

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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It is the mission of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum to be a national leader in the exhibition of significant and challenging contemporary art with an emphasis on emerging and mid-career artists, a world-class innovator of museum education programs, and a vital cultural resource for our community.

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Stars



Leatherman in Saybrook (production still from *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*), 2009
Courtesy of the artists

Jeanne C. Finley + John Muse: *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*

January 31 – June 6, 2010

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



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In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, prisoners who have been chained underground since birth believe shadows cast by figures passing in front of an unseen fire are the whole of reality. Having never seen anything but shadows they cannot fathom that they are simplified representations of the real world. This allegory has usually been interpreted as a statement of Plato's belief that forms and ideas possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality and that what we perceive with our senses are but shadows of the truth. But what if Plato's story is a prophecy on how humankind might be able to use artificial means to create experiences that help explain reality? Perhaps this simple but profound allegory helped chart the course for the ensuing 2,300 years of cultural and technological evolution, leading us to frequent dark caves of our own making (theatres and galleries) where we watch flickering shadows that attempt to inform us about the true essence of the world.

Artists Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse have created their own cave of sorts: a darkened space with moving shadows and images that tell us about the nature of time through movement in both the historical and contemporary landscape surrounding The Aldrich Museum. This space that they have created has two main characters as protagonists, both of whom are intimately connected with caves: Sarah Bishop, a hermit who lived in a mountaintop rock shelter not far from the Museum in the period immediately following the Revolutionary War, and the Leatherman, a wandering tramp who slept in a series of caves along a 365-mile route that he traversed like clockwork through Connecticut and New York in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The artists were drawn to these characters because of the way that both their lives operated "outside of time," that is, they ran on clocks that were considerably different from those of the civilization around them. Although these two figures animate the landscape that Finley and Muse have created, the landscape itself is far from being a mere backdrop, but rather is presented as an active player, connecting characters and events over a span of the past 300 years.

In 2006 Finley and Muse were invited to produce a new video project for The Aldrich that dealt with the daily rhythms of Ridgefield's residents. After multiple exploratory trips to the community, however, their concept for the project began to change. Though still interested in the perception of time and its passing, their focus moved from the staccato lives of the contemporary community to the deep, slow sense of time that is expressed through local history. After further research, they chose to work with three major elements that all connected time with movement: Sarah Bishop, the Leatherman, and Ridgefield's 300th Anniversary Parade, which occurred on July 4, 2008.

Concerned that the distillation of these characters and events—no matter how immersive—into a multiple-screen video environment was going to somewhat disembody the experience that they were after, the artists decided to incorporate geocaching¹ into the project as a way of both bringing the landscape to life and physically engaging viewers. Geocaching is a worldwide phenomenon where participants use GPS receivers to play a treasure-hunt-like game to find "geocaches," (usually small sealed containers) that are hidden at a particular latitude and longitude. Within these containers are logbooks that allow a visitor to record their successful discovery of the cache, in addition to small items for trading between participants (such as toys) and "travel bugs," small uniquely marked items (such as specially made coins) whose travels from cache to cache are logged and followed online.

Geocaching appealed to Finley and Muse's sensibility as it utilized a new technology in an unintended manner, but, more importantly, it spoke in a complex way about our current engagement with both time and space. The blinders of our limited consciousness (and the nature of human society) have always tied us to primarily perceiving time not far from either side of the immediate moment, but the task of acting as responsible citizens in the modern world demands we act in a manner that looks into (and understands) both the past before we were born, and the future after we're gone. Ironically, as we have become more aware of both history and the theoretical future outcomes of our actions, the clocks that we run on have been increasingly controlled by the advent of the technological society that has made that knowledge possible. The global positioning system is based in the technology that all clocks associated with the Internet are synchronized (if you don't believe this watch your computer, mobile phone, and cable box, and notice how the seconds will advance at exactly the same instant). So not only are we all now "running on the same clock," but thanks to GPS we also live in a three-dimensional grid where the location of every point on Earth (including altitude) can be charted down to a matter of inches. At least metaphorically, it is now not only impossible to be late, but also to be lost.

