

it» is hardly the apex of individual freedom and independence it purports to be, as it relies on wisdom passed on by thousands of years of culture and communal living. As Mohawk leader Ellen Gabriel recently noted in a lecture at Marianopolis College, the knowledge that strawberries are edible fruit is part of the intellectual property of First Nations people,<sup>5</sup> not a «discovery» made by brave Europeans wandering in the «virgin wilderness» of North America. The same could be said of a host of other wild and domestic foods, including «the Foolproof Four.» And while many would rather not admit that they depend on others for their quality of life—and by extension an array of social and cultural institutions—the unpleasant truth is that the only freedom outside

civilization is ultimately death, and even this is located within a complex ecological web of decay and regeneration. After all, mushrooms grow just as well on the grave of a libertarian as that of a communist.

#### ENDNOTE

1. Annie Dunning, artist statement, 2011.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 42–44.
3. Ibid., 36.
4. Annie Dunning, artist statement, 2011.
5. Ellen Gabriel, «Colonial History Has Been Written in a Liar's Scrawl! An Indigenous Critique of Colonialism and the Writing of History» (lecture, Marianopolis College, Montreal, April 29, 2011).

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**ANNIE DUNNING** received an undergraduate degree in fine arts from Mount Allison University and a MFA degree from the University of Guelph. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and abroad in Japan, Germany and the US. Dunning's practice includes collaborative projects, teaching, artist residencies and lectures, and has been funded by the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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A U T O D E L I Q U E S C E N T  
S U P E R H E R O E S

BY EMILY FALVEY

██████████ A friend of mine recently applied for a job in a high-end restaurant. During the interview she was asked, «Do you consider yourself a foodie?» This was one of the main reasons she wanted the job, so she replied, «Yes.» As a test, the owner of the restaurant immediately asked her to name five different mushrooms. The fact that this was his measure of her commitment was no accident. Mushrooms have long been synonymous with fine dining, and certain kinds, such as truffles, can cost upwards of six hundred dollars a pound. Those unwilling to pay a small fortune for such mushrooms may forage for them in the wild, learning to distinguish between the edible and poisonous species, and then picking them at their own risk. While the urbane foodist's appreciation of delectable fungi is coloured by an ideal of civilized living that equates knowledge of food with a highly evolved sense of culture, the forager represents a different, although not unrelated ideal: the freedom of one who does not depend upon society for essentials and is capable of «roughing it.»

Mixed-media artist Annie Dunning has long explored the paradoxical terrain between culture and the natural world. Through a unique sense of humour and craft, her work emphasises overlooked creatures and aspects of our daily environment, infusing them with a sense of wonder and intrigue. Employing a variety of media, including drawing, performance, and video, some of her best-known projects focus on urban wildlife, and most notably pigeons: creatures whose existence depends upon human society while also being largely anathema to it. In *The Pigeon Homing Project*, for example, Dunning teased out the complex rapport between city dwellers and these ubiquitous birds, inviting members of the public to have a pigeon painted on the walls of their home. Playing upon the double standard that allows pests like mice, flies, spiders and snakes to appear in the patterns of our domestic décor but not in

our homes, the project quietly highlighted our increasingly conflicted relationship with the natural world. In a more recent project, titled *Air Time*, Dunning worked directly with a flock of three hundred domesticated pigeons, fashioning instruments based upon Chinese pigeon flutes, which were attached to the birds and «played» by air passing through them as they flew.

*Foolproof Four: Superheroes of the Forest Floor* is Dunning's most recent undertaking, and it explores a similar set of conflicts. Inspired by a group of four mushrooms dubbed «the Foolproof Four» by Professor Clyde Christensen in 1939 (Morel, Shaggy Mane, Puffball and Sulfur Shelf), this multi-part installation questions heroic ideals based upon oppositions such as wild and domestic, active and passive, natural and supernatural. As the most common and easily identified edible mushrooms in Canadian forests, «the Foolproof Four» are popular quarry among amateur mycologists and foragers. With her usual quirky wit, Dunning has re-envisioned them as a confederacy of superheroes, whose superpowers include «spore liberation,» «cytoplasmic fusion,» and the decadent sounding «autodeliquescence» (self-digestion). As she observes in her artist statement, mushrooms are usually associated with dark, mysterious, and supernatural themes and forces, just like bats, spiders, cats and other creatures linked to famous superheroes.<sup>1</sup> And yet fungi are more likely to be associated with villains and witches than supermen.

