

Positioning the Collection: Perspectives on Larry Spring's Vernacular Museum

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*Larry Spring with the Spring Demonstrator. n.d. Estate of Larry Spring.*

## Abstract

This paper, in partial fulfillment of my Master's in Environmental Studies, represents an effort to build a curatorial framework to position the cultural production (the collection) of outsider and amateur collector Larry Spring. This work and project is focused on the collection of artifacts, objects and demonstration models housed in The *Larry Spring Museum of Common Sense Physics*, which is located in the town of Fort Bragg on the coast of northern California's Mendocino County. The approaches and methods used here to explore how the Larry Spring collection are aligned with theories of contemporary outsider art, research-creation, and what Donna Haraway has described as 'situated knowledge production', a form of objectivity that accounts for both the agency of the knowledge producer and that of the object of study. In this academic study, my position was simultaneously that of curator of Spring's collection and member of Fort Bragg's multiple networks. My approaches to using research-creation were developed during three month-long site visits and resulted in projects that coalesced custodial-, curatorial-, and research-based activities into print, video, curated performance and a website revisioning of the Larry Spring Museum.

## Acknowledgments

I recognize that the Larry Spring Museum of Common Sense Physics would not have come to be if not for those who came before him – the colonized Pomo peoples, the lumber barons and the many immigrants who supported the timber industry and who built Fort Bragg, which includes the building that now houses Spring's collection.

I am deeply indebted to Heather Brown, Spring's heir and custodian of his collection, for allowing me to probe, re-arrange, critique and bond with Spring's cultural production. I've lived in the museum, her home and her trailer while conducting my research. She has generously shared her friends, her wisdom, and stories about Larry Spring. All of these experiences contributed to my perceptions of Fort Bragg, its citizens and the collection.

Thank you to York University, the Faculty of Environmental Studies and to my advisor, Professor Honor Ford Smith who patiently assisted me in finding a clear academic approach to Larry Spring's collection. I am also grateful to York University's School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design for lending me Professor Jennifer Fisher as my project's supervisor. I am indebted to Prof. Fisher for her intellectual contributions and keen interest in alternative ways of knowing. Prof. Fisher's careful attention to the work of writing and editing were valuable lessons in nuance. In addition, I will always be grateful for her enthusiastic support of my work, her friendship, and her ability to easily cajole me back to sanity.

Without the support of Mary Pattenden, John Graham, Chris Rahim and my father, Gerald McKeating, I would not have completed this Master's. I am so grateful for their pep talks, unconditional love, financial support and editing skills. And finally, I thank my mother, Betty-Anne McKeating, whose complex legacy fuelled this odyssey.

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## FOREWARD

### Inheritance

In 2009, my long-time colleague Heather Brown notified me that her employer – outsider artist and amateur scientist Larry Spring – had died. Brown, who had worked with Spring for well over a decade, was named in his will as the heir to his storefront school, collection and intellectual property. Knowing my intense fondness for vernacular collections and self-taught art, Brown invited me to Fort Bragg, to help her sort through Spring’s legacy. After landing in San Francisco from my Toronto home, I undertook a spectacular trip northward and arrived in Fort Bragg’s roiling fog to initiate what was to become a long-term curatorial project.

My first impression of Larry Spring’s storefront was that the air tasted of dust – the kind that accumulates when buildings settle into entropy. The rooms were still, hot and silent. Yellowing ephemera, once securely in place, curled away from the walls leaving brittle paper fragments pinned under thumbtacks. Jury-rigged tables were covered with vaguely scientific assemblages constructed from cat food tins, chicken wire and table tennis balls. Faded handwritten exhortations stated, ‘do not touch’ and ‘spin me gently’. Naïve paintings and dioramas hung beside photograms – permanent shadows – of things long since removed. A toy helicopter, powered by solar energy, whirred in the storefront’s window. Presence and absence existed simultaneously.

### Common Sense Physics

“Common sense physics,<sup>1</sup>” is the term Spring used to describe his amateur work,

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Spring rejected the veracity of theoretical or mathematical physics. For him, the only approach was a ‘common sense’ approach, which meant that he could physically demonstrate and observe phenomena in action.

<sup>2</sup> According to the seventh edition of Spring’s publication *Magnespheres and the Spring Atom*, a Magnesphere is a weightless,

investigations, and homespun notions of physical phenomena. He obsessively aspired to make theory material, through his production and collection of artifacts and objects inspired by what he understood to be his keen powers of observation (Fig.1). “THE ENERGY ITSELF IS MY TEACHER” was the common sense mantra that appeared in all 8 of his self-published books, and also appeared as the introduction to a series of teaching charts that he made and presented his storefront (Fig.2). Through his life, Spring maintained a stubborn resistance to mainstream physics and in many ways this resistance enlivened his output. His anti-professional stance was evident in the handmade aspects of his works and displays, which literally lacked polish and coherent explanation. Spring’s approach to making objects was about reconfiguring the existing and the recognizable: Found objects and repurposed artifacts were important materials and all in line with his common sense, *waste not want not* ethos. Fragments of things became things in their own right – a cat food can became a motor, a collection of rocks became a dinner party, beach and forest detritus became woodland creatures, carton lids became storage systems. Each object took on a different meaning and function according to his use, and as always, became part of his kinetic method of inquiry.

According to Spring, his most significant project was the *Magnesphere*<sup>2</sup>, a three dimensional model that he developed using table tennis balls and chicken wire for describing the shape of energy. He also built a ‘new, more flexible’ model of the atom called the *Spring Atom*, out of magnets that he contained in a Plexiglas and redwood frame. Spring self-identified as an

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<sup>2</sup> According to the seventh edition of Spring’s publication *Magnespheres and the Spring Atom*, a Magnesphere is a weightless, massless, sphere that travels at the speed of light. Spring claims that electromagnetic energy is spherical rather than the commonly understood waveform. The name Magnesphere describes its magnetic structure and spherical shape.



‘Explorer of Radiant Energy’<sup>3</sup>. He connected with amateur scientific communities in teaching, self-guided research and publications,<sup>4</sup> particularly the Tesla Society<sup>5</sup>. Spring wrote and self-published over twenty books and articles designed and built demonstration models<sup>6</sup> and taught other amateur science enthusiasts. Spring enjoyed communicating his observations, craft explorations, and ‘discoveries’ and in 1985 established the *Larry Spring School of Common Sense Physics* in a rural storefront. Despite his efforts to gain acceptance in mainstream science, Spring never attracted peer recognition and acknowledgement that his approaches to understanding ‘radiant energy’ held insights for knowledge development. Yet, as I will argue, his approaches to understanding radiant energy hold insights for how knowledge is developed through collection and display.

### **Research Inquiry and connection to my Plan of Study**

My area of concentration examines curatorial practice and place-based vernacular production at the Larry Spring Museum of Common Sense Physics. The components are curatorial practice, arts-informed research and museum studies. This research examines how Larry Spring’s collection can be seen in curatorial terms. Questions concerning Spring’s work,

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<sup>3</sup> Spring’s description of himself appears in most of his publications as well as on the handmade wooden sign that is outside of his storefront.

<sup>4</sup> The *Journal of Borderland Research* published many of Spring’s articles and in their 1990 Sept-Oct issue, where they dedicated an entire issue to him. The Journal is the publishing arm of *Borderlands Sciences Research Foundation* which specializes in “Visible and Invisible Manifestations of Reality include: Archetypal Forms and Forces of Nature and the Use of the imagination and intuition to Perceive Them, Ether Physics and Ethereal Forces, Light and Color, Orgone Energy, Dowsing, Nikola Tesla and True Wireless, Octaves of the Elements, Electricity & the Evolving Soul, Intuition Science, Hollow Earth Mysteries, Anomalies and Fortean Phenomena, Hypnosis, Photography of the Invisible and Unidentified Flying Objects.” This description appears on the masthead of every issue. The foundation is located in Gerberville, Humboldt County, California, just 66 miles north of Fort Bragg.

