



# *Deriva continental*

*el neoliberalismo al revés*

« [The Midwest Radical Culture Corridor](#)

[Some Reflections on Global Mapping](#) »

## FURTHER:

By Brian Holmes

### The Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor in the Recent Past and the Distant Futures



*the drift as seen by Claire Pentecost; more [here](#)*

*The Glass Bead Game*, a novel by Herman Hesse, envisaged a utopian epoch of society in which highly cultivated spiritual aristocrats would play an extraordinary game of aesthetic contemplation, using glass beads that condensed the quintessence of a period, a style or an entire civilization. That was then: the distant future. The bead you see now is actually a piece of garbage, just an average bit of industrial refuse — or rather it's a resource, since it was "harvested" at the Creative Reuse Warehouse on 135th Street where the City of Chicago runs aground on factory ruins, incipient farmland and the nature/culture chaos of the Calumet River. The dystopian future is already here. Today, no-one can claim to condense the quintessence of anything, let alone play games with it. In fact we don't know what

to do with all the garbage that industrial civilization has accumulated over the past two centuries. Rather than expertly rearranging the existing map of cultural crystals, around a dozen of us decided to try consciously refracting some scattered pieces of the territory, while talking about what it might be with whoever we might happen to meet. The result was the *Continental Drift through the Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor*.

How to get to know the place where you're living? One of the answers is to settle in deeply, to sink roots, to become part of the landscape or the urban beat. But a "place" in contemporary times is always also a "space," crisscrossed by a warp and weft of flows that end up weaving almost everything you see, the solid seams. What we wanted to do was to filter through the regional neighborhood, to check out the nearby distances, at a time when Champaign sounds closer to Paris than to Urbana — except to those who move constantly between them. What if there was radical culture right here in the Midwest and we were not seeing it? Or being it? The idea was to let slip an open secret: the existence of latent cultural corridors that you alone can bring to life, just by circulating within them.



*discussion at Tomahnous Farms, by Ryan Griffis; more [here](#)*

OK, all this was "very experimental." In other words, an ad hoc group of people made a few good guesses about what to do, leaving most everything up to chance and circumstance. The conclusion, inevitably, was that it will all have to be different next time (what Heraclitus would call a truism). Our particular roll of the dice started in Urbana, fabulously I must say at the [Indy Media Center](#), where a collective of desiring-media people not only managed to buy the stately and defunct Post Office, but also to rent a small part of it back to the neoliberal US government — since the townspeople still expect to receive their letters. Mike Wolf, Claire Pentecost and I arrived late, and unfortunately missed Jessica Lawless and Sarah Ross's intro to the art show "The Audacity of Desperation," which offered some witty and amazing multiples reflecting on the current American political scene. Fortunately we did arrive just in time to catch a "local" guy named

Kevin Hamilton giving a lecture about an even more “local” guy, the Viennese physicist and cybernetician Heinz von Foerster, who taught in Champaign-Urbana for a couple decades, notably during the late 1960s. This was an auspicious beginning for me, since I have a nagging cybernetic fetish and Kevin managed to ask at least half the questions that have been struggling to get out of my personal glass bead...

What does it mean to solve a problem? Von Foerster offered a wildly popular class in “Hermeneutics,” which was or purported to be a practical introduction to problem-solving in a complex society of, basically, white male engineers. The class was run in what seemed like a very original way, including the functions of a “scribe” to keep an objective account of what went on in each session, and a “metascribe” to add a subjective flavor. So you can get a peek at what happened through the archives, and also through a journal issue that was published as a culmination of each semester, with a page where each student explained, catalogued or graphed out their “problem” and its “solution.” Classic human problems like how to get laid as many times as possible, or what kinds of drugs you could score on campus in 1968... But was that the whole story?

