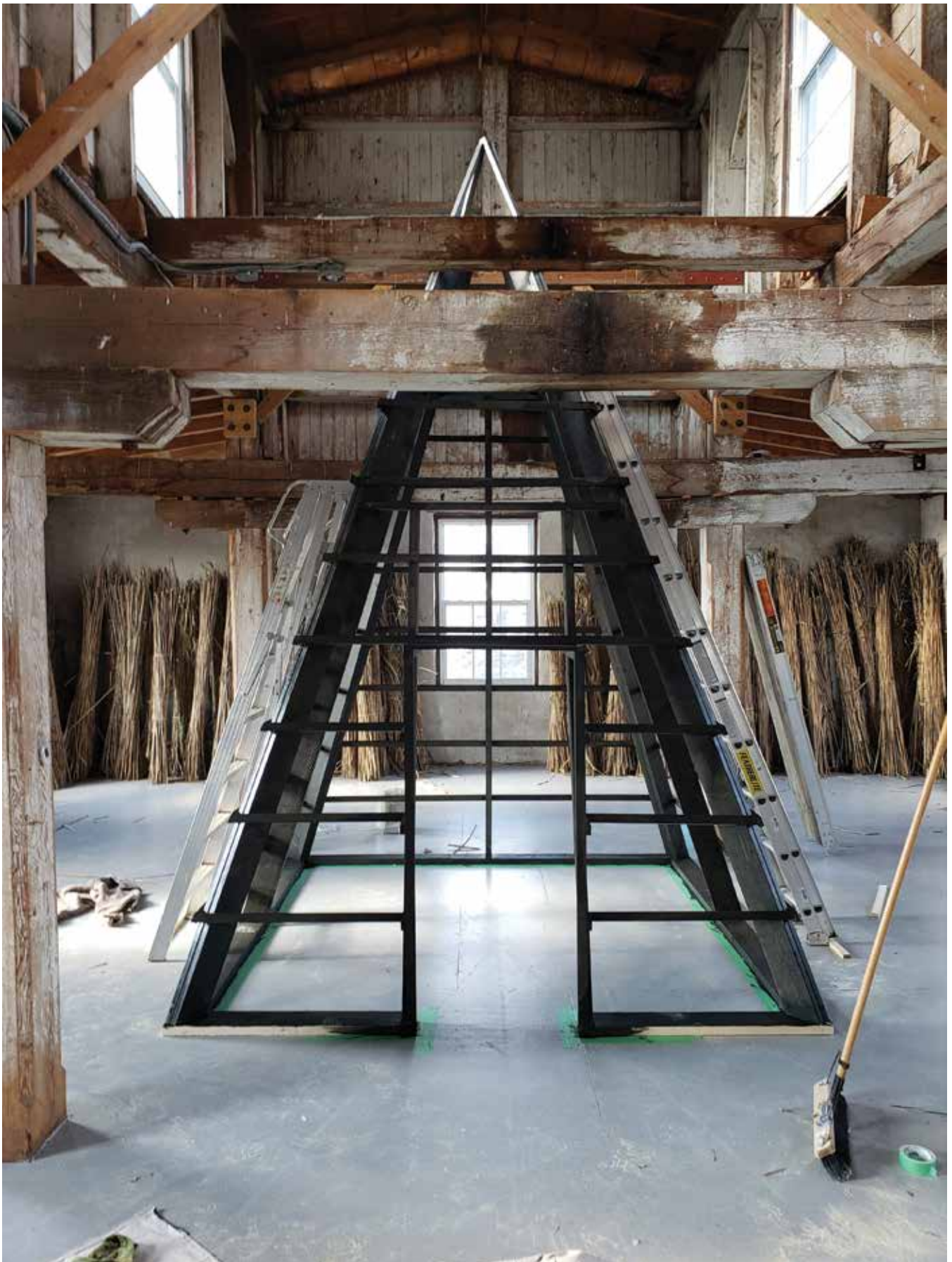
Over the following weeks and months, *The Hissing Folly* was meticulously measured and built to create the immersive structure we find in the Loft Gallery today. Visitors are confronted with a folly thatched in phragmites that spreads out onto the ground taking up the vast majority of space, mirroring its natural tendencies. A folly, designed primarily for decoration and aesthetic pleasure, comes





Images: (Above) Documentation of the phragmites harvest at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, photo by Jamie A. McMillan, 2019. (Left) Volunteers holding yelms of phragmites, photo by Cole Swanson, 2019.





from the realm of fanciful and impractical architecture, suggesting a greater purpose than its symbol of wealth and abundance. Using the centuries-old tradition of thatching, Cole Swanson employs a low-cost and ecological method of using local vegetation to build roofs to produce his structure, while thatching the folly upside down to add to its impractical existence. A small opening at the front of the folly prompts visitors to enter the small, dark, enclosed space. Surrounded by phragmites, visitors listen to a field recording from the Thickson's Woods Land Trust. The recording captures the density of the thick reeds resisting the wind and other life forms.