<sup>5</sup> Spring was awarded a lifelong membership to the Tesla Society. He displayed the plaque that honoured him beside his desk. Spring’s VHS library contained many recordings of the Tesla Society’s proceedings.

<sup>6</sup> Fifteen of his models are currently intact. There are countless other unidentified pieces in the museum’s storage that appear to be unfinished works.

peer review and conclusions in science are not taken up here. Instead this paper posits his output within the framework of contemporary outsider art and is organized to discuss how the Larry Spring collection operates as a vernacular museum. This discussion proceeds in three sections. The first, *Methods* situates my work in arts-based research-creation, an approach that emphasizes the interdisciplinary work shown in [\*Energy is My Teacher\*](#), the title of my website production about the work of Larry Spring. The website is an intrinsic component of my work, as it gives visual context to Spring's production through stills, archival texts and video. The second section, *Larry Spring's Fort Bragg*, proceeds with data collected through archival research and told stories that probe how Spring's contextual influences informed his production. It outlines a pattern of settlement and rupture that is inherently linked to Fort Bragg. Fort Bragg's idiosyncratic culture is enacted through spaces both abstract – Northern California as a source of esoteric energies – and material – the land, the town, industry and Spring's storefront. The third section, *Locating the Collection*, situates Larry Spring's collection in contemporary outsider art theory. These approaches not only consider Spring's objects, but also his methods and production as elements of 'outsider' making and curatorship that emerged from the collection's associated context.

### **Terminology**

'Outsider' makers are largely self-taught and generally do not self-identify as artists. Production in this field is almost always outside of the mainstream in principally marginal circumstances (Fig.3). British art historian Roger Cardinal coined the term 'outsider art' in his 1972 book of the same name. 'Outsider art' is the modern English language equivalent of French artist Jean

Dubuffet's *Art Brut* (Raw Art).<sup>7</sup> Both art brut/outsider art are western 'insider' art world categories that situate creative works produced by the designated 'other' in their own distinctive grouping. While 'outsider art' is considered to be the more inclusive of the terms, both are located within the now widely contested anti-cultural stance that places the artist-subject in isolation, free from the influences of the dominant culture, or as Roger Cardinal notes, "enclosed in a radiant space of his own creativity" (1972:28). The 'outsider' artist is a conflation of the romantic myth of 'artist as genius' with social and economic judgments. Critic Lyle Rexer (among many others) considers the term loaded, as it is "one that measures aesthetic judgments with social, economic, psychological, and even political designations," (2005:33). Outsider Art's complicated status is a consequence of the artists' often-unusual systems of communication and the works' disordered material properties, as both challenge professionalized ways of knowing and making. As a result, there is a lack of shared creative forms, impulses, stylistic designations or movements. Moreover, much of what is called 'outsider art' was created without a prescribed destination, which further complicates its current location within the Western art 'world'.

Within the discourse of contemporary outsider art, these essentialist markers are vigorously debated. In response, curators, collectors, artists and academics have been prompted to find ways to disseminate outsider art within a contemporary context, to problematize outsider art as a limiting interpretive frame<sup>8</sup>, and to examine the impact of contemporary contexts on the artists and their works. Theorists call for the term to be revised, while conceding that a language

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<sup>7</sup> Artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) advanced a personalized vision of the 'primitive' through the criteria he developed for works he labeled 'Art Brut' (raw or rough art) that he developed after a tour of Swiss psychiatric institutions. In his imagined ideal, these institutionalized patients were anti-cultural and expressed an authentic creative genius that transgressed and resisted official art production theory or analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Outsider art is a term that lacks neutrality. A recurring motif is that the artists' biography (which is most often marginal) provides a concordance to the meaning of the artists' works as a condition of viewer response, and market value.

that recognizes context without investments of privilege and exclusion has yet to be developed<sup>9</sup>. The lack of consensus regarding terminology within the field is an indication of the diversity of artistic creation, but also signals a positive departure from the narrative of the margin/center.

In the United States, the term self-taught or vernacular art is also used to avoid the stigma of the term ‘outsider art’ which conveys social, racial and economic judgments. For the purposes of this research I will refer to Larry Spring’s cultural production as both ‘outsider’ when referring to larger art world categories, and vernacular. The vernacular refers to self-taught work rooted in the local/regional identity, and the anti-hero – linked details that are central to Spring’s production. Vernacular expression suggests what Kobena Mercer calls a division between ‘the people’ and the rules and norms of ‘officialdom’ (institutions, governing bodies) – an antagonistic quality that drove Spring’s theorizations, (2007:9).

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<sup>9</sup> At the proceedings of the *Contemporary Outsider Art: The Global Context*, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia, Oct. 2014, curator Lynne Cooke critiqued ‘outsider art’s’ otherness as a safeguard that strengthens critics, gallerists and collectors through their association with outsider art. Otherness is the paradox of the outsider art world; while most insiders support the mainstreaming of outsider art, the work’s assimilation could destabilize insiders’ specialized status.

## SECTION 1

### Methods

The approaches and methods used to explore how the Larry Spring collection are aligned with theories of contemporary outsider art uses research-creation as a form of what Donna Haraway describes as ‘situated knowledge production’. Situated knowledge, a form of objectivity that accounts for both the agency of the knowledge producer and that of the object of study, accounts for my positions within this study – as curator of Spring’s collection, producer of academic research and as a member of Fort Bragg’s multiple networks. Through these networks I bring a constellation of interpretations to the project, but I also consciously maintain an empathic distance or what Haraway positions as generative doubt (1988)<sup>10</sup>. This locates the self somewhere in between the epistemologies of knowledge as socially constructed, and empirical objectivity. Research-creation allows me to participate in each modality through ‘knowing’ – which Elliot Eisner describes as the active processes of inquiry that yield tentative conclusions rather than certainties, (2008).

My approaches to using research-creation were adopted early during the project’s discovery period. Three month-long site visits during the course of my Master’s resulted in projects that coalesced custodial-, curatorial-, and research-based activities into print, video, curated performance social media components and a website. Given the emphasis on the use of artistic process as a method of examination, research-creation offered a useful path to the investigation of the nature of Spring’s collection and the conditions of its production. The strategy was also necessary given the need to apply resources to preserve the collection: the

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<sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway in her article *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* questions the omniscient male scientific gaze as objective. Through the feminist lens, the gaze is embodied and knowledge is situated and thus accounts for the agency of the producer and the object of study without falling into relativism. For Haraway, situated knowledge is embodied objectivity.

work of cataloguing, archiving, documenting, marketing and communications and organizational development. Figure 4 gives a summary chart of FES course work and deliverables that are related to this project and make use of research-creation.

While on-site at the museum in Fort Bragg, I undertook interviews to probe how selected informants interacted with Larry Spring's non-conforming scientific beliefs as articulated through his collection of cultural artifacts and found objects. While this is not an exhaustive survey of opinions and perspectives, it aspires to advance ways of understanding Spring's production and more generally, opens up the opportunity to probe art world uncertainties about how biography and place impacts the way that vernacular production is received at a community level.

Data was collected through largely local informants; each of whom had some level of interest or connection to Larry Spring's collection as former students, artists, curators, historians, local cultural and civic figures and chance museum visitors. When possible, the interviews were conducted on-site as the museum and its associated material culture provided context for new participants and memory prompts for those who shared a history with Larry Spring. The interaction was both formal in the sense that the interviews had a key set of themes to address – the social and cultural conditions from which the museum emerged, how informants constructed their interactions with the collection, and the work of defining the collection itself – but also flexible enough for the informants to go into depth about the significant components of their experience. This combined structure generated anecdotal understandings of how Spring's production was received, and provided insights into Spring's practice across the span of his career that would not have been otherwise available.