Von Foerster ran a thing called the [Biological Computer Laboratory](#), which was funded, like the overwhelming majority of blue-sky research at the time, by the US military. He was the figure who initiated “second-order cybernetics,” whereby the architect or observer of a system tries to see him- or herself as an integral part, affected and transformed no less than any of the other functioning parts of the system. He was quite fascinated by an event which shook up his own local system in 1968, and of which he was also a part: a conference organized by a television news station, in order to bring together university figures from around the country to converse on the air about campus unrest. As the debate got loud and stormy, focusing on the napalm that US airplanes were spewing all over Vietnam, a local civil-rights activist named [John Lee Johnson](#) asked about the “psychological napalm” that was constantly being dumped on blacks in the USA. This was the question that finally cracked the TV’s crystal ball: and everyone involved went fulminating back into their corners, despite von F’s elegant attempt to explain it all as a problem of metacommunication or some such cybernetic concept.

Confronted with an unusually large number of notes and clippings on the event, preserved in the Von Foerster archive, Kevin Hamilton wondered whether the research into second-order cybernetics had anything whatsoever to do with the local activism of John Lee Johnson, which involved the pragmatic improvement of schools, hospitals, community services, the daily substance of fundamental human rights. Kevin thought maybe the two were totally separate, strictly irrelevant to each other. When I look at the smooth cybernetic management of economic flows today, I wonder if local shortfalls aren’t part of some perfectly computed neoliberal picture? Kevin brought up Operation Paperclip, then preferred not to speculate on whether Von Foerster might have been among the Nazi scientists that the CIA imported for the anti-communist cause, inviting us instead to ask how resistance and radicality can make a difference amidst the most tightly run system — for example, amidst military research carried out at universities like Champaign-Urbana. I think his question is a great one for anyone working at a university today, where the

imperative to create intellectual property calls most of the scientific shots that DoD doesn't. But I also think there might have been some good reason for the Mansfield Amendment of 1973, which limited military research budgets to direct wartime applications. Just how far can you dance to the generals' tune? Or how high can you fly on their scores?

In the end, all of us were fascinated by the obscure, unsung hero of the Biological Computer Lab, the composer [Herbert Brün](#), who mistrusted the computable flows of ordinary semantics and put all his marbles in the basket of *anti-communication*: "a human relation between persons and things which emerges and is maintained through messages requiring and permitting not yet available encoding and decoding systems." In other words, enigmas that the machines can't process, and that orient both us and them in the quest for something beyond what we already are. That's maybe what I call "the pathic core at the heart of cybernetics." Following Kevin's brilliant talk, Claire and I offered a few ideas about what Continental Drift could be, and why you might do such things anyway, of which my version can be found right [here](#).

## Revolutions Then & Now

The basic principle of the drift was simple: in each city or region, one or two or a few of us would set up meetings with someone at a particular place. The group would then gather, listen, ask questions, look around, maybe get lost, eat a meal, spend the night and so forth — onwards and outwards and upwards. After a week of this, with conversations and reflections in between, your head is spinning! Among the threads that most entangled us was in fact revolution.

Maybe it started at the north end of Champaign, at a meeting with Ken Salo of the UIUC Urban Planning Department and Aaron Ammons of CU Citizens (Champaign-Urbana Citizens United for Peace and Justice, to which Ken also belongs). The issue was environmental justice, or what to do about that the toxic waste buried in the ground at the site of a former coal-to-gas manufacturing plant in a black neighborhood (see Ryan Griffis' [post](#) on the subject). What struck me were Ken's stories about liberation movements in South Africa where he's from, and his distrust of the courts as a way to get anywhere in the US right now. He thinks that the state and the corporations always figure in possible rights claims, and effective strategies against them, before taking any action. The relevant examples were the thick binders full of indecipherable information and booby-trapped legalese that the state and the gas utility laid down on the table, in response to the citizens' demands for transparency on the neglected local site. All that adds up perfectly in the central computer, but how could anyone from North Champaign really deal with it? What seems more important to Ken than law courts are social movements, demands that overflow the legal procedures with the living weight and resistance of people in the street. Aaron Ammons told us about the C-U Citizens' Unity Marches, moments of organizing that bring folks together beyond any particular campaign. Ken Salo kept coming back to the words "aesthetics," by which he meant the culture of struggle, how it's made into something common that people can touch and feel. Voices from the the so-called "third world" have a lot to tell us about the need



for social movements in the US today.