The three elements in this exhibition: Sarah Bishop, the Leatherman, and the parade, have been configured by the artists into a sort of clockwork. As in a clock's mechanism, each gear is turning at a different speed, but the compound movement of the parts is harmonized in the service of a whole. Each of these three elements is presented via time-based media in the interior, gallery environment, while being linked via geocaching to actual routes out in the landscape.

Sleeping Under the Stars

Sarah Bishop, often referred to as "the hermit of West Mountain," was a curious figure who lived on the Ridgefield/North Salem border between the years 1780 and 1810. There are many conflicting narratives about the circumstances of her life, including an eponymous children's book published in 1980 by novelist Scott O'Dell. The various facts, however, all point to Bishop suffering some sort of extreme trauma during the early years of the Revolutionary War, an experience so profound that she withdrew from society. Ending up in Connecticut after leaving her native Long Island, she found the rock shelter that now bears her name, making it her home for thirty years. The site of her cave is currently not publicly accessible, but from its lofty position at 900 feet above sea level one can see not only Long Island Sound, which is fifteen miles south, but also, on a clear day, the twenty-five miles to Long Island itself. From this perch Bishop would walk into both Ridgefield and North Salem in order to beg food and clothing, with some narratives having her also attending church. In February 1810, after paying a visit to a family in Ridgefield that had befriended her, she was found dead in the woods on a trail that led back to her cave.

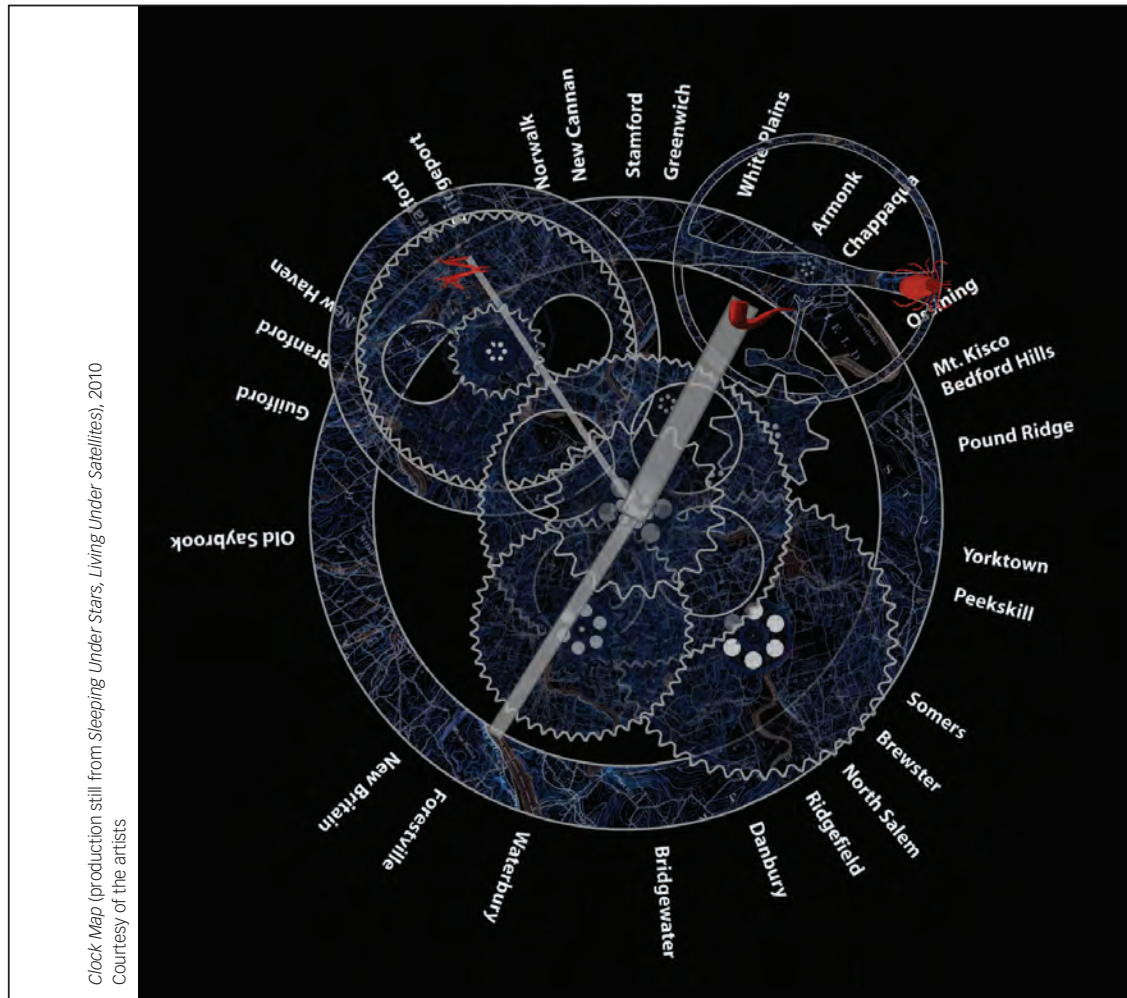
Much like the Native American people who still inhabited the forests of Connecticut in the late eighteenth century, Bishop's life was governed by celestial phenomena. She awoke to the rising of the sun, and understood time by the position of the sun, the moon, and the stars as they wheeled overhead. Living before the advent of artificial light (other than flame) her mountaintop with its 360-degree views of the horizon gave her a sense of time and space that was completely based in personal visual experience.