Informants were identified through the museum's Facebook page, the local list-serve, through word of mouth and chance museum visits. Among the 21 informants interviewed, 17 were men and four were women; 11 identified as artists, 10 as professionals and three as scientists. Seven expressed "alternative" beliefs<sup>11</sup>. Eleven of the informants had had relationships with Spring for over 10 years, three of whom were life-long. Nine had attended Spring's classes. Five informants had never met Larry Spring and were responding to the collection's current configuration. From this group, five informants operated within the mainstream 'art world' and referred to Spring's work as 'outsider art'. Each informant was asked to briefly share their relationship to Spring and Fort Bragg, their educational and professional biography and to disclose any hobbies or beliefs that they believed to reside outside of the mainstream. Most informants viewed their interactions with Spring and his production as an important and interesting aside to their experience of Fort Bragg. The informants' reconstruction of a particular cultural moment in their lives aided in my online recreation of the relationships between Spring's collection, place and the development of his non-conforming ways of knowing.

The secondary data sources that were used during the project were designed to produce insights into Spring's vernacular process, and to untangle the complexities of Fort Bragg's cultural economy during his productive years. Data was generated through Spring's substantial collection of documents, photographs and VHS tapes and through the archival holdings of the Fort Bragg-Mendocino Coast Historical Society (FB-MCHS).

Located in the former change room of an abandoned gym, the FB-MCHS was overseen by historian Sylvia Bartley, a Fort Bragg native whose family had deep roots in the area. Bartley

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<sup>11</sup> Some of these beliefs include 9/11 conspiracy theories, crystal healing, Mendocino as an energy vortex, alternative gravity theory, the presence of chemtrails, and idiopathic environmental intolerance to electromagnetic fields among others.

was born and raised in the Finnish utopian *Sointulan* (Harmony) collective<sup>12</sup>. The collective's founder, Oscar Erickson, was both a friend of Larry Spring's and Bartley's father. "They were both eccentrics", she recalled, "so it made sense that they were attracted to each other's ideas," (2015). As a historian with responsibility in organizing evidence of Fort Bragg's official culture, and as a daughter of Fort Bragg with family roots in the counterculture, Bartley had a unique perspective on Spring's cultural production and was able to frame his interests as an alternative way of knowing.

In contrast to the FB-MCHS, Larry Spring's archive could be understood as an accumulation rather than a systemized arrangement of documents. It was as if Spring was aiming to create a navigable index of his production, but was immune to common cataloguing codes. Papers were stacked in cardboard box lids with an anarchical labeling system. One label read 'education requirements, septic requirements, new thoughts and ideas and dog island' as its contents. Innumerable mock-ups of Spring's self-published booklets were fashioned with tape, staples and hand lettered notes. In his book, *Larry Spring's Spherical Electromagnetic Quantum*, Spring announced that "I, LARRY SPRING have written a total of 900 pages and will simply state the end results, and let you look around and recognize proof of their validity" (1985 n.p.). Marginalia disputing standardized physics were liberally dispersed throughout Spring's library of high school physics books and alternative guides to speculative technology. A trove of correspondence revealed Spring's desire to advance his theories into the mainstream. Despite the countless rejections stemming from his efforts to offer his research to universities and libraries across North America, he kept the letters on file replete with his rebuttals and notations (Figs. 5,6).

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<sup>12</sup> The Finnish were initially drawn to Fort Bragg through the timber industry. Many chose to live collectively and established cooperative stores in order to share resources. Mendocino's Finnish Cooperative store was the first in Northern California.



In his early days, Spring was a passionate photographer who experimented with many popular films and formats. His collection contained hundreds of examples of many of the 20th century trends found in vernacular American snapshots including handwritten and visual jokes, (Figs. 7,8) athletics, family and rural life, shadows and motion. During his service in WWII, Spring filled multiple albums with finely composed photos of everyday life in Tripoli, Cairo and Casablanca. In the 1970's and 80's Spring used slide film exclusively for his real estate business and to record his travels through the American southwest rock-hounding. In his later years, Spring stopped making pictures and instead became the camera's subject. Consumer grade video technology was his preferred medium to record his physics demonstrations. A brief survey of over 100 VHS tape labels revealed his careful recounting of date, place and content. Regardless of his attention to label detail, the content and style of the tape recordings were crude – stilted camera work, muffled sound and Spring's invariable, pedantic delivery. Most of these recordings took place at events geared toward amateur scientists – for example, the International Tesla Society (now defunct) and Borderlands Science conventions. Spring also demonstrated his theorizations at the Fort Bragg Senior's Center, where local cable television station, MCN Station 3, recorded and aired his performance.

Notwithstanding the availability of all of this material, little understanding of what constituted Spring's concept of 'common sense physics' could be gleaned. However, these materials underscored that Spring's practice was distinctly about observation – whether through the camera's lens in his early years or through the 'observation by making' that dominated his retirement. The materials also acted as a kind of photographic and written assurance of Spring's identity as an 'experimenter'.

My use of stills, video and sound capture were also critical components of the research-creation. This image production interlinked two sets of concerns – one that began as a functional record of objects and place, and the other about how objects and place are received. In both areas of visual documentation, an unconstructed neutral aesthetic was employed. As discussed by theorist Charlotte Cotton, photographic neutrality privileges the object/subject over the photographer's gaze (2004). This approach was intentional – as it withholds aesthetic distractions while paying careful attention to the shape and form of the Fort Bragg's generic qualities and the collection's enigmatic purpose. The photographs captured meaningful placement of domestic objects – a graduation announcement in a street level window, a tree stump with eyes is wearing a hat. Totems of domesticity are also photographed within the museum – a rock 'dinner party', repaired clothing, repurposed toys and games. Everyday acts and matter were given significance by the frame and by default asking, what is this collection and how did it come to exist?

My first step toward creating research was to produce content for the website by photographing Fort Bragg and elements of Spring's collection. This was a reflective process as the act of making photographs instigated an interrogation into how I represented place and the collection, because the camera's lens literally adapted my gaze. Individually, each photograph functioned as a forensic examination of place and materials: Fort Bragg's and the museum's economic decline and the collections' entropic condition became intensified when seen through the camera's frame. When the stills were connected to other digital media, the capacity for meaning was amplified, (Ritchin 2009, Weber 2008). Didactic text that accompanied each picture either resolved or sustained visual ambiguity. My interviews with informants, whose perspectives I incorporated, introduced ways of understanding the collection that I would not

have considered, such as informants Gary Mason and Keith Wyner, both of whom called the museum “an important teaching facility,” (2015). When I began to assemble the content, themes emerged that informed content and tone. For example, I had anticipated a split between those who believed in Spring’s ‘science’, and those who did not. Instead, the informants share a kind of bemused respect for Spring’s spirit of amateur inquiry. So what I had begun as an act of practical considerations – building a library of content – developed into a curatorial homage to Spring through his collections’ digital reconceptualization.

### **Curating Larry Spring’s Collection**

Larry Spring’s environment remained intact until just after his death in 2009. When I refer to his environment, I am referring to in curatorial terms – as an entire artwork that was his storefront, but also to the collection contained inside. As defined by the Kohler Arts Center, an artist-environment is a transformation of aspects of personal surroundings into multifaceted works of art, that “in vernacular ways, embody and express the locale – time, era, place – in which the artist lived and worked.”<sup>13</sup> Over the course of 50 plus years, Spring gradually transformed his former home and place of business into a vernacular cabinet of wonders that expressed an approach to knowledge production unique to his time, place and community.