*Dr. Ken Salo; photo by Claire*

Later on, at Mess Hall in Chicago, we watched a movie about one of the things that makes you want a revolution right now: [The World According to Monsanto](#). The film actually starts with one of the worst cases of environmental racism this side of Bhopal, namely the town of Anniston, Alabama, the so-called “Model City,” where Monsanto went on manufacturing deadly PCBs for years in full knowledge of their toxicity. The townspeople finally came to a one-time monetary settlement, with no admission of wrongdoing and no pursuit of any individuals. Today the corporation’s major money-makers are genetically modified “Roundup Ready” seeds that can grow to market under a deluge of pesticide — a kind of Intellectual Property that Monsanto pushes in an endless quest to establish a monopoly position on farm inputs at the world scale. The film gives fantastic insight into the kinds of far-flung operations that a contemporary corporation can undertake, and their consequences. It shows you how to research such things, how to find the information, how to go straight to the scene of the crime: a kind of do-it-yourself aesthetics of investigation, somewhat like what we were doing in the Continental Drift, but with a hundred times more focus and precision. What it doesn’t show you are the social movements that can seriously oppose such corporations, or how you could become part of them.

Two days later, when we went down through the South Side to meet Martha Boyd at the Creative Reuse Warehouse, what we saw was an impoverished and devastated local area crying out for environmental justice. Martha lived on the site and got to know it in detail, particularly the Altgeld Gardens housing project of the 1940s whose history of hope and decline she explained to us. Today she is working with various groups to try to put this area literally back on the map (including, for instance, the neighborhood right outside the warehouse, which the local alderman didn’t even know was in Chicago). Her main efforts go to the Chicago/Calumet Underground Railroad Effort (C/CURE). Someday we hope to visit an eco-park here along the Calumet River, with maybe a re-creation of a now-vanished stop on the Underground Railway that helped slaves escape from the old South. Today the most inspiring seeds were the ones coming up

out of carefully tilled soil that some locals were just using, rent-free, to grow huge gardens beneath the summer sun.

Gerald Raunig, from Vienna, arrived at Mess Hall while the Monsanto film was ending. The next day Dan Wang interviewed him for a session at the collaborative art space [InCUBATE](#), on his book "Art and Revolution." One of Gerald's ideas is about concatenation: the way dissimilar things fit together outside any formulas or rules, the "and and and" of art & revolution. We talked all the way from the Paris commune to the counter-globalization movements, which Gerald was involved in through his work with the Publix Theater Caravan, a travelling agit-prop group that evolved out of a political squat in Vienna. We were also trying to get to some further concerns about how exactly you create that aesthetics of resistance that Ken Saro was mentioning, and what were the effects of a complex, multilingual critical discourse like the one developed by the [Transform](#) project that Gerald helps coordinate.

The discussion spilled out of the hot InCUBATE space onto the street, where we all sat on chairs in a circle, drinking a few beers and pausing periodically for the clattering aesthetics of the passing subway trains that just about rattle your mind out of your head. At the end, a totally cool Latino guy, actually a neighbor, broke in to say he wasn't sure what we were really talking about, but if it was art and resistance he could tell us about the hip-hop movement right in this neighborhood, for instance some murals across the road. He explained how later on, the commercial media made hip-hop into something totally different from what it had been at the start, but they went on working anyway, doing things in the neighborhood. At the end I was amazed that the cops hadn't come to sweep us off the sidewalk, which seemed like a minor miracle; but the neighbor guy said, that's cause we were white. "If you were Black or Latino the cops would've been here in five minutes."

That was true right now, but what about then? What about '68, the Democratic National Convention, Martin Luther King's murder and its aftermath in Chicago? Claire had read one of the classic Black Power novels, by a fellow named Sam Greenlee, called "The Spook Who Sat by the Door." It's about a fictional character named Dan Freeman, the single token Negro of the CIA, who learns the moves, completes the tests, but then drops out of the agency, passing himself off as a do-gooding social worker in Chicago while actually organizing ghetto gangs with all the insurgency techniques of The Company. A dream of deliberate blowback on a massive scale. Greenlee, who had fought in Korea, then worked for the propaganda department of the Foreign Service in the early 60s, actually got his incendiary novel made into a [feature-length movie](#), with scenes of guerrilla warfare in the Chicago streets (actually filmed in nearby Gary, Indiana, with the support of a black mayor). It was pulled from theaters after just a few weeks, undoubtedly under pressure from the FBI, but at last it has been released on DVD, so we watched it at the newly opened [Backstory cafe](#) at the Experimental Station, on the South Side not far at all from where Greenlee still lives. "I was mad," said this alert, passionate, generous old man, after we'd seen the aesthetics that he was willing to put out in public.



*Sam Greenlee*

Greenlee explained that he got back to the States in 1965 after quitting the Foreign Service, saw the way that things were going, predicted it would turn into a violent revolution, and gave up the novel he was working on to write "Spook." It was ready by '66, the same year the Panther Party was founded in Oakland; but it was only published in 1969 by a small press in England, then subsequently in the States. I wished Gerald Raunig had been able to stay and see this amazing embodiment of Foucault's theory of power, which says that power is necessarily produced from below, generated by all the people who make the social order real — and who can therefore take that power into their own hands, twist it away from its normative ends and use it for different purposes. Art seemed amazingly close to revolution in Greenlee's film, which must have taken fantastic courage and clever trickery to make. Yet the movie came out late, in '73, years after the Black Power movements had peaked and began to subside under police repression. Today, the kind of blowback that Greenlee was explicitly calling for only happens much farther afield, with Al Qaeda, whose actions none of us on the drift could even dream of imitating. What is left, in the novel and the film, is really a cultural document of explosive anger and the hope for something better — an artistic document of the revolution that we don't know how to find, where to locate. I looked at the bookshelves of the Backstory cafe before leaving: they were filled with those distant documents of art and revolution, the paradoxical basis of Leftist culture in the present.

### Milwaukee and Dreamtimes West

After Chicago we hit the road for Milwaukee. There we were met

by the artist Nicolas Lampert, who organized a visit to the amazing urban permaculture operation called [Growing Power](#). This inaugurated the seriously organic side of the drift (though we had already been to [Tomahnous Farm](#) outside of Champaign-Urbana, and also had breakfast with Lisa Bralts, who is a neighborhood organic gardener and the director of the Urbana Farmers' Market). Growing Power is a non-profit organization started by the charismatic former basketball player, Will Allen, on the only land zoned for farming within the city limits of Milwaukee. Out back there are goats, a huge and hilarious chicken coop, ducks, bees, compost heaps, long plastic hoop-houses which keep plants warm in the winter. Previously existing cast-iron-and-glass greenhouses have been redone to house impressive three-tiered gardens: lettuce, tomatoes or other vegetables on top, usually in pots that can be taken outside in fine weather; a middle layer of watercress, which filters the water draining down from the vegetables; and a lower pool, dug five feet deep into the earth, that holds thousands of farmed fish in nutrient-rich water that is constantly pumped up to the top-level vegetables and cycled continuously down through the watercress, turning the waste-water of the fish into fertilizer for the plants, then delivering a purified environment back to the fish and thus constituting a self-sustaining heterotopia in three dimensions! This "aquaponic" model was a revelation to me, both for the fantastic efficiency and the beauty of the whole thing: I finally started to understand why so many friends are entranced by permaculture.





*Julie fishes in the 3-tiered garden; photo by [ready subjects](#)*

Growing Power is about culture on a lot of levels. You can take an introductory tour there for around two hours, like the one we were given by a wonderfully knowledgeable woman named Julie. You can take part in workshops that last for several days and get hands-on experience for your own garden or community farm. Growing Power also accompanies emerging projects over a period of years, helping to set up unique permaculture operations in different communities around the country. Finally, there are apprenticeships for Milwaukee youth, some of whom have been working at the gardens for many years. The place produces tremendous quantities of salad greens and delicious sprouts which are sold to co-ops and restaurants. It also recycles organic waste from local businesses, and is developing experimental projects such as a giant anaerobic converter which could someday produce methane from kitchen trash. With gas prices shooting up through the roof, and corporations like Monsanto pushing pesticides and GMO seeds that make a mockery of the word nutrition, Growing Power is obviously a model for the locally produced food of the future. And the secret of the place, the hidden bio-engine powering all this greenery, is actually the best composter on the

planet: the lowly earthworm. Growing Power is home to literally millions of worms, whose castings help to create the very soil that the plants are grown in. Vermiculture is the underground hope of the Urban Garden Revolution!

We ate sprouts and salad for dinner, then discussed this and many other revolutions on the rooftop of Nicolas Lampert's Milwaukee studio, out on the southwestern edge of the city where packs of coyotes are said to howl at passing trains. Nick showed images from the [Seeing Green](#) show that he had put together, including a very beautiful film called "Water Water Everywhere," made by Ray Chi working with teenage students from Cass St. School. The next morning we went to the [Black Holocaust Museum](#), founded by James Cameron, the survivor of a Ku Klux Klan lynch mob and the author of a book called "The Time of Terror." You can hear and watch Cameron's interviews, and learn a million things about the Middle Passage, the life on the plantations, the civil rights struggles and other more or less glorious facts of American history. The Museum opened late because the basement was flooded from the week's heavy rains. In fact, the whole state of Wisconsin was flooded and the waters were moving down the Mississippi. Under brilliant but always short-lived sunshine we set out for points west, and ultimately for Dreamtime.

Wisconsin has the most registered cooperatives in the United States. It's home to back-to-the-landers, Mennonites, Amish people who don't drive cars, anarchists and fundamentalists on the lam from civilization, as well as plenty of plain old conservative dairy farmers who make sure the roads stay ploughed in the winter. Our first meal, at the Langeby house out near Elk Mound where Dan Wang arranged our stay, was the site of a spontaneous potluck dinner cooperative put together by the Langeby's friends from thirty miles around, mostly part of the home-school network that educates the lovely and creative children who were playing in the grass everywhere you looked. Everyone in the tents survived the night of drenching rain and we got up at 7 am to go see the Holm girls dairy farm, part of the Organic Valley cooperative. The cleanest farm and the sweetest cows I ever saw, kept by two California dotcom refugees and their daughters who were making their dream come true, with a lot of conviction and I think, a little difficulty, since the people who put the milk in your coffee rarely have life easy. We weeded in the Langebys' garden, hung out in the house sheltering from the rain, cooked another great dinner and then Claire and I were lucky enough to sleep in an empty room, while others tented their way through the Greatest Downpour of Them All... The next day we visited the Organic Valley headquarters in the town of La Farge, also known as the [CROPP cooperative](#).



*Organic Marketing; photo by Claire*

Someone should write a book about this place, if they haven't already. It's a farmer-owned cooperative, now doing half a billion dollars worth of business annually getting organic vegetables, eggs, meat and above all dairy products out to people around the USA, with farms in various parts of the country. 350 people work directly for the co-op, making it by far the biggest employer in the area, although notice carefully that the labor end of the company is not cooperative, that's only for the farmers — among whom I'm afraid you'll find plenty of arch-Republicans. The CEO of the outfit, George Siemon, is as it turns out an old Rainbow Tribe member (ah, remember those mythical Rainbow Gatherings back on the West coast in the 70s?). I was fascinated to see elements of the counter-culture that I had known and left behind in California now scaling up, trying to keep some integrity and simplicity while doing 100 million more dollars worth of business every year. If they can keep growing at this pace without losing the effective reality of their idealistic values, we will all witness a quiet revolution: cooperative business at a continental scale, able to outproduce and displace the corporations. Sounds like a fairytale in the capitalist USA, but already it has come partially true, with all the usual contradictions. Let's see how that one develops over the next few years.

What they were actually doing at Organic Valley HQ while we were received and given a fascinating explanation of how it all worked, was trying to coordinate some volunteer relief efforts and free distribution of dairy products for all the people flooded out of their houses in the Kickapoo River valley where the town La Farge is located. Hoping to get more insight into the complexities of the cooperative, I asked some questions about the function of advertising in this kind of enterprise where the quality/price ratio isn't the only value that computes; but for clearer answers we would have had to seek out specific individuals in the company. Maybe what I really wanted to grasp was the place and the use of the enigma: that moment of anti-communication where nobody's exactly sure what the relationship really runs on. But these questions take time, lots of time. And here was the obvious thing on the whole drift: the only real limit to understanding your territory is the time and the curiosity and the energy you can put

into it.