The folly is anchored by two yelm horses, used for bundling the phragmites, and behind it a collection of yelms leans against the gallery's back wall, a testament to a labour-intensive production process. Opposite the back wall is a title wall, which includes a quote from *Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book XI*. Swanson utilizes the Roman myth to deepen the notion of folly. The story's main character, King Midas, is overcome by his love of wealth. It leads him into a number of arduous circumstances, and ultimately he is cursed with donkey ears. Hiding his ears under a turban, he eventually exposed them to his barber, who found the secret hard to contain and whispered it into the ground. Out of it grew a reed: phragmites. Swanson utilizes complex, seemingly disconnected relationships that collectively reveal the implications of human tendencies to be misled by folly. He takes a nuanced approach to explore the plant that has devastated regions in the backyard of the VAC. Swanson's response to the Loft Gallery Commission is a deeply thought and masterfully executed work that considers phragmites as a historically valuable construction material with creative potential. His public engagement in the production and the experience of the work empower viewers as co-creators of, and



active participants in, their own experience of the piece. *The Hissing Folly* is accompanied by a video documenting the collective efforts to produce the work, a permanent and accessible record of its creation.

*The Hissing Folly* is presented by the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Special thanks go to the Central Lakes Ontario Conservation Authority, the volunteers who made the phragmites harvest possible, and contributing writers Helen Gregory and Darryn Doull for their insights and thoughtful interpretations.

Images: (Above) Volunteers outside the VAC, (left) skeletal structure of *The Hissing Folly*, photos by Cole Swanson, 2019.













Images: (Above and pages 11-12) Stills from *The Hissing Folly* film by Jamie A. McMillan, 2020.



# Phragmites and the Folly of Human Endeavour

**Helen Gregory**

**G**olden light illuminates a cloud of insects as they lazily drift through an atmosphere thick with swirling pollen. Monarch butterflies and honeybees alight on swaying tendrils of goldenrod, and we hear the sounds of a multitude of insects and birds. A deer twitches its tail as it meets our gaze. Abruptly, our view shifts towards a swathe of land dominated by *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*, that has choked out nearly everything around it, save for a few trees. The only sound is that of a quiet but insidious hissing as the reeds brush up against each other, bending in the breeze – a sound that is soon drowned out by that of a chainsaw cutting them off at ground level.

So begins the film that Cole Swanson has produced to accompany his exhibition *The Hissing Folly*. The film documents the process by which Swanson and a team of community volunteers, working under the guidance of the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority (CLOCA), attempted to clear invasive phragmites from a three-acre tract of environmentally sensitive land in the Thickson's Woods Land Trust in Durham Region. The severed stalks were gathered together into yelms, then stored and dried for use in the construction of the soaring pyramidal structure that dominates the Loft Gallery at the Visual Art Centre of Clarington. The project complicates a known ecological concern by interweaving it with colonial histories, posthuman relationships with nature, and ancient mythology.

In addition to using the physically laborious technique of thatching<sup>1</sup>, *The Hissing Folly* makes reference to an architectural form intended to be appreciated more for its aesthetic quirks and charms than for any utilitarian purpose. Mimicking such forms as gazebos, belvedere towers, obelisks, decorative cottages, mausoleums, rotundas, and pyramids, follies were traditionally built by the wealthy to adorn their properties, serving as little more than quaint focal points and ornamental diversions to enliven a stroll through the grounds. Particularly common in England, follies are part of a tradition of garden landscape architecture predicated on, and intricately intertwined with, the impulse not merely to control nature, but to define it in terms of human desire. They are intended to enhance a visitor's experience in the garden by prompting a meditation on the beauty of the site at which the structure is located, as if nature could not be fully appreciated without human intervention.

John Dixon Hunt argues that this lofty goal is achieved through the folly acting as a "built or material form of the rhetorical strategy of *prosopopoeia*...the device by which a poet or orator imagines something in the landscape speaking directly to a privileged visitor or passerby."<sup>2</sup> In the case of Swanson's *Hissing Folly*, *prosopopoeia* occurs somewhat literally as a repercussion of the field recordings of wind moving through the reeds that the visitor encounters upon entering the exhibition. Rather than silently evoking a reflection on a particularly captivating vista, *The Hissing Folly* whispers its demand that we consider the pervasive impact of human activity on the natural world. Should we be doing more to mitigate the spread of phragmites when any attempt at intervention seems a Sisyphean task? Is the idea that we can bend the reeds to our will and exert control over them merely an example of human folly?