My curatorial role at the museum began as a series of custodial duties – salvaging, sorting and categorizing objects – as a means to directly encounter the collection. The storefront was alive with decay – rot, plants, insects and animals had found a hospitable environment in which to thrive. Layers of things revealed more layers and each stratum contained surprising finds. An envelope of old letters contained a hand made paper doll and a tin type, a box of outdated

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.jmkac.org/explore-discover/collections/artist-environments> accessed May 28 2016.

television parts hid delicate shell carvings. Human hair, dentures and 30 pairs of moldering eyeglasses were the kind of grotesque remains that Janet Hoskins called “the disparate, messy fragments of daily experience” (2007:401). Menacing acts had taken place in the silence – drying, warping, damp, and disintegration – these created ambiguous sense impressions to the problems of classification. There was however, wonder in each discovery and this informed the approach undertaken in the museum’s programming and display strategies.

The act of presenting Spring’s work, became one of inquiry. In a bid to recapture Spring’s unorthodox curatorial eye, mediums, materials and object types were combined to suggest that the collection be received as a total artwork. This recalled Spring’s unselfconscious approach to display – where art, science and unexplained phenomena ‘in between’ coalesced in a web of visual relations. Much of what emerged was accidental, and the process became a reckoning with both confusion and discovery – what Carolyn Steedman calls “the poetics of process”, (2002:81). In this way, my work of curating the collection represented the logic of curiosity that combines skepticism, enthusiasm, and the practice of wonder. Artist Deth P. Sun, wryly confirmed the strategy’s efficacy. His understanding of the collection varied with each encounter:

“You have to visit the space several times. Each time someone else explains things to you differently. When I asked, what do these rods do, some guy in a funny hat came by and showed me. The next thing you know you’re that guy with the funny hat showing your friends these funny things the funny hat guy showed you. It’s entertaining in that way coming to the Larry Spring Museum,” (2015).

The accidental also figured in the museum’s curated performances. *Theatre de la Liberté* and artist Wu Li Leung were interesting collaborators because they generated improvised responses to the spaces in which they performed within the Spring museum. They also placed material interventions – which mixed elements from the performer’s personal collections with

objects from Spring's – throughout the space which made the experience immersive. These performers proposed that the collection be taken up as a process, rather than as an historically fixed presentation of Spring's life's work. In this presentation, the temporal kept Spring's narrative open. In his absence, the performers generated reciprocal relationships between the collection, themselves and the audience in a way that the museum's static displays could not.

### **Energyismyteacher.com**

The website project that I designed to accompany this paper functions as an ongoing study into Larry Spring's cultural production. Intended for a general audience, the website presents an accessible visual examination of how time, place and Fort Bragg's cultural economy may have influenced Spring's worldview. 'Energy is my teacher' takes its name from Larry Spring's assertion that "The Energy Itself is My Teacher," an aphorism that loops back into Spring's belief in himself as an exceptional observer. Observation was the key to Spring's process and correspondingly, his artifacts and objects are more easily seen than described. However, it must be noted that [energyismyteacher.com](http://energyismyteacher.com) operates to some degree to abstract his production. That is, it does not attempt to tell Spring's entire story, but instead, offers brief encounters through the mediated experiences of informants, the researcher and the web.

The first step in the website's creation was to edit thousands of assets in order to narrow down themes and to give shape to the storyline. Each decision to include, exclude and produce text, would impact how Spring, now removed from the context of his production, is perceived by an audience outside of Fort Bragg. The process of building the site yielded some tentative assumptions about positioning Larry Spring. Data sources aligned his work with the vernacular – meaning self-taught and distinctly local – but questions about *what* he produced, diverged. The

challenge lay in giving a Spring voice without creating a feedback loop based on elaboration or minimizing his process through undue skepticism.

The initial solution was to give a sense of narrative continuity through pre-loaded photo galleries, where each gallery would function as a hybrid space – part exposition, and part narrative. However, users have agency to determine how much information they seek, and may navigate from encounter to encounter nonlinearly. As postmodernists and other interlocutors have recognized, there is no single truth, and thus hypertext (indicated by underlined text) provides access for additional information and/or varying points of view through links to outside content. Simultaneously, technological limitations (imposed by the template's constraints) threatened to flatten the viewing experience. The museum's shift from spatial and material concerns to digital content erased the quality of hand labour that made the storefront so affective. The web however, can still quote affect, because the objects are digital reproductions and text-based analysis can capture, to some extent, the spectrum and textures of sense perceptions. Susan Stewart's writings resonated when she spoke of the distance that mediated content and form puts between the maker and the user – it is non conversational, miniaturized in effect, due to an imposed narrative (1992). In response, these tensions were addressed through an aesthetic approach informed by the hand made rather than the technological, and through the use of text and audio versions of the informant's responses. Following Sandra Weber's insights, informants' voices provide a reflexive "other eye" which made the process of representation less subjective and critically more transparent (2008:15). The videos also reinsert Spring's distinctive aesthetic through experimental choices – rudimentary collage effects, video glitches<sup>14</sup> as a device to move between cuts, the use of Spring's voice and hands, and variations in temporal rhythms. These

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<sup>14</sup> A video glitch is a corrupt piece of video usually on a degraded VHS tape. The glitch used between each cut in the three videos is from one of Spring's VHS tapes.

attempts address the transition of affect from the museum context (space) to the web (cyber space). As a result, Spring's production has been doubly constrained: first by site-specific curatorial intervention and again through the collection's online mediation.

While the web cannot replicate the material, spatial and temporal experience of Spring's museum-environment, it does provide an assemblage of his curatorial production that would otherwise be inaccessible. My intention was to establish a framework to experiment with 'virtual storage' for Larry Spring's collection, in preparation for the eventual closure of the site itself.

## SECTION 2

While the significance of rural Northern California's peculiarities is essential to understanding Larry Spring, it would be easy to overstate its importance. However, in relation to Spring's personal biography and cultural production, the logic of time, place and changing social processes are equally relevant. As Arthur Frank asserted "we act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak for that time, and other people's dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories," (2004:191). Many of my informants (including the town historian) had deep roots in Northern California's counter-culture, and thus I have chosen to represent how Fort Bragg was experienced during Spring's productive years through their personal recollections.

### **A Brief History of Fort Bragg: Setting Context**

Northern California has long been held in the American imagination as a place of limitless possibility – its hardscrabble history dramatized as what informant Bob Kirtland called "the pioneering American spirit,"(2015)<sup>15</sup>. This myth has origins in the Spanish colonial era when land originally settled by Indigenous peoples, the Coast Yuki and later the Pomoans, were exploited by successive waves of outsiders for economic opportunity<sup>16</sup>. Historian Kevin Starr recounted that Spanish explorers sailing west from Mexico mistakenly took California's stunning peninsula for the fabled gem-dotted paradise described by 14<sup>th</sup> century Spanish writer Garcilaso de la Vega. Despite the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century discovery of the explorers' geographical mistake, the narrative of opportunity endured. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century whalers plied the rough

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<sup>15</sup> Bob Kirtland was a long time friend of Larry Spring's and resident of Fort Bragg. He was interviewed in the Museum in September 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Bartley, Sylvia E. *Images of America: Fort Bragg*. Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina. 2014.



waters hunting whales for their oil. From the mid-1700s to 1800s Russians colonized the North Coast to develop a maritime fur trade. The Spanish, succeeded by the Mexicans dotted the area with Christian missions to fortify their claims to the territory. In 1826 trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company moved over northern California's rough terrain in search of fur, leading to intense clashes between Native Americans and the expeditions (2015:68-70).

