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Mary Mattingly is an artist based in New York. Her work has been awarded grants from the James L. Knight Foundation, the Harpo Foundation, NYFA, the Jerome Foundation, and the Art Matters Foundation. In 2012 she launched the Flock House Project: three spherical living-systems that were choreographed through New York City's five boroughs. Mattingly also founded the Waterpod Project, a barge-based public space containing an autonomous habitat that migrated through New York's waterways.
BROLAB: The rumor is that you started out as a Fashion Designer. Where does that play in your art practice now?

MARY MATTINGLY: Well, I studied photography and fashion design. I wanted to make a uniform that was adaptable. I wanted to challenge the idea of the ‘universal’ and also the new, better product and make one outfit for men and women, for any condition. I was interested in finding a material that could be repurposed from something that was commonly considered trash but could actually be made into a wearable material that met those standards and different weather conditions. It was an utopian project and brought me to the idea of the Wearable Home, which is an extension of that but also a lot different because it’s really not practical at all and had all of these extensions and extra limbs and protection from invisible things. So I realized I needed to marry my impulses to be practical and utopian and everything else.

BL: You mention Wearable Home. Is this something you have created and actually lived in? If so, why and equally important, where?

MM: Yeah, I wanted to test them as full experiments, and see if it would be possible for these Wearable Homes to be provisional shelters. Could they work to carry things in, keep me warm, they could clean and store water, that kind of thing. I began trying them out in the desert in Oregon, around a town called Fossil. I was (and am) concerned about being dependent on large systems of infrastructure or supply chains to acquire the things we need for daily life such as food and water. It’s a dangerous space and it really hit home for me when Bechtel and the World Bank privatized water in 2000 in Bolivia, and people couldn’t afford the new price of water. BroLab makes things that function in public, a lot of times to provide meeting places. What are some of your ideas behind that? Are you responding to a lack of spaces like that?

BL: We are interested in the impact an object can have on the situation of a location. This has led us to making objects that are interactive and can serve a function. For instance, in Bench Press we created temporary seating along bus routes where there was a need. Typically these temporary structures are directed towards public spaces where people congregate. Whether it is a traffic jam, library or bus stop, the nature of these spaces leads to a natural
BL: We see our sculptures generating a deeper interest in the use of public space in the urban commons. Our interventions tend to be specific to the location and the meaning has a direct tie to the site. Humps & Bumps, a sculptural commission through the NYC Department of Transportation, was a particular success as we took the idea of a speed bump, something the NYC DOT uses, and applied the metaphor of slowing down and being aware of one’s surroundings to an object that people were allowed to sit, pause and lay on. The vehicle-sized nature of the piece drew people to it and allowed them to feel a sense of familiarity, so much so that they were quickly free to interact with it. That is one of our main goals, for the public to use our objects, furnishings and nomadic sculptures in ways where they reconsider the space in relationship to the object.

We have noticed lately that some of the newer images of your sculptures appear more performative. You have used the process of digital montage throughout your practice, sometimes as sketches and at other times as finished works. Do you see these latest works along similar lines or are they becoming more like stories?

MM: The *Flock Houses* were small nest-like sculptures that could function as a temporary home. They do change every time they are reconstructed, through the way each resident uses them, through a changing crew of people setting them up, through city-based constraints in a particular area, and through how neighbors participated in them. They have become more simplified over their multiple moves, but the longer they are inhabited by the same people, the more they take on the lives of those people. People are allowed to do whatever they want. There aren’t any signs or instructions. People usually have their own limits that dictate their behavior, and that’s fascinating to challenge. What do you see your sculptures instigating?