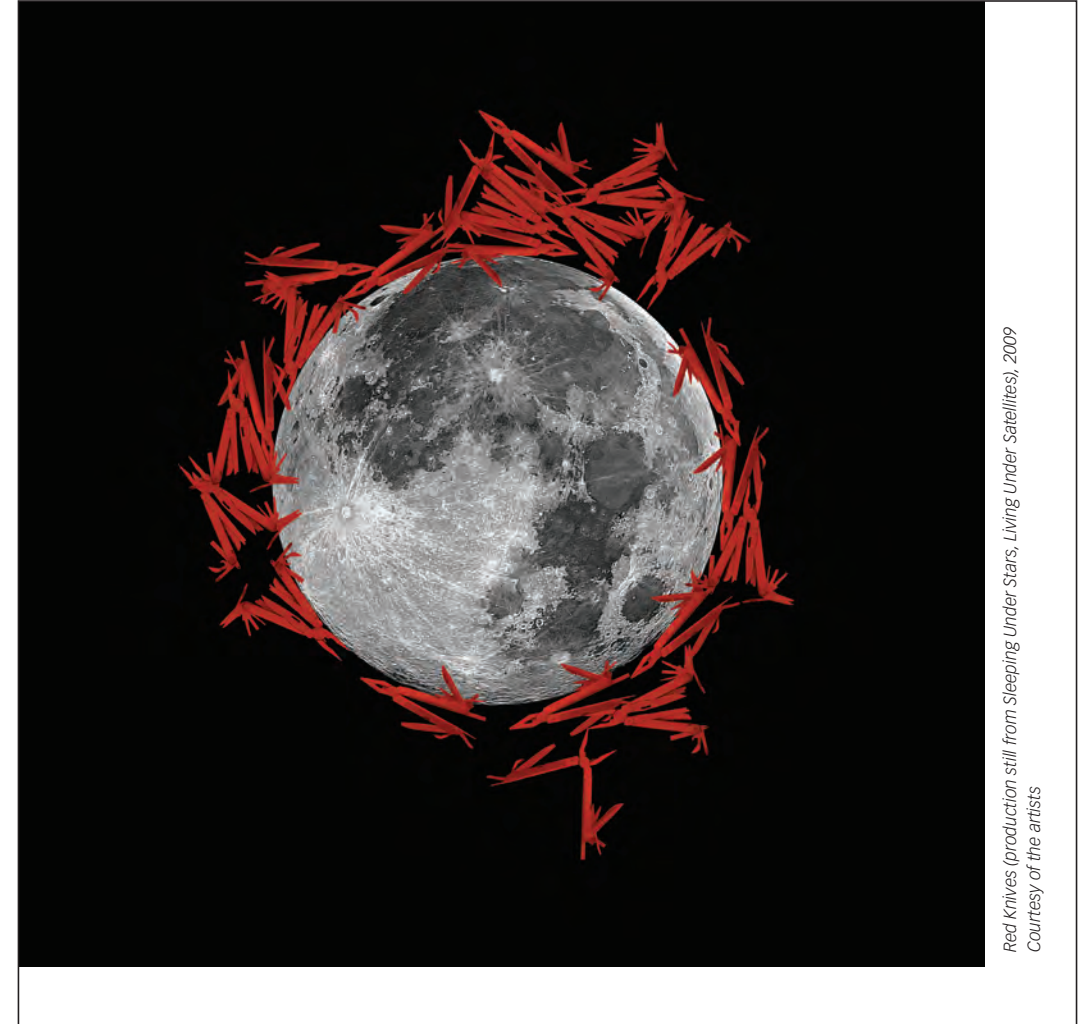
Sarah Bishop's Cave model (detail), from *Sleeping Under Stars*, *Living Under Satellites*, 2009
Courtesy of the artists