Town historian Sylvia Bartley's research revealed that after the 'fur-rush' throngs of gold-rush miners squatted on Native lands to claim homesteads. Following the mass slaughter of the indigenous North Coast Pomoans and their indentured servitude to the new settlers, California was admitted to the Union in 1850 as the thirty-first state. Fort Bragg, named after Confederate general Braxton Bragg, was built in 1857 to police further rebellions by Native Americans whose remaining numbers had been forced onto a 25,000-acre reservation. This enterprise was short-lived and by 1867, both the garrison and the reservation became public lands. Lumber baron C.R. Johnson known as the 'father' of Fort Bragg established Union Lumber on the abandoned garrison's site. A century of single industry colonialism followed – reservation allotments were sold to entrepreneurs who built logging railroads and sawmills. Primordial Redwoods had become the 'gold' of the previous decades (2014:8:21:29:32). Northern California was caught in the paradox of reverent awe and exploitative use.

### **Larry Spring's Fort Bragg**

Larry Spring came of age when myth of gigantism – taken from the Pacific northern redwood stands – became tied to northern California's identity. This played out through the activities of the timber industry, which monopolized the town's socio-cultural economy. In 1885, the Union Lumber Company founder and Fort Bragg's first mayor C.R. Johnson became the town "father" largely through the soft power of cultural activities designed to support Union

Lumber's interests. The Paul Bunyan Days festival, which starred the 6'8" Charlie Buck, single log houses and other gigantic timber-themed amusements became (and continue to be) an intrinsic part of the leisure economy. Many of these activities were nostalgic in tone, and aimed to imitate a kind of 'authenticity' that can only be present in what Susan Stewart calls 'reconstruction as day-to-day life' (1992:23). In reality, the timber industry's working conditions were miserable and dangerous.<sup>17</sup> The enormous 1753-year-old redwood round that towers over the town's center represents the extent to which Union Lumber would remove unpleasant context – its tree ring timeline notes prominent moments in European history – 'Leif Ericson Lands on American Coast' and 'Signing of the Magna Carta' – yet omits any trace of indigenous peoples, exploitation of natural resources or the lives of those who were engaged in the lumber industry. The domination of a single industry had a lasting impact on the inauthentic nostalgia promoted by the town's socio-cultural economy, which left little to valorize outside of a fictionalized era that was long past.

Unlike many of his peers, Larry Spring did not work in the timber industry of this company town, although he was fundamentally impacted by the industry's soft power amusements. Spring grew up on a stump ranch – an inhospitable plot of land sold to his family by Union Lumber. Farming a stump ranch was a laborious existence, because in order to maintain an arable plot, families had to constantly remove the stumps and later growths that sprouted from the roots. Early pictures from Spring's archive show the family working together to manually remove stumps and debris. Other photographs show Spring's friends posing diminutively in jocular contrast to a giant redwood. Handwritten text on one photograph, which shows family beating a tree with a club reads, "Why Punish Them?" Later, redwood would

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<sup>17</sup> It would take six men three to five 12-hour days to fell a giant redwood with saws they called 'misery whips.'

figure in Spring's cultural production in his large collection of burls and the carved heads that he made from redwood roots. Spring also used redwood in the construction of his demonstration models and would often only identify this material as a component. Poet and long time friend Robert Squire described Spring's work with redwood as a quest to find what the trees held inside<sup>18</sup>.

The legacy of Union Lumber's power may have also influenced how Spring's production was received within his community. Spring was widely regarded as a 'teacher' and his storefront a 'teaching institution.'<sup>19</sup> This may be connected to Union Lumber's resistance to formal education. In 1908 the company manager took his opposition to the founding of Fort Bragg's first high school all the way to California's Supreme Court. The 2009 census determined that only 16% of the town's population had any post-secondary education, and as recently as 2014, Fort Bragg's College of the Redwoods had only one full-time employee – the janitor<sup>20</sup>. Spring likely filled an educational void: he was a distinctly regional figure who operated within an economy of generosity. People could drop into his storefront at any time and he would demonstrate his theories without charge. Many former students still view their experience with Spring as positive. Although none could plainly describe *what* they had learned, they clearly felt that *something* had been transmitted.

Spring was largely active during Union Lumber's slow demise. While the mill did not officially close until 2009<sup>21</sup> the timber industry's function as Fort Bragg's economic backbone

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<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Robert Squire in Sept 2014

<sup>19</sup> Many informants – whether they regarded Spring as a teacher or not – tended to abstain from judging Spring's work as right or wrong. Only one informant referred to Spring in derogatory terms.

<sup>20</sup> <https://city.fortbragg.com/280/Demographics> accessed May 30 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Coincidentally the same year as Spring's death

was well over by the early 1950s. At that time, Fort Bragg, had lost 90% of the redwoods to logging and the town was showing signs of disrepair. Regardless, cheap real estate, the town's rural setting and myth of northern California as a place of escape, attracted counter-culture migrants in the 50's and 60's.<sup>22</sup> Informally described as 'beatniks and bohemians' this wave of newcomers created what Iain Boal described as a North Coast archipelago of communal settlements, (2012:140). Town historian Sylvia Bartley recalled Fort Bragg's pull: "A lot of people during that time period found their way here. There were inventors here that came with really interesting ideas – different ideas. Fort Bragg gave them a place to explore"<sup>23</sup>. Bartley also recalled that Spring was one of the few Fort Bragg 'old-timers' who welcomed the new migrants, whom they recognized as a peer (2015). "He was a draw," activist Norman de Vall recalled Spring's devotees as, "people wanted to be around him...that were following the same path. Larry wasn't the only one looking for a new and better understanding of the old and unknown,"(2015). The combination of original, old and new settlers<sup>24</sup> made Fort Bragg's post-timber culture idiosyncratic and self-sufficient, a characteristic that current Mayor Dave Turner ascribes to the confluence of outliers, isolation, and the town's flagging economy (2015). Larry Spring's story is closely aligned to Fort Bragg's counter-culture, but in his case the culture he opposed was that of established art and science.

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<sup>22</sup> Sept 2015 interview with self-described "beatnik" Norman de Vall, who came to Fort Bragg during the Cuban missile crisis.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sylvia Bartley September 2015

<sup>24</sup> Original, old and new settlers are defined differently depending on the generation. It is generally agreed that original settlers are the indigenous peoples, although 'old timers' would suggest that the original settlers were the army/logging companies. 'Old timers' tend to separate what they deem as the primitive (indigenous peoples) from the 'modern' (industrial colonization). At one time, 'new settlers' were the labourers brought over from Europe to work on the camps. 'New settlers' included the Finnish, Portuguese and the Italians, all of whom have a visible presence in current day Fort Bragg. A generation later, the 'new settlers' were counter-culture migrants including those who have been variously described as bohemians, hippies and beatniks. It could also be argued that Mexican migrants are 'old timers' given that California was once Mexico. Mexicans have a presence in Fort Bragg, however, they are typically not integrated into the town's official history. The only time overt Mexican pride is displayed is during the Paul Bunyan Days parade, when Mexican men and women on horseback carry the Mexican flag.

## **Larry Spring's Vernacular Museum**

In this section I look at how Larry Spring's storefront evolved and how it both provided him a place of cultural production and also gave him inspirational materials. Following from Susan Stewart's writings on collections, this chapter connects Spring's cultural production with metaphors of the gigantic, which in his case is the natural world and institutional authority and the miniature, his use of interior space. Both of these narratives configure the collection in terms of desire for nostalgic reconstruction, (Stewart 1994). If place and Spring's storefront are viewed through the lens of Stewart's metaphors, they may be seen as follows: Northern California aligns with the gigantic, a place that embodies the American myth of nature's spaciousness and the individual's freedom to escape or exploit that space; Spring's storefront operates as a miniature, a domesticated, contained, realizable world. Nostalgia was likewise articulated through his hand-labour, which he valued over mass production.