Dreamtime was the last stop on the way. [Dreamtime Village](#) is an anarchist colony, poetry treasure trove, permaculture garden and half-ruined heterotopia consisting of a few buildings, a decaying schoolhouse and a piece of cultivated land in the unincorporated town of West Lima, founded in the early '90s by mIEKAL aND & Elizabeth Was. At the time it must have been a lively and fantastically interesting place, overflowing with permaculture workshops in the summertime and all kinds of wild artistic explorations in the old schoolhouse. Now it is a calm, surrealistic and no-less fantastically interesting place, with a smaller permanent population than in its heyday, but a rich trove of knowledges for those whose seek them. mIEKAL aND Camille Bacos greeted us in the big house at nightfall, with conversation and a bottle of homemade currant wine, which was unusual and delicious. A block away is the Hotel, another chaotic building with lots of rooms, one of which is decorated by the amazing schizophrenic collage art of Malok. Upstairs in the big house we would discover the four parrots in a fabulous video-poetry-hypertext workspace. Never forget that Dreamtime is the home of [Xexoxial Editions](#), aka Xexoxial Endarchy Ltd., initially based on xeroxed D.I.Y. books and now shifted to print-on-demand. Among the authors in the collection is the mythical Bern Porter, about whom mIEKAL, sensing an interest, was willing to regale us with stories. Bern Porter, it turns out, is among the very few original beatnik poets to have worked on the Manhattan Project. The legend we heard is that he was lied to every day, having no idea what was really coming down the pipe until the day of the explosion, whereupon he quit his job with the government. This story gave rise to vivid debates about whether we are all being lied to every day, just the same, or whether there is now a significant difference, namely they don't even bother to lie to us any more and people just tolerate it. Bern Porter went on to do fantastic cut-up advertising poetry ("The Book of Do's" & "Here Comes Everybody's Don't Book"), as well as a famous title in the Exoxial collection, "The Last Acts of Saint Fuck You," and the allegorical autobiography "I've Left." Right now I'm still waiting for the combined efforts of the US postal service and some Abebooks affiliates to come through with surviving copies of that last title, plus "Where to Go, What to Do, When You Are Bern Porter," the biography by James Scheville, where I hope to learn at least some authorized version of the one true Manhattan Project story....





*Camille and friend at Dreamtime Village; photo by Claire*

What to do and what to don't with the leftover leftist culture of the last two centuries? We didn't make it to [Dr. Evermore's Forevertron](#), an enormous would-be spaceship disguised as a piece of outsider art, located maybe an hour away from West Lima. However it seems that many egalitarian futures could be invented on the ground, in the Midwest which, when you think about the relativity of maps and compasses, is clearly here and everywhere. The Forevertron of the Present could take off with the formation of more ad hoc exploratory collectives, digging deeper beneath society's spectacular crust to get at whatever might still pass as the Grounds or Ground Zeros of Existence. Some future destinations and forms of investigation have already been suggested. I am very impressed with the possibilities of this kind of group research, which could both be more focused, aiming for hard facts and significant patterns, and at the same time more speculative, inquiring into the dreams we live by, the ways both societies and individuals shape their worlds. Obviously, it will all have to be different next time.

Opting for place instead of space on the last sunny day of the westward drift, a few of us went down to the town of Viola where [Driftless Books](#) and its tenant — yet another US post office — had just been flooded out again by the Kickapoo River, which had done the same the preceding August with historic floods (it's like climate change in your own basement). The urgency was to save the post office and with it, the viability of the whole building, which entailed stripping off the soaked paneling and linoleum, clearing out all the heavy metal filing cabinets, pulling the remaining nails out of the floor and mopping more or less everything that was covered in smooth brown silt. Eddie the anarchist bookseller was an excellent guy to meet, however briefly, and we were happy to lend an afternoon hand, pushing mops, hauling cabinets and pulling a few hundred nails. Meanwhile others were working in the garden back at Dreamtime, or fetching the water from the spring. But when the immediate floods are over everything still remains to be done: and the end of the story can only be further....



*Drying the Tent at Dreamtime; photo by Claire*

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