In order to physically ground Bishop's story, Finley and Muse employed artist Vanessa Marsh, a model maker for the film industry, to make a diorama of the hermit's cave, based on historical photographs. But instead of animating the sky above the cave, the artists have animated the cave itself, having it slowly turn and cast moving shadows on the wall. The shadows, like the elements of Sarah Bishop's story, are phantoms that loom large over both the viewer and the other elements of the space that Finley and Muse have created. Furthering the presence of Bishop, the installation includes a video projection of images that are a montage analogous to Bishop's wanderings. But like the hermit (and her story), the frame of reference has also been set to wander: the projector is mounted on a rotating platform so that its changing images sweep across the space. A voice recites fragments from existing narratives (some fictional, some not) surrounding Bishop.

Visitors to the exhibition have the ability to relive the telling of Bishop's tale from two perspectives: standing still in the gallery with history literally swirling around them, or walking out into the landscape armed with a GPS device to follow a trail that the hermit's feet actually trod. As different as these two experiences are, there is a stunning parallel: in the gallery projectors silently turning overhead provide information, while unseen satellites hovering above provide the GPS data. The satellites have become our new stars, pacing and informing our daily routines, and the geocacher the new voyager, expertly using new networks of both technology and like-minded citizens to



Clock Map (production still from *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*), 2010
Courtesy of the artists



Red Knives (production still from *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*), 2009
Courtesy of the artists

explore the landscape.² As fewer and fewer Americans spend time outdoors, the pursuit of experiencing nature has been boosted by the rise in popularity of geocaching. We can't (and don't) want to get away from digital technology, so we have conspired to bring it out into the woods with us.

Also spinning overhead and sweeping the gallery with imagery is another projector: this one with a digital animation based on the life of the Leatherman. Like Sarah Bishop, there are varying narratives about the circumstances of his life, but what is known is that he was a wandering tramp who first appeared in Connecticut and New York around the year 1856, and that he traveled irregularly for the first twenty-six years from central Connecticut east to the Hudson River and as far north as western Massachusetts. In 1883 he began his regular, clockwise circuit of 365 miles that took thirty-four days, a path that took him along the coastal communities in western Connecticut, up into Westchester and Putnam Counties in New York, back into northern Fairfield County, through Litchfield, Hartford, and Middlesex Counties, and then south back to Long Island Sound at Old Saybrook. Named after the crude, handmade leather outfit that he wore, he rarely spoke, and although he would occasionally venture into a building for food or coffee, he never slept indoors, preferring a chain of

caves, rock shelters, and wood lean-tos that he maintained along his route. Unlike the majority of tramps that plied the roads and trails during the later part of the nineteenth century, the Leatherman became a beloved character, never causing trouble or disturbing anyone. Indeed, his regular appearance was anticipated keenly by many, with certain people regularly providing him with food and leather scraps. As the Peekskill Blade newspaper reported in October 1885 in an article about “Old Leathery,” “...He asks for nothing, but eats what is given him without complaint or thanksgiving... so regular are his habits that it is often said that he is the only sure thing that farmers can depend upon in this age of uncertainty.”³

As the Leatherman kept to his own schedule, the world around him was adjusting to a new sense of time brought on by the industrial revolution. With the spreading of the railroads in the 1850s and '60s, a more universal time standard was needed to coordinate high-speed train travel, a situation that fostered the creation of “standard time” within a system of newly delineated time zones. Before this development time was determined locally, by observation of the sun reaching noon (its highest point in the sky) and apparently noon could vary considerably from community to community, depending on the accuracy of the observation. The Leatherman’s clock was the subject of immense speculation: How did he keep to his regular schedule? Was there a system that he used to regulate his travels? One report has him carrying a piece of paper “completely covered with curious characters, written in pencil and red chalk, and with scrupulous regularity.”⁴ Is it coincidental that he traveled clockwise like the hands of a clock, and that his circuit of 365 miles matched the number of days in a year and that a circle is divided into 360 degrees? Whatever his method (or madness), his sense of time and the landscape he trod were inexorably bound together.