The process of the storefront's 'miniaturization' began the early 1950's when Spring found a way to organize his life around his interests by owning and operating an independent business, Larry Spring's Zenith Television Store, the first and only television and antennae sales and service shop on the Mendocino coast. The store and its display window allowed him the material and conceptual space in which to pursue his physics investigations, craft explorations and to further an exchange between his professional and individualized learning.

Under the guise of Larry Spring's Zenith Television Store, Spring developed a reputation as a maverick experimenter<sup>25</sup>. Spring aspired to make visible the complex phenomena described

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<sup>25</sup> For Spring, experimenters 'did the work' while theorists merely dreamed.

by mathematical theories<sup>26</sup>. He resisted what that philosopher of science James Griesemer described as “purely linguistic accounts of the theories and explanations that codify knowledge,” (2004:433) and instead designed his own form of knowledge production in order to invent something new. Spring idealized what curator Bruce Ferguson has described as “knowledge through vision,”(1996:126) and to that end, he conducted a personalized empirical inquiry through craft, by constructing hand-hewn models from antennae, television parts and other found materials to demonstrate his original scientific principles (Fig. 9)<sup>27</sup>. In tandem with his work as a self-defined experimenter, Larry Spring was a prolific artisan. Works included his ‘Little Woods Creatures’ fashioned from beach and forest detritus, dioramas and wood-carving and turning, place-based objects brought about by the geographical embeddedness in the materials’ local origins (Fig. 10). Along with Zenith television banners and advertising, Spring’s craft objects became intrinsic components of the storefront’s décor – which blurred the boundaries between his personal and professional pursuits. In this way, he shaped his authority by presenting his work in a commercially sanctioned space. This space was also specialized because Spring – who created his own closed-circuit production cycle by controlling his creation, curation and distribution– was at its center.

Larry Spring’s curatorial eye defied the conventions of museum display. He unselfconsciously ignored aesthetic typologies, mainstream knowledge or disciplinary categorizations. Instead, Spring enacted what I would suggest is vernacular (outsider) curatorship through his use and display of art and non-art objects within the same space. Some objects were placed behind glass and others had labels reading ‘do not touch.’ Through these conditions,

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<sup>26</sup> The following quote is taken from a passage he called *THE PATHWAY TO SUCCESS IN UNDERSTANDING PHYSICS* “Let the Exotic Dreamers have their Fantasies, and their Theories. The way is really works is fantastic enough,”

<sup>27</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that Spring started to formally demonstrate his findings in the storefront as early as 1968.

Spring imposed what Svetlana Alpers has called ‘the museum effect’ as “certain parameters of visual interest,” by drawing attention to how the objects were seen. His idiosyncratic mix of art, science, and assemblage gave the objects a kind of ‘visual distinction’, through their relation to one another whether Spring intended the effect or not, (1991:26:29).

Simple and familiar on the surface, Spring’s television shop evolved into something layered and complex – a space where entrenched ideas about classification and hierarchy were unselfconsciously critiqued through Spring’s democratic arrangements. Eventually, the community referred to *Larry Spring’s Zenith Television Store* as simply Larry’s ‘place’ because its primary purpose became increasingly obscure.

Spring eventually made the dissemination of his ‘discoveries’ into his full-time vocation. The storefront was re-named, the *Larry Spring School of Common Sense Physics*, and Spring self-identified as the ‘explorer of radiant energy’<sup>28</sup>. Equal parts do-it-yourself wonder show and teaching facility, Spring would hover at the entrance beckoning passers-by to partake of his three-hour physics class. Through this change in positioning from shopkeeper to curator, Spring collapsed the distance between his auto-didacticism and institutional science by creating an institution – a vernacular miniaturization of a museum that resided outside of the centers of culture and knowledge. At the end of his life, Spring expressed the wish that the *Larry Spring School of Common Sense Physics* remain a school and eventually become a foundation to support the research and dissemination of his theorizations. Spring however attached the caveat that his work was not to be challenged or further developed. It was to remain ‘as is’, so that his voice remained authorial and its agency protected. While his investigations might have been an

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<sup>28</sup> The wooden sign that hung outside of the storefront read “Larry Spring, Experimental Analysis of Electromagnetic Energy.” However, it was commonly referred to as the school of common sense physics and Spring as the explorer of radiant energy.

affront to reason, the fact that he wanted his perspective preserved was a measure of Spring's 'outsider' obsession.



## SECTION THREE

### **‘Outsider Art’ and the Larry Spring Collection**

While the previous section identified ‘place’ as having a critical influence on Larry Spring’s cultural output, this section will consider contemporary theories of outsider art that will serve to illustrate Larry Spring’s vernacular production. Spring’s personal vision dominated his storefront. His expressed aim was to master all the world’s mechanisms, an unattainable positivist project through objects both fantastic and mundane. Spring’s objects were as important as his theorizing – at least through the perspective of the care and treatment he gave in producing displays and exhibiting his models, experiments and collections. Spring saw himself as an experimenter. He did not identify as an artist – although he employed deliberate visual language in both his crafting and display. Many of his demonstration models were sculptural, and he took care in balancing form and materials. His *Mendocino Levitating Brushless Solar Motors* were painstakingly painted, laboriously wrapped in layers of copper wire and signed, as were all of his works (Fig. 11). His redwood-framed chicken wire screens, which he made to measure ‘magnespheres’ cast beautiful shadows when hung (Fig. 12). If “Art,” as critic Gary Allen Fine insists are “sets of unique objects that by virtue of their uniqueness lack precise boundaries,” then how can unique objects like Spring’s be categorized? Determining the boundaries of Larry Spring’s production is no easy matter (2006:loc.355).

The isolated subject, or disconnected ‘outsider’ who Cardinal described as the creator of a-historic ‘autistic’<sup>29</sup> artworks is a constructed ideal – as culture, time and place permeate every aspect of living (1972:35, 1994:33). However, creators – like Larry Spring – who are *indifferent*

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<sup>29</sup> For Cardinal the term ‘autistic’ is not a clinical term, but rather an autistic ‘air’ that reveals itself in the intensity of the artwork

toward mainstream knowledge production and artistic practices may develop unique stylistic impulses that are ‘outside’ of art world trends. Outsider art’s historic preoccupation with creators working within the contexts of poverty, institutionalization and mental illness is challenged by makers like Spring, whose idiosyncratic personalized cosmology, unusual system of communication, prolific disordered writings, and models with unsophisticated handmade properties signaled ‘outsider art’, but whose financial prosperity and rich social networks suggested a kind of subcultural belonging. He was not isolated, and while it is difficult and perhaps dangerous to generalize, like many American ‘outsider’ stories, Spring was a rural autodidact who gave full reign to his practice within his community post-retirement.<sup>30</sup> During Spring’s active years in northern California, his relationship to technology was mainly explored without the pressure of social or academic consensus. Fort Bragg was outside of the centers of knowledge and artistic production, and thus, its culture was distinctively self-sufficient. Mayor Dave Turner attributed this to the area’s rough foggy weather, and the town’s search for a post-industrial identity: "people here have to think for themselves and that means that unique things happen" (2015). Fort Bragg’s cultural marginality – typically unseen, ignored and outside of the mainstream – resonates with the thinking of theorist Gregory Sholette. In his article, *Art, Politics and Dark Matter*, Sholette argued that ordinary citizens – Sunday painters, hobbyists, inventors, tinkerers – who thrive in parallel to mainstream art production – are not ‘outsiders’ at all, but producers who engage in counter-hegemonic visual culture. Sholette ascribed this shadow zone of creativity its own cultural category: ‘dark matter art’. Borrowing from the science of cosmology, dark matter is what cosmologists call the enormous quantity of non-reflective