Each of «the foolproof four» appears in the installation as a cute, yet vaguely grotesque porcelain sculpture surrounded by spore-like, handmade buttons promoting its various «superpowers.» The latter are free for the taking, and will presumably go out into the world much as spores would. On the walls around the sculptures hang posters containing a variety of blank speech bubbles,

graphic templates that were downloaded as freeware, and which recall the exclamatory statements of comic books. Recalling the dispersal pattern of spores and other organic forms of replication, these bubbles are somewhere between recognisable motif and abstract function. A series of hand-made braided rugs offers a final, telling counterpoint to the usual trappings of superhero narratives, which typically celebrate defiant individualism, extroversion, and novelty, instead of domestic labour, reproduction, repetition, and survival through dormancy.

In his oft-quoted essay «Civilization and its Discontents,» Sigmund Freud wrote that «individual liberty is not an asset of society,» which is built upon renunciation and the suppression of instinctual drives.<sup>2</sup> Despite its flaws, the central thesis of this essay continues to ring true: the advantages of social, cultural, and technological progress come at the price of personal freedom. One need only watch someone driving while talking on their cell phone to realise, as Freud did, that humanity is a «God with artificial limbs,»<sup>3</sup> both an impressive spectacle and the author of its own misfortunes. It is no accident that superhero narratives frequently associate attempts to unravel, neutralize, or artificially reproduce their heroes' powers with villainous schemes and diabolical machines. In actuality, life as we know it is shaped by similar machines—discoveries and devices that unravel seemingly supernatural powers, such as the ability to speak across long distances or travel at high speeds, and make them widely accessible. Superhero narratives and similar diversions cater to diminished feelings of independence in the face of greater and greater technological mastery by celebrating «superhumans» who defend civilization without being bound by its laws. Instead, extremely antisocial and uncivilized behaviour, such as murder, the destruction of public property, environmental pollution,

and revenge, are presented as being in the interests of a «greater good.»

Despite the obvious benefits of communal living, personal freedom remains an intoxicating ideal in contemporary Western society. From the libertarians of the American Tea Party to environmentalists who advocate living «off the grid,» hostility towards civilization expresses itself in a variety of conscious and unconscious ways. Those living in large urban centres like New York adopt «Palaeolithic diets,» aspiring to eat like our prehistoric ancestors and promulgating an unpleasantly testosterone-laced rhetoric concerning food and lifestyle choices. In Canada, there is a national cult of woodsmen and other European explorers, which venerates courageous self-sufficiency in the face of harsh climates and quietly conflates First Nations people with plants and animals. Indeed, as the Discovery Channel confirms on a daily basis, there are endless fantasies of rugged individualism, and the vast majority of them seem to cater to our most anti-social and aggressive tendencies.

On the heels of a summer dominated by superhero movies, such as *Captain America*, *The Green Lantern*, and *X-Men: First Class*, *The Foolproof Four: Superheroes of the Forest Floor* offers a humorous parody of the genre, gently encouraging us to examine fantasies of heroic independence in relation to natural and social concepts of multiplicity and replication. By celebrating «spore liberation» and «the imperative function of decay,»<sup>4</sup> Dunning shifts the emphasis from Hollywood's pyrotechnic illusion of heroic freedom to a variety of quiet, unsung wonders and achievements, such as the ability of spores to survive for long periods of time in harsh conditions and the transmission of cultural heritage over centuries of conflict and struggle. Through its celebration of DIY aesthetics and handicraft, the installation aligns foraging for mushrooms with socio-cultural activities often carried out with family and friends, instead of an epic vision of individual survival. The ability to «rough