The video component of the Leatherman section of Finley and Muse’s project, like Sarah Bishop’s chapter, is accompanied by an audio track of voices reciting fragments from the historical narrative of the Leatherman’s life. The artists have connected these two historical figures by what might pass as a mere coincidence of landscape: it is believed that the Leatherman may have spent some time in Sarah Bishop’s cave. But it is another historical coincidence that connects Finley and Muse’s project to the present day: they began working in earnest on their project in 2008, the tercentenary of the founding of the town of Ridgefield.

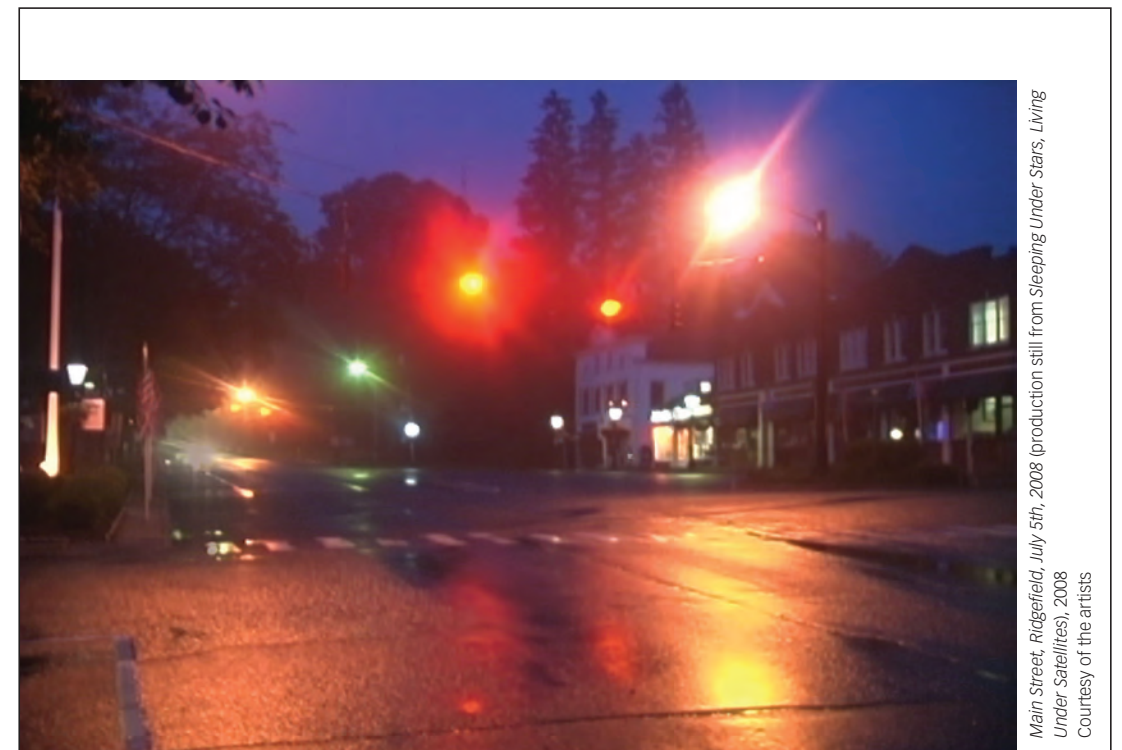
On July 4, 2008, Ridgefield celebrated its anniversary with a parade on Main Street. This path is indeed an ancient one, first a Native American trail that followed the ridge tops, followed by a Colonial roadway that connected the inland settlements of Fairfield County. It was down Main Street that the British marched during the famous Battle of Ridgefield when the local revolutionary militia fought a pitched battle with the Redcoats on their return from the burning of Danbury. Finley and Muse wished to work the parade into their developing narrative, but wanted to escape portraying it as a purely temporal event by allowing the viewer to experience it from a standpoint that is once again somewhat removed from our normal perception of time. They turned to a device that they had utilized previously with video, the intervalometer, which allows for the compression of time by recording for only brief intervals in a predetermined rhythm, a technique that creates a stop-action like effect. Setting up two cameras on the parade route in the center of Ridgefield the night before the parade, they recorded