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<sup>30</sup> Curator Lynne Cooke whose interests include the development of American ‘outsider art’ offers an analysis of how outsider art developed in America. She attributes its growth to late capitalism, which left the racialized, poor and aging sectors of the population at a disadvantage.

material created by the Big Bang. He maintained, “like its astronomical cousin, artistic dark matter makes up most of the cultural universe in contemporary, post-industrial society. Yet, while cosmic dark matter is actively sought by scientists, the size and composition of artistic dark matter is of little interest to the men, women and institutions of the art world” and thus is on the ‘outside’ (2011:4). However, as Sholette suggests, these “dark matter artists’ at times prop up the Western contemporary art world as fodder for inspiration. As a way of signaling ‘authenticity’ some contemporary artists appropriate outsider artists’ use of poor and/or available materials for a commentary on the ephemeral transitory nature of art, while ignoring that these materials are usually socially and economically determined<sup>31</sup>. This rich history of artistic and institutional engagement with outsider art’s aesthetics, culminated in the 55th Venice Biennale, where curator Massimiliano Gioni, positioned auto mechanic and vernacular architect Marino Auriti’s *Encyclopedic Palace*<sup>32</sup> as the Biennale’s central metaphor (Fig.13, 14). Like Auriti, Spring produced within Sholette’s shadow zone, but unlike Cardinal’s classic outsider, both Auriti and Spring resisted conformity without being anti-social or anti-cultural. Spring unselfconsciously resisted conformity through his lack of formal training and stubborn resistance to his critics. His stance, in turn, enlivened Spring’s creative output. In this way, Spring *selectively* self-segregated to engage in a counter-hegemonic visual practice.

While Spring tenaciously held that his work’s importance was as science, his objects, like Emery Blagdon’s (1907-1986) healing machines,<sup>33</sup> were received by many museum visitors as

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<sup>31</sup> Sholette calls this the “amateurization of contemporary art” (2011:6)

<sup>32</sup> Marino Auriti was a self-taught American artist who imagined building a museum to house all of the world’s knowledge. He was so sure of his obsession that he filed his design with the U.S. Patent Office in November 1955. His model – Ill Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace) has become a masterwork of American Outsider Art

<sup>33</sup> Blagdon constructed machines out of found materials in order to channel electromagnetic energy with the purpose of healing the earth. While he saw them as scientific machines, others receive the works as art. They now reside in the John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

art. Artist and curator Anne Beck described Spring as a vernacular da Vinci, who did not appear to be performing as a scientist, but rather as an inventive bricoleur who refigured scavenged items as sculpture (2015). Similarly, several of Spring's former students preferred to confer his works with a kind of ephemeral mystery rather than explain how Spring's objects functioned within his theorizations. Art historian John Beardsley describes outsider art as "less a fixed phenomenon than a flexible construction" (2003:10), meaning any kind of cultural production which is perceived to be outside of the mainstream, fits into outsider art's constellation of practices. Despite Spring's self-assigned identity as an 'experimenter', he took everyday objects out of context and repositioned them in his language of art – which produced intersections that were inordinately contemporary. Though Spring courted recognition from mainstream science, thereby asserting that his artifacts belonged within that realm, it was his tenacious person vision and aesthetic that dominated his work. While the viewer cannot be sure what Spring was trying to convey, it is clear he was fascinated by the world and trying to figure out how things worked. Perhaps he was trying to convey wonderment. Maybe he was just trying to leave a little of his perspective on a world that he could create and contain in his storefront.

### **The Afterlife of the Larry Spring Museum**

In his book, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* critic Gary Allen Fine states: "to be a self-taught artist is to be a creator: not only a creator of the works themselves, but also a creator of a justification for doing the work and a creator of a system of resources that permits artistic creation" (2004:loc1751). Fine's quote can relate to Spring's system of relations to his process, objects, collection, storefront and Fort Bragg. Spring was an 'outsider artist' because his aesthetic sensibilities were autodidactic and largely misunderstood. However, he created these conditions through his hermetic process and unwillingness to accept

analysis of his work that did not agree with his methods or outcomes. As historian Sylvia Bartley recalled, “Larry was a leader of a very small following” (2015). While Spring self-selected as an ‘outsider’ in the sense that he saw himself as ‘accomplished’ outside of the realm of ordinary experience, did not choose *marginality* knowingly. He instead justified what some would see as his obsessive, dedicated practice through what he perceived as common sense thinking: “THERE ARE NO PEERS FOR NEW DISCOVERIES. To JUDGE something, a PEER would have to know about it. If the PEER already knew about it, it would not be a NEW DISCOVERY” (1992: Fig. 15 emphasis original)<sup>34</sup>. Within a limited community network, Spring was the creator and curator of his original knowledge, and as such, largely untouched by professional criticism or categorization. I would like to suggest that Spring’s works fall into contemporary outsider art, but specifically within the purview of Gregory Sholette’s dark matter art. While Spring was generally considered ‘eccentric’ by friends, family and community, he was also a ‘good citizen’<sup>35</sup>, entrepreneur, and engaged community member. Theoreticians politely ignored his overtures; some considered his work as obsessive and unfathomable, while others saw his explorations as products of an uncommon curiosity. Common sense physics were his way of understanding the complexity of the world, via a highly personalized manner.

The experience of curating Spring’s museum gave me a ‘system of resources’ that permitted me to practice curation from the ‘outside’ while reflecting on the process. While the ‘outside’ for me, meant culturally and geographically from ‘elsewhere’, Spring’s museum also presented an opportunity to reflect on my complex family history. My late mother was an obsessive maker whose work and life story had the markers of ‘outsider art’. After spending

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<sup>34</sup> This text is from a pen and ink cartoon that Spring photocopied, laminated, and sold as placemats in his storefront.

<sup>35</sup> Spring paid his taxes, obeyed the law and engaged in civic process. He was also known for his uncommon generosity toward those in need.

hundreds of solitary hours with Springs artefacts: dusting, cataloguing, deciphering his writings with varying success; pouring over his vast collection photographs and ephemera, organizing his library, and conversing with his ashes that sat encased in a redwood burl on top of his desk – I concluded that Larry Spring’s cultural production was analogous to my mother’s crafting and collecting practices. During my time with Spring’s collection, I learned to discern his work from ‘the gut’<sup>36</sup> because the affect of wonder can arise when something is strange or unknowable. This was the rapport that he and I, and ultimately my mother, shared. I sought the perspectives of others: “Who was he?” I asked, “What was he trying to convey?” and “What should his collection become?” Yet none of these questions yielded the origin story or conclusions that I was chasing. It wasn’t until I started to assemble the website [energyismyteacher.com](http://energyismyteacher.com) that I realized that intention can be as mysterious to the maker, as it is to the viewer or the researcher. I had to look at the project as a fragment of Larry Spring’s story, a miniaturized whole, a small beginning, my naïve reconstruction and summary of his physical world.

There is something poignant about Larry Spring’s storefront’s crumbling remains – something that cannot be captured in digital representation. Larry Spring’s school – now a museum – exists because Fort Bragg’s disparate economic and socio-cultural make-up has made the town resistant to gentrification.

Currently, Larry Spring’s storefront operates precariously as an unfunded museum and as such, requires diverse income streams to pay the building’s utilities and taxes. As of this writing, two-thirds of the building is rented out to tenants who are unrelated to the museum, or to Larry Spring’s creative practices. While culturally relevant as a work of ‘outsider’ curatorship, the

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<sup>36</sup> At the proceedings of the *Contemporary Outsider Art: The Global Context*, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia, Oct. 2014, Professor Colin Rhodes articulated that outsider art is discerned from the gut; that it’s known through its affect.

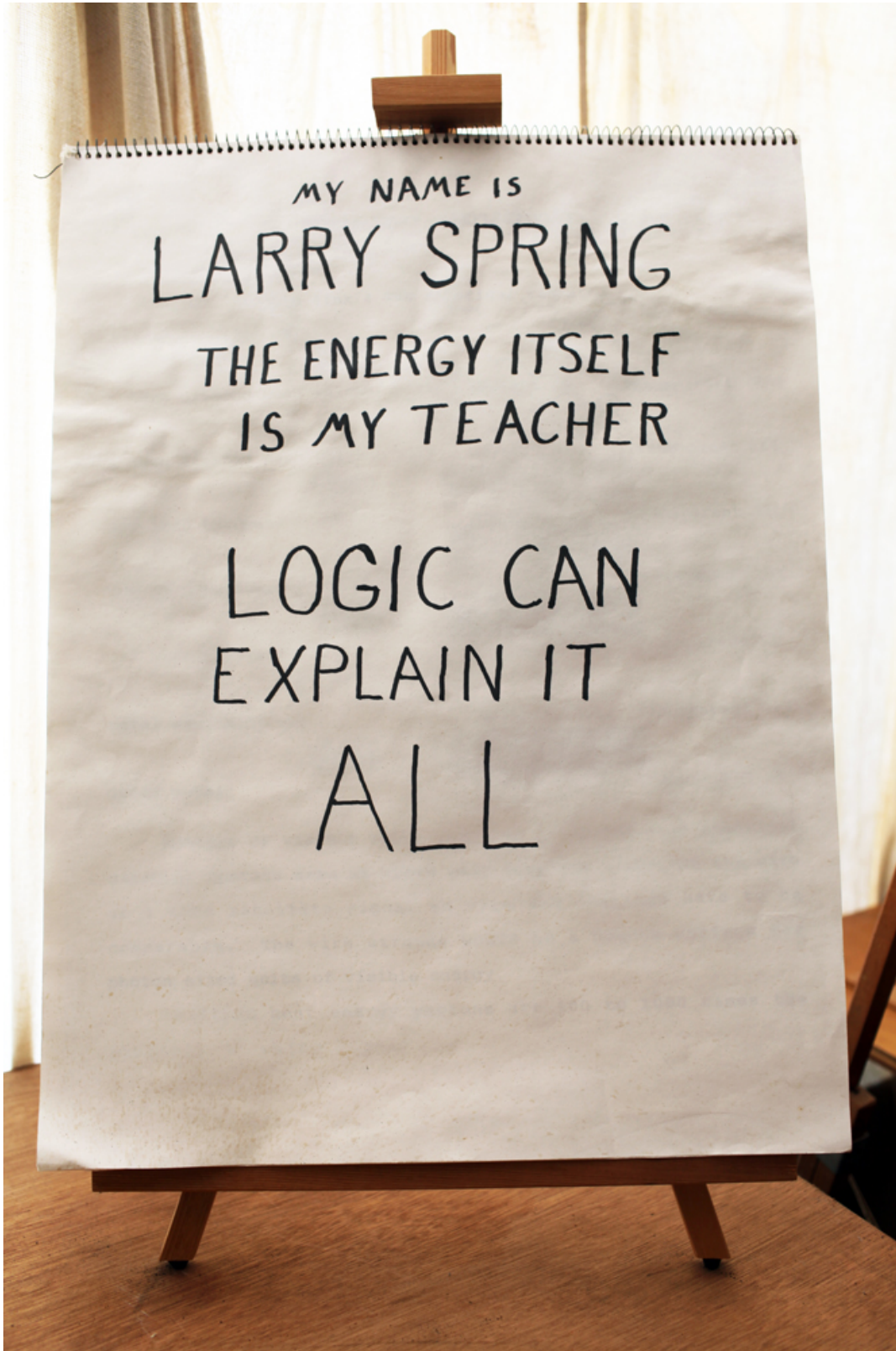
future of the Larry Spring museum is uncertain. This is what compelled me to create a website as a way to document and preserve Spring's unusual and multifaceted modalities of engaging in the world through his collection.

## APPENDIX A: FIGURES

**Figure 1:** Curatorial Summary of the contents of Larry Spring’s collection

<b>Artifacts &amp; Objects</b>	<p><b>Collections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burls</li> <li>• Driftwood, nuts and cones</li> <li>• Sea shells</li> <li>• Rocks, minerals &amp; fossils</li> <li>• Rock Dinner Party</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Library</li> <li>• Ephemera</li> </ul>	<p><b>Craft Explorations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turned wood and carved wood</li> <li>• Display cases</li> <li>• Dioramas</li> <li>• Painting</li> <li>• Cartoons</li> <li>• Agate Lamps</li> <li>• Little woods creatures</li> <li>• Jewelry</li> <li>• Photography</li> </ul>
<b>Publications by Larry Spring</b>	<p><b>Books</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My Electromagnetic Theory and My Experiments to Prove It</li> <li>• Electromagnetic Heat as Analyzed by Larry Spring</li> <li>• Electromagnetic Heat in Brief</li> <li>• Larry Spring’s Spherical Electromagnetic Quantum</li> <li>• Electromagnetic Sea In Which We Live</li> <li>• Now I See</li> <li>• I am Energy</li> <li>• Electromagnetic Forcitos</li> <li>• Magnespheres and the Spring Atom Editions 1-7</li> <li>• Poems: Bit and Pieces of Larry Spring’s Life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Articles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Whole Scientific World is going Topsy and Turvy</li> <li>• Magnetic Energy Taught me New Basic Concepts or <i>Can’t is a Challenge</i></li> <li>• If Outer Space is Empty Then So are You</li> <li>• Heat and Expansion Need a New Foundation</li> <li>• Mendocino Brushless Solar Motor</li> <li>• Conservation of Energy</li> <li>• A Round Peg in a Square Hole</li> <li>• How to Eat a Persimmon</li> </ul>
<b>Documentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VHS copies of Spring sharing his demonstrations and theories</li> </ul>	
<b>Demonstration Models</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solar Motors</li> <li>• Spring Atom</li> <li>• Magnespheres</li> <li>• Spring Demonstrator</li> <li>• Parabolic Dish</li> <li>• Laser and fish tank</li> <li>• Measuring Screens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carom Board (audio)</li> <li>• Reflection table</li> <li>• Field Strength Meter &amp; Dipole antennas</li> <li>• Aluminum tube &amp; neodymium magnet</li> <li>• Light Bulb</li> <li>• Ball and Mirror</li> </ul>





**Figure 2:** Spring's mantra operated as the opening message in a series of teaching charts that Spring designed for use in his storefront. n.d. Estate of Larry Spring.

**Figure 3:** A brief overview of the terminology used by artists and institutions in Western Europe and the United States.

Term	Description
Primitive Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes the art of the ‘insane’, artifacts removed from context and children’s drawing</li> <li>Embraced by the Modernists</li> <li>Primitivism in the 20<sup>th</sup> C, a 1984 show at the MoMA has been heavily critiqued for its ideological position</li> </ul>
Psychotic Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artworks created by institutionalized patients. Term used by psychiatrists and early Modernists</li> <li>Embraced by German Expressionists and the Parisian Surrealists in particular</li> <li>Hans Prinzhorn’s 1922 publication, <i>Bildnerei der Geisteskranken</i> (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) was a seminal text</li> </ul>
Art Brut