According to American political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett, the notion that matter is without agency feeds into "human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption."<sup>3</sup> Bennet argues that there are some materials—which she terms vibrant matter—that possess an intense vitality and have the capacity to "not only impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."<sup>4</sup> Such is the case with *Phragmites australis*, an intensely invasive and destructive alien species with a history deeply entwined with human activity. By definition, alien species are those that have been introduced outside their natural range, whether intentionally or unintentionally by human agency.<sup>5</sup> *Phragmites* was likely inadvertently introduced to North America from Europe as a consequence of international commerce, which might explain why their worst and most damaging effects appear to be traceable along trade routes.<sup>6</sup>

In the United Kingdom, phragmites is so unassuming that in East Anglia, where it is cultivated for use in the thatching trade, it barely provides sufficient quantity for local needs. By contrast, in North America the plant grows unchallenged, reaching up to 4.6m and choking out everything around it, destroying vital biodiversity. Relatively restrained under European conditions, phragmites has metamorphosed into an unruly, uncontrollable force in the Canadian environment. Although we can blame past human actions for the ecological damage resulting from phragmites' migration to North America, Bennet asserts that nonhuman species have significant agency that must be taken into account within an ecological system.<sup>7</sup>





Image: Detail of *Phragmites australis* at Thicksen's Woods Land Trust, photo by Áine Belton, 2019.





It will only be when we begin to experience the relationship between humans and nonhumans more horizontally—that is, less hierarchically—that we will move towards a more ecological sensibility.<sup>8</sup> In the film mentioned above, Swanson juxtaposes footage of two ecosystems: a meadow in which numerous species coexist, and a wetland almost completely consumed by phragmites. The latter ecosystem, where Swanson harvested the material for this installation, is the site of an ongoing process of incursion as the phragmites encroaches upon a biodiverse marsh which contains cattails and other native species. The only obstacle is a road, which, although it slows the invasion, will likely not stop it altogether. Phragmites has evolved to propagate through several means—the dispersal of airborne seeds, via rhizomes (underground shoots connected to the parent plant), and stolons (connected stems that travel along the soil surface)—none of which will find a road to be an impenetrable barrier. And while that road may form a temporary obstacle to the spread, it also provides the means for different modes of dispersion. This human/nonhuman relationship is one of equal complicity. Phragmites may have arrived in North America as a result of human economic activity, but the plant's intrinsic and undisciplined potential gives it the agency to have such profound and damaging effects on the environment.

Highlighting the complexity of this ecological conundrum, *The Hissing Folly* is an exercise in the paradoxical. Inspired by the pyramidal form common to many European follies, its rigidly geometric structure belies the ephemeral, organic stuff of its construction. It is a building within a building. It is both interior and exterior: an inside constructed from an outside, nature reconfigured as culture. Musing on the Loft Gallery's history as a barley mill, Swanson imagined the

process by which the grain might have entered the mill for processing. In homage to this speculative past, he brought bundles of phragmites into the loft to dry before using them to construct *The Hissing Folly* in situ. With the help of his brother-in-law,<sup>9</sup> Swanson used the utilitarian technique of thatching to create a functionless form. Further emphasizing the nonsensical nature of the structure as well as the folly of human endeavour, Swanson has inverted the process of thatching by laying the reeds upside down so that, in contrast to a true thatched roof, they would channel rain towards the interior of the structure rather than diverting it. Extensive human manipulation is imposed upon a material that is notoriously recalcitrant, yet any semblance of discipline is at odds with the gallery space in which it is installed. Swanson has transplanted a species that is antithetical to biodiversity into a space that already sustains its own microcosm of life: The Loft Gallery's airy and atmospheric space is inhabited by mice, bats, birds, insects, and fungi. *The Hissing Folly* is built to reflect the height that phragmites grows to in North America, and although it violently thrusts upwards, piercing the rafters and dominating the space, it is in danger of becoming slowly infested by the organisms with which it must now coexist. It may yet moisten and mold and play host to an ecology that it would otherwise subjugate.

*The Hissing Folly* is located within Swanson's broader art practice in which he explores the sociocultural and biological histories of his materials, often using natural materials sourced directly from his environment. This tangible, physical connection to the environment and an interest in ecology have resulted in a research-driven practice that has much in common with the scientific and museological disciplines of natural history. As an overarching field of investigation, natural history has given rise to an associated body

of material, notably objects or specimens that can be understood as a combination of nature and culture. Such objects are often removed from nature and re-contextualized in research or museum collections and, through the processes of preservation and display, transformed into objects of material culture. Similarly, Swanson's creative output can be conceived as occupying a liminal space between multiple categories. Working at the intersections of art and science, nature and culture, Swanson's practice is characterized by a blurring of disciplinary boundaries. He repurposes or alters natural materials with the consequence that the social role of the material shifts from natural substance to cultural artifact—as here, water reeds are transformed into an architectural structure that underscores the perilous entanglement of human and nonhuman agency within a fragile ecosystem.



Images: (Left) Construction of *The Hissing Folly*, (above) thatching of *The Hissing Folly*, photos by Harry Knight, 2020.

## Notes

1. The thatched-roof cottage is one of the most iconic features of rural England. Dating back to the Bronze Age, and with examples still remaining from the 1600s, thatched roofing was borne of the need to use readily available, cheap materials. In the ensuing centuries, as a result of economic shifts and changes in population distribution, thatch fell out of favour as a building material. However, over the past few decades, an increased focus on sustainability as well as an interest in preserving British heritage has restored the popularity of traditional thatching methods. Once associated with poverty, this time-consuming, specialized, and therefore expensive technique has become a symbol of wealth and affluence. The highest-quality thatching used phragmites, or water reed, which is hard and strong and lasts for 50-70 years. However, because of a shortage of usable wetlands in which the phragmites grows, much of the material is now imported.

2. John Dixon Hunt, "Folly in the Garden," *The Hopkins Review* 1, no. 2 (Spring, 2008): 228.

3. Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

4. *Ibid*, viii.

5. Philip E. Hulme, "Trade, Transport and Trouble: Managing Invasive Species Pathways in an Era of Globalization," *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 46, no.1 (2009): 10.

6. Hulme argues that the introduction of alien species from Europe to North America "coincides with the Industrial Revolution, a period of increased international trade across almost all continents facilitated by the

construction of canals, highways and railways as well as the introduction of steamships. Furthermore, the spread of European species worldwide was undoubtedly aided by 50 million Europeans who emigrated to distant shores between 1830 and 1920, taking with them, whether intentionally or by accident, numerous species." *Ibid*, 11.

7. Borrowing Bruno Latour's term "actant", Bennett states that an actant never really acts alone. "Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as automatons but as vital materialities." Bennett, 21.

8. *Ibid*, 10.

9. Swanson's brother-in-law is, coincidentally, the son of a thatcher—an immigrant from the UK who brought this building tradition with him.

Image: (Right) Bundles of yelms in the Loft Gallery, photo by Cole Swanson, 2020. (Image overleaf) Detail of inside thatch of *The Hissing Folly*, photo by Toni Hafkenschied, 2020.

















Image: Old John laying a wreath at the monument to Old Bet in Somers, New York. This picture was scanned from the 1936 ed. of "This Way to the Big Show" by Dexter Fellows. The picture is from 1922. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oldjohn\\_somers.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oldjohn_somers.jpg)





# Bucolic Infestation: The Hissing Folly

Darryn Doull

**W**hile crossing the Atlantic Ocean amid horizontal rain and harrowing waves, the elephant stood in relative peace. Exhausted from the ongoing journey, she drifted in and out of sleep while the ship creaked and groaned wildly around her.

On a bed of common reed, Old Bet drew some comfort from the resilient grass. The vegetation cushioned her, helped moderate the oceanic extremes, and made the lengthy trip (some six to 12 weeks in the late 18th century) slightly more bearable. Overwhelming scents hung heavily in the air. The sweetness of the common reed mixed with the odours of pungent fish for the crew, fresh coffee beans for trade, wilting greens for the elephant, and the collective musk of the sailors.

Old Bet first appeared on the ship's manifest between Kolkata (a jewel in the crown of the British Raj and hub of the East India Company), and Saint Helena (the British overseas territory that would host an exiled Napoleon Bonaparte some forty years later). Eventually, the vessel arrived in New York. Old Bet became the first and only member of the Elephantidae family in North America. As the elephant disembarked, a fresh sea breeze gently lifted and took away a cloud of seeds, scattering them along the shore.

• • •

This parafiction is an origin story for the arrival of *Phragmites australis* (common reed) on the shores of North America.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that the early elephant trade – supplying circuses, budding zoological gardens, and the occasional travelling sideshow – played some role in the arrival of the reed and its easily dispersed seeds. However, the story also introduces some important aspects of Cole Swanson's *The Hissing Folly*.



Image: (Above) *The Hissing Folly* at dusk, (top right) detail of yelm, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid, 2020.



Swanson's pyramidal folly is a phenomenology of the wetlands. It tells stories with multi-sensorial appeal. In this space, colonial trade roots and the seeds of empire are deeply rooted. Such foundations are made visible through the materiality and temporal fluidity that envelops the present, the recent past, and ancient myth in equal measure. In concert with ecological awareness and community activation, these relations form the ground from which the pyramid rises.

As a native plant in Europe and parts of Asia, phragmites reaches a maximum height of two meters and has a sparse growth pattern, interspersing with other vegetation. The ecosystem has grown to accommodate the plant and it is not disruptive to larger ecological relationships.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the plant is a traditional material for crafting thatched roofs and fences. On the other hand, invasive phragmites in North America is known to reach up to five meters and forms a dense monoculture.<sup>3</sup> This maximum continental growth is mimicked in Swanson's folly – the very tip of the pyramid (which, in a potentially violent subtext, nearly bursts through the highest rafters of the Loft Gallery) reaches the same height as a single reed growing in ideal circumstances in Ontario.

Despite this untoward reality, significant beauty radiates from Swanson's installation. This is true for much of his work; it is appealing, despite tackling subjects that are not inherently seductive.<sup>4</sup> In all projects, the artist carefully nurtures sensitivity to the overlapping realms of site, context, material and history. For him, it is not enough to simply *exist in* the world. Instead, one has to develop strategies and frameworks for *being in* the world. Swanson's artwork and ways of bringing communities together encourage us to actively develop these



relations to contextualize our respective places and agencies within Nature.

Action is necessary to develop a relationship with the world. We cannot expect the world to reach out to us. The reeds, the birds, the water – each does its own thing, and the vast majority exist beyond human awareness. At the same time, the world shares an abundance of obvious clues with us. These help to acknowledge our role(s) in the changing face and viability of Nature. Without intention and attention, the tendrils that bind wilderness and daily life do not always combine. Swanson brings these realms together. In his work, intellectual and objective understandings meet emotional, mythical and subjective domains. The world begins to open up, to spill its secrets and communicate directly with participants. It helps us see the parallels between invasiveness, consumption and capitalist exchange, and how these are more similar than we would like to acknowledge.<sup>5</sup>

To spill secrets would be apropos for an installation featuring phragmites. One of the earliest and most widely read literary appearances of the common reed is found in Ovid's epic poem, *Metamorphoses*. In Book XI, Ovid shares the familiar story of King Midas who was granted the wish, and veiled curse, that, "whatsoever I may touch with my body may be turned to yellow gold."<sup>6</sup> After the immediate thrill of metamorphosing simple twigs and stones into gold, Midas quickly became horrified that he could no longer eat or drink – "through his jaws you would see the molten gold go trickling."<sup>7</sup> The kind gods restored Midas to his former condition upon his acknowledgement of his fault.

But Midas did not learn much from his initial folly. Soon, he found himself to be the only one opposed to a decision made



by Tmolus, the great Delian god. Tmolus judged the music of Apollo and his lyre to be musically superior to that of Pan and his reed pipes, but Midas disagreed. Punishing this insubordination, the "Delian god did not suffer ears so dull to keep their human form, but lengthened them out and filled them with shaggy, grey hair; ... [Midas] wore the ears of a sluggard ass."<sup>8</sup> Deeply embarrassed, Midas did his best to conceal his new ears until, alas, his secret was discovered by a barber trimming his hair. Burdened by the receipt of this secret, the barber "went off and dug a hole in the ground and into the hole, with low, muttered words, he whispered of his master's ears."<sup>9</sup> Feeling relieved, he filled the hole and withdrew. This peace was shattered when a thick growth of reeds began to spring up from the secret hole. When stirred by even a gentle breeze, the reeds betrayed their sower by whispering his buried words and exposing the secret of Midas' ears.

The common reed is the common thread between two important aspects of the story. First, Pan played a set of reed pipes so beautifully that they seduced Midas to speak out of place and beyond his experience, earning him a dubious punishment. After this initial curse of hubris, the reeds also betray the headstrong king's secret, whispering the story of his donkey ears for the world to hear.

In Ovid's poem, metamorphosis has a clarifying power. It "makes plain a person's qualities, yet without passing judgement on them. It is ... a change which preserves, an alteration which maintains identity, a change of form by which content becomes represented in form."<sup>10</sup> In *The Hissing Folly*, it does much the same. The reeds themselves are transformed into thatched shelter. Instead of destroying natural





habitats, they became an artificial one. They have had their heads removed, a metamorphosis that makes their secrets harder to hear, but that keeps the seeds from spreading during harvest.

The pyramid harkens back to ancient ambitions, and looks forward to the afterlife. While it appears to promise shelter, the thatching is in fact upside-down, mirroring the absurdity of the phragmites story in North America. If it were to rain inside the Loft Gallery, the inverted reeds would efficiently channel water into the darkened inner chamber (itself reminiscent of dim ancient temples and reiterating the darkness spilling forth amidst stands of phragmites). Swanson's metamorphosing does little to clarify the details of the plants' structure, but quietly nods toward

empire, ancient myth, industrial handcraft and greater-than-human relations.

A thick stand of reed limits relations. Very little lives amongst invasive *Phragmites australis*. Amongst the reeds, all that is heard is their whispering of their own paths and traces, of stories and secrets foisted upon them. There are few, if any, bird songs to be heard, and the flutter of insect wings is an imperceptible echo of what it would otherwise be. There is silence, except for the haunting sound of the reeds' secret sharing. In this environment, the only reward for a deep listener is the constant whisper from another time and place: passages and premonitions dispersed by tangled reeds, cast out like seeds upon the wind.

A four-channel soundscape envelops the inner sanctum of the folly. When walking into Swanson's architectural thicket, we hear clearly. We hear absence. We listen to the erasure of a bio-diverse soundscape. The only thing left is the abrasive, aggressive hiss of the reeds blowing in the wind, spreading seeds, sharing secrets. Within the darkness of the folly, attention to smell and sound is focused. The scent of the dried reeds is infused with trails of dust escaping from phragmites husks crunching underfoot, symbiotically enhancing the soundscape and vice versa.

I long to listen to the sounds that are otherwise hidden and dispersed by the reeds' whispers. I reach for nostalgic reminiscences of time spent in nature, looking up at immense columns of beautiful wildflowers and trees. I imagine entire ecosystems of pollinators, predators, prey and lost outliers buzzing by overhead, or clumsily crossing my outstretched limbs. I dream of a multi-sensorial experience, in which the persistent breeze pushes a seductive, pollen-laden, floral aroma across each breath, soaking into my clothes with the satisfaction of drying laundry on the line. Despite my efforts, these sounds never register. Instead, there is hissing. Wind, and hissing.

Such is the magic of *The Hissing Folly*. It subtly knots together complicated histories, acknowledging the scale of the current invasion, and moves toward correcting the overgrowth on a local level. It is a deeply affective space that is at once visually and spatially pleasing, even if disconcerting for ecological consciences. It encourages dream and projective idealism right alongside the dangers of hubris and the folly of our attempts to control nature.

Returning to nature, the installation has begun a new chapter of its life. Since closing to the public amidst the ongoing global pandemic, *The Hissing Folly* has catered to an unknown cadre of participants and formed a new multispecies collaboration. Drafty gaps in the raw Loft Gallery invite countless flies, the occasional bird, curious mice and (purportedly) a small group of bats to inhabit the reeds. At this time, the recorded soundtrack has been rendered mute. There are no more hissings and no more secrets being shared. Instead, echolocations and a slight whirring of insect wings survey and surround the pyramid.



Images: (P. 27) Abraham, Janssens I, *The Judgement of Midas* (1601-1602), oil on panel, Height: 94 cm (37 in); Width: 125 cm (49.2 in). <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.12.html/2011/old-master-british-paintings-evening-l11033>

(P. 28) Crane, Walter, *Sweet, piercing sweet was the music of Pan's pipe*, 1914, Illustration from *The story of Greece : told to boys and girls* by Macgregor, Mary, New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sweet,\\_piercing\\_sweet\\_was\\_the\\_music\\_of\\_Pan%27s\\_pipe.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sweet,_piercing_sweet_was_the_music_of_Pan%27s_pipe.jpg)

(Above) Close-up of insects surrounding *The Hissing Folly* during the COVID-19 closure, by Áine Belton, 2020.

(Opposite) Various insects surrounding *The Hissing Folly* during the COVID-19 closure, by Cole Swanson, 2020.





## Notes

1. It seemed appropriate to begin reflecting on an installation riddled with tales, and an artist with a great propensity for sharing them, with a story of my own. Information for this narrative was gleaned from: George G. Goodwin, "The Crowninshield Elephant: The Surprising Story of Old Bet, the First Elephant Ever to be Brought to America" in *Natural History Magazine*. First published in October, 1951, retrieved online on June 4, 2020. <http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/>.
2. The author thanks horticulturalist and professor Lynn Short for an insightful conversation on May 5, 2020. One area of Short's research is the manual control of *phragmites australis*. In 2017, Short received the Severn Sound Bob Whittam Environmental Award in recognition of her efforts and methods. She also assisted Swanson in planning for a sustainable and ecologically sound harvest for this project.
3. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, *Invasive Phragmites – Best Management Practices*, (Peterborough: Version 2011), 5.
4. I am thinking of past projects such as *Monument* and *Bone Black*. In the former, a constellation of deceased insects glimmers in suits of 24-karat gold. In the latter, captivating graphic symbols tell a complex story of global capitalism, meat production and bovine off-cuts. In both cases, Swanson's visual poetry encourages a deeper consideration of subjects that otherwise produce discomfort or fear of the unknown and unseen.
5. This is further enhanced when thinking about the historical purpose of the Loft Gallery. In drying over two hundred yelms of sustainably harvested phragmites, Swanson mimicked the small-scale industrial process of drying barley for cereal that The Cream of Barley Mill employed in the same room during the early 20th century.
6. Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume II*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, revised by G.P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), Book XI, Lines 101-103, p 127.
7. Ibid, Lines 124-125, p 129.
8. Ibid, Lines 173-178, p 133.
9. Ibid, Lines 182-184.
10. Joseph B. Solodow, *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 19.



# Plates





Images: (Above) Documentation of the phragmites harvest at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, by Jamie A. McMillan, 2019. (Right) Yelms of phragmites at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, by Cole Swanson, 2019.









Images: (Above) Documentation of the phragmites harvest at Thicksen's Woods Land Trust, (right) yelms of phragmites at Thicksen's Woods Land Trust, photos by Cole Swanson, 2019.







Images: (Above) Bare structure of *The Hissing Folly*, by Cole Swanson 2020, (right) stills from *The Hissing Folly* film by Jamie A. McMillan, 2020.

















Images: (P. 39) Front of *The Hissing Folly*, (above) side view of *The Hissing Folly*, by Cole Swanson, photos by Toni Hafkenscheid, 2020. (Right) Detail of the thatching, photo by Cole Swanson, 2020.









Images: (Above) Bottom detail of *The Hissing Folly*, by Cole Swanson, photo by Áine Belton, 2020, (right) arrangement of yelms behind *The Hissing Folly*, photo by Toni Hafkenschied, 2020.

















Images: (pg. 45-46) Inside *The Hissing Folly*, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid, (above) doorway (right), and detail from the interior of *The Hissing Folly*, photos by Cole Swanson, 2020.











Images: (Left) *The Hissing Folly at dusk*, (above) reverse view, photos by Toni Hafkenscheid, 2020



Images: (Above) Peak of *The Hissing Folly* at dusk, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid, (right) detail of a wooden beam from the reverse view of *The Hissing Folly*, photo by Áine Belton, 2020







Images: (Above) Detail of the peak of *The Hissing Folly* at dusk, photo by Cole Swanson, (right) yelm horse, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid, 2020







Images: (Above and right) *Video installation of The Hissing Folly*, photos by Toni Hafkenscheid, film by Jamie A. MacMillan, 2020







Images: (Above) Stills from *The Hissing Folly* film by Jamie A. McMillan, 2020. (Right) various insects surrounding *The Hissing Folly* during the COVID-19 closure, by Áine Belton, 2020.







# Biographies

**Cole Swanson** artist and educator based in Toronto, Canada. He maintains a studio art practice drawing on sound, photography, video, installation, painting, and sculpture to consider interspecies relationships and complex, co-evolutionary systems.

Swanson has collaborated with ecologists, conservation authorities, and community members to challenge mainstream discourses on commonly reviled species, and has launched ambitious projects that draw from multidisciplinary methods and research findings. He has exhibited work internationally and is a two-time fellow of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute for his research on the traditional preparation and use of natural materials.

Swanson has received support from several public and private agencies and his educational practice includes faculty postings at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (Toronto) and Humber College (Toronto).

For further information visit:  
[www.coleswanson.org](http://www.coleswanson.org)

**Sandy Saad Smith** is a Toronto-based independent curator and writer. Her curatorial practice aims to bring new perspectives to seemingly fixed or frozen systematic structures and narratives while creating more accessible and meaningful ways of engaging with art and asking questions. Much of her work considers the ways in which artists disrupt and subvert hierarchical spaces, systems, and historical accounts.

Sandy was Curator of Exhibitions and Education at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington and during her tenure established the Loft Gallery Commission Program. The annual program invites contemporary artists to create site-specific installations in the unique attic gallery space at the VAC.

Sandy has held several positions in the arts including Curator of Exhibitions and Education at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, Public Engagement Coordinator at the Koffler Gallery, Education Coordinator at the Varley Art Gallery, and Curatorial Assistant at Art Museum of the University of Toronto. Sandy holds a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto.

Image: Phragmites harvest area at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, photo by Cole Swanson, 2019.





**Helen Gregory, Ph.D.** is Curator of McIntosh Gallery at Western University, London, Ontario. She holds a B.F.A. in painting, printmaking, and art history from Concordia University, an M.Phil. in humanities from Memorial University, and a Ph.D. in visual culture from Western University where she was the recipient of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada Graduate Scholarship for doctoral research.

As a curator, scholar, and somewhat lapsed visual artist, her interests reside at the intersection of art, science, and museology with a specific focus on natural history and biotechnology in contemporary art. She is also interested in the built spaces of knowledge production—universities, laboratories, museums—as well as taxonomy and systems of display from both historical and contemporary post-colonial perspectives.

Gregory's work as a visual artist is held in several significant public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, the National Library of Canada, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom.

**Darryn Doull** is a curator, writer and musician based in St. John's, NL / Toronto, ON. Prior to enrolling in the MVS: Curatorial Studies program at the University of Toronto (2018), he was the Assistant Curator of the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery in Sarnia, Ontario, and recipient of the Hnatyshyn Foundation Fogo Island Arts Emerging Curator Residency (2015).

Recent exhibitions include *Of Myths and Mountains* (2020), *Loops to Live By* (2019), *Philippa Jones: Suspended* (2018) and *Morning Star* (co-curated with Jason Baerg, 2017-18). Darryn is currently the Curator of Canadian Art at The Rooms.







## Artist's Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the dedicated community members who contributed their valuable time and effort to *The Hissing Folly*. While the resulting installation is one of my most ambitious constructions, the process-work that lead to the Folly's materialization is the true heart and soul of the project. For this exhibition to exist, and for its important environmental message to be told and shared, many important people must be recognized.

A community harvest of invasive phragmites was conducted in autumn, 2019 through the coordinated effort of a dedicated team of volunteers. I would like to thank Diana Shermet, Invasive Species Ecologist for the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority for providing guidance and resources for the in-field component of the project. I would like to acknowledge

the support of the Thickson's Woods Land Trust and Margaret Carney for identifying the harvest site, sharing the ecological history of the area, and supporting our access throughout the season. Over the course of three days, a hard-working group of community volunteers plodded through flooded, freezing terrain, cut and de-seeded massive phragmites reeds, and bundled up yelms for transport and storage. Your efforts toward this project and your dedication to environmental sustainability are deeply appreciated.

I would like to thank the Clarington Public Library and the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority for providing reading resources on invasive phragmites and other ecological themes available to patrons throughout the exhibition.

Image: Cole Swanson and volunteers at Thickson's Woods Land Trust, photo by Jamie A. MacMillan, 2019.



Over the course of several months, I had the pleasure to work alongside a dynamic team. Many thanks to forester Fraser Smith, studio assistants Sarah Taylor and Karun Ramani, videographer Jamie A. McMillan, builder Eliot Callahan, audio engineer Robert Shortill, and essay writers Darryn Doull (MVS) and Helen Gregory (PhD). I would also like to thank my family for their volunteer work and support, including Andrew Herron for harvesting, Harry Knight for harvesting and thatching, and my father, Pete Swanson, for tirelessly contributing to various aspects of the project. Your support means the world to me.

I am enormously grateful to the dedicated workers of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington for their involvement in many aspects of this exhibition. Thanks to Carley Bruckner, Desarée Roskopf, and Elizabeth Jamischak for their willingness to always lend a helping hand. A special thanks to

Marketing Coordinator Áine Belton for her outstanding catalogue design and to Executive Director Dionne Powlenczuk for guiding us over innumerable, unforeseen hurdles. I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Curator Sandy Saad Smith, whose faith, support, and dedication to this project has made *The Hissing Folly* one of the most enriching experiences in my career.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the funders who helped make this exhibition and its programming possible, including the Canada Council for the Arts, whose support directly contributed to the making of this publication.



## Volunteers & Crew

Carley Bruckner  
Eliot Callahan (construction)  
Andrew Herron  
Harry Knight (thatching)  
Brandon Latin  
Scott Latin

Jamie A. McMillan (video)  
Jacob Parliament  
Karun Ramani  
Megan Schieck  
Diana Shermet (CLOCA)

Robert Shorthill (sound)  
Fraser Smith  
Pete Swanson  
Sarah Taylor  
Sally Thurlow

## Partners

Margaret Carney & Thickson's Woods Land Trust  
Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority  
Clarington Public Library

## Installation

Paul Oldham  
Lori Simpson, L. A. Signs 'N Designs





Image: Detail from the floor surrounding *The Hissing Folly*, by Cole Swanson, 2020.





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