the parade not as a discreet event, but rather as an episode that coalesced and then dispersed within a twenty-four-hour cycle. With the parade recorded in this manner, the stoplights—silently running through their green-yellow-red cycle in the middle of the night—are as much a part of the parade as the legions of little leaguers and firemen that marched past the cameras. The parade viewed this way is more of a node in the life of the town than a happening, and the location (that silent partner in all parades) is brought to the fore as a critical participant.

Living Under Satellites

The three narrative strands of the hermit, the wandering tramp, and the celebratory parade are all bound up with the landscape that surrounds the Museum. If you have visited The Aldrich, you have crossed both the path of the Leatherman, which went through Westport, Wilton, New Canaan, and North Salem, and the parade, which passed directly in front of the Museum on Main Street. This landscape has certainly changed in appearance since the founding of Ridgefield in 1708, and undoubtedly you are on a schedule considerably different from that of a traveler 300, 200, or even 100 years ago. You carry in your pocket a device (a cell phone) on which the time is usually correct within fifteen microseconds via its automatic connection with the GSM (Global System for Mobile) communications network, and your trip from home to the Museum’s parking lot might have been guided by a GPS unit on your car’s dashboard.

Finley and Muse have not only tempered their project with these facts, but have also embraced them as a real element in the landscape, as tangible as a tree or a stone wall. The digital ether that we currently inhabit allows us access to almost unlimited information, besides connecting us with both real and virtual communities. The artists have allowed for two different points of access to their exhibition, the first being the traditional route through the Museum’s front door, and the second being through the virtual online community that has coalesced around Geocaching.com. In fact, geocachers will be drawn into the experience created by Finley and Muse without necessarily knowing that they are entering an “art” project. The geocaches that the artists have created have been incorporated into the already existing geocache database, with



Main Street, Ridgefield, July 5th, 2008 (production still from *Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites*, 2008
Courtesy of the artists

participants who choose to visit the caches associated with the exhibition adding and subtracting peripheral exhibition content. It should be noted that prior to the additions by Finley and Muse, there were already forty-two geocaches within a four mile radius of the Museum.⁵ Sarah Bishop, the Leatherman, and the parade each have geocache circuits associated with the exhibition, and these three circuits all intersect physically at the Museum:

Sarah Bishop

There are three caches associated with the hermit of West Mountain: one preexisting cache in New York State that is approximately one half mile from Bishop's cave site (now on private property and inaccessible); one created by the artists that is adjacent to the hermit's burial site; and one that is associated with the proxy cave made by the artists that is included in the exhibition. The cache that is associated with the hermit's grave contains geocaching "travel bugs" that are linked both to Bishop's story and the Museum.

The Leatherman

Finley and Muse have connected the exhibition with an already existing series of twenty-three caches called The Leatherman Circuit, adding a new twenty-fourth cache entitled "The Leatherman's Cave at Ward Pound Ridge." The location of these caches can be found in the "Seek a Cache" page of Geocaching.com by using the keyword Leatherman under "Other Search Options." The Leatherman Circuit includes caches in Connecticut in the towns of Bantam, Barkhamsted, Berlin, Bristol, Burlington, Chester, Clinton, Essex, Guilford, Hamden, Middletown, New Milford, Roxbury, Southington, Thomaston, Westbrook, and Wilton, and in New York in the towns of Armonk, Bedford, Peekskill, and Pound Ridge.

The Parade Route

The artists have created a chain of six multi-caches that follows the route of Ridgefield's 300th Anniversary Parade down Main Street. Each of these caches is associated with a landmark along the parade route. In the jargon of geocaching a multi-cache ("multiple") involves two or more locations, the final location being a physical container. This chain starts at a location that has a hint to find the second cache, and the second cache has hints to the third, and so on.

