

“Muddy Waters”

Paul Soulellis

It's time to consider the swamp.

Politicians have been using the expression “to drain the swamp” throughout the 20th century, but the phrase has taken on new life in recent years. The swamp evokes dark, murky waters where disease and crime run deep. Draining is a protective measure: we don't navigate this mess—we eliminate it. The desire to drain is a powerful gut impulse: to clean up the filth, then start over. But total drainage is merely an illusion, swamps have a way of never really disappearing. Water sources live on, out of view. They continue to feed the landscape deep below the surface, rotting and destabilizing foundations.

Swamps persist. Swamps, marshes, and bogs are transitional areas that perform a kind of filtration—critical edge conditions where communities meet and integrate. Even though they're slow landscapes, there's a sense of urgency in the swamp: to actually drain it would be a disaster. It's in stasis, a critical balance of waters rising and retreating in a regular way, while toxins flow in and out. These are predictable motions.

How to approach a quagmire? Perilous, troubled waters could bring on a kind of paralysis. A concerned citizen sits motionless, scanning, reading for activity. In the face of so much corruption, it's easy for some to wait it out. Opt out, opt in. Platforms, floating at the surface of the swamp, provide nice waiting areas. These are smoothed out spaces, with good views. Like lifeboats or balconies. Signs of life, waving to friends over there on another platform. Publishing here is easy because language flows freely in these spaces. There might be a toxic system supporting smoothed-out spots from below, but these platforms work to soothe the surface. They keep it clean up top, with good lighting and easy reassurances. Some platforms appear to be more free than others, seemingly detached, but their existence depends on entangled roots that extend down into the mud, clearly out of view.

For some, there is no choice but to intervene. Consider the whistleblower, whose impulse is to leave the safety of smoothed-out surfaces and go down below. For the whistleblower, the goal isn't complete drainage, but rather to infiltrate—to permeate the surface, dig down into the muck, exposing clogs. Perhaps the leak is our most radical form of publishing right now, and will continue to be so in the near future, because it's less concerned with lateral moves. The leak

travels vertically, from private to public, and it's an urgent gesture. The whistleblower brings submerged information up to the surface. For the whistleblower, this is a singular point of cannot-return; they reject the safety of platform relations in order to radically shift perspective. The whistleblower works to divert flows of power, to rip apart dominant narratives through acts of publishing.

Artists can choose to infiltrate, too. Is there an artistic practice that aligns with the whistleblower, publishing work that exposes the flows and diversions of hegemonic power along their most regular routes? This isn't soothing work, but art that acts like an interruption (or *is* an interruption).

Speculative design that uses CGI model building, animation, and simulation is one way to operate on an existing condition, to "re-see" culture by interrogating familiar views. Artists who work in this way infiltrate our sense of reality, of what we think we know, by carefully collapsing real narratives onto alternatives, interrupting "easy views" with more difficult experiences.

Nicholas O'Brien pulls us into such a tense scenario with *Treatment: The Plan for Rain* (2018). In his array of rendered animations and physical objects, O'Brien reconsiders an overlooked detail in public space, tracing its real and imagined relations. Research drives his inquiry. The act of infiltration in this case—inhabiting civic archives and histories of engineering—is a kind of slowing down, dipping far below visible surfaces to examine problematic information. The artifact at hand is a contentious design for rain gardens, realized and installed on sidewalks in New York City. Mixed with recorded conversations between the artist, consultants, and other civically engaged individuals, O'Brien stages the strange shapes in physical space as a distortion, disorienting and performing the material of bureaucratic processes. Questionable decisions and events resurface as digital material.

In *Treatment*, the CGI works like a seduction, beckoning between visual completeness and fragmentation. In reconciling this fractured narrative, a speculative space for new views opens up. *Treatment* pulls on a loose thread in the built urban environment, and delivers an unravelling—a story of failure.

The swamp presents a soft condition, an ecosystem where power structures commingle with different species from surrounding biomes. It's a complex, difficult-to-see environment of interwoven relations, disguised as a treacherous landscape. We can speak about draining the swamp, but this is as unreasonable a request as it is an impossible gesture. To take the plunge

and swim “off-platform” through the entangled mess is to stay in motion, to use one’s practice to resist easy binary narratives, like dark and light, below and above, by engaging directly with the muddy waters. Artists, activists, and archivists help us navigate. As the swamp deepens and bleeds out into other landscapes, we need new ways to infiltrate.

“Muddy Waters” appears in a special broadsheet print publication on the occasion of Nicholas O’Brien’s “Treatment: The Plan for Rain” at Knockdown Center, NYC, May 8–July 1, 2018.