The immersive experience that Finley and Muse have created—even though it is connected with specific characters and events—does not have fixed form, a definitive boundary, or a clear beginning or end. The video and audio channels are never presented in exactly the same relationship to each other, and the stories that are told overlap and merge with a landscape that itself constantly changes with the time of day, the weather, and the seasons. Is the primary experience of the exhibition achieved standing in the darkened gallery watching a modern-day magic lantern show, or walking up a hillside, GPS in hand, to find a cleft in the rock that once sheltered a madman? It depends on one's perspective, and one's view of what is real and what is not. The tools and technologies that are at our disposal for augmenting our senses and our consciousness are expanding exponentially, seemingly allowing us to further narrow the gap between art and life. At the end of the last Ice Age we chose the wall of a cave and daubed it with pigment to help explain real-

ity, and 10,000 years later a Greek philosopher used the wall of a theoretical grotto to postulate that ideas themselves are the basis of reality. Do we now have the ability to be freed from Plato's cave, not only by seeing exactly what is casting the shadows, but also by obtaining the knowledge that will release us from the prison of temporality? Unfortunately, in an age governed by satellites and cell phones, we need caves and the stories they contain more than ever.

-Richard Klein, exhibitions director

1 Geocaching began in 2000 after the Federal government allowed non-military users of the global positioning system (GPS) access to increased accuracy. Prior to that point intentional errors (up to 100 meters) were randomly added into the system to prevent hostile interests (such as foreign governments or terrorists) from accurately utilizing GPS information. This new ability for pinpoint accuracy allowed for more widespread civilian use, including navigational systems in automobiles. There are currently approximately thirty satellites broadcasting GPS signals, although only four satellites are needed for an accurate GPS fix. Each satellite has a fixed orbital location and all are running extremely accurate digital clocks with synchronized time. The GPS receiver's location is determined by triangulating data based on the slightly different amount of time it takes for the receiver to communicate with each satellite at a given instant, due to their varying distances.

2 Geocaching is administered and organized by a small, Seattle-based company named Groundspeak. Founded in 2000, its mission is governed by the following goals: "Getting people outside by using location-based technology, providing or enhancing real-world adventures and experiences, supporting parks and outdoor recreational areas, educating about GPS and other location-based technologies, and bringing online communities together in physical locations." (From Groundspeak's Web site: www.geocaching.com)

3 Dan W. DeLuca, *The Old Leatherman, Historical Accounts of A Connecticut and New York Legend* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 55. DeLuca has assembled a fascinating portrait of the Leatherman from newspaper articles written during his lifetime. Finley and Muse have utilized this collected material as a primary source for the Leatherman component of their project.

4 James F. Rogers, "A Night with the Leatherman," *New Haven Evening Register*, June 11, 1885. *Quoted from The Old Leatherman*, p. 50.

5 It is estimated that as of January 2010 that there are over 950,000 active geocaches worldwide, including locations on Antarctica. January 3, 2010 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geocaching>>

Since 1988, Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse have worked collaboratively on numerous experimental documentaries and installations. These works have been exhibited nationally and internationally, at festivals and museums, including The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Biennial, San Francisco International Film Festival, Berlin Video Festival, and World Wide Video Festival. In 2001 they received a Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship. Additional awards include a Creative Capital Foundation Grant and an Artists Residency at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center.

Works in the Exhibition

Sleeping Under Stars, Living Under Satellites, 2010

Site-specific media installation with four video channels, five audio channels

Components: four video projectors; four solid-state digital video controllers; three two-channel audio amplifiers; six speakers; DVD player; two rotating platforms; spotlight; mixed-media cave model
16 x 48 x 22 feet

The artists have created several geocaches as part of the exhibition that are linked to existing geocaching circuits in Connecticut and New York via Geocaching.com

Finley and Muse would like to thank Arthur Schmidt, who provided the voice work, and artist/model-maker Vanessa Marsh for their assistance. Special appreciation goes to Henryk Teraszkiewicz, executive director of the Woodcock Nature Center in Wilton, for assistance with the geocaching component of the exhibition.

Courtesy of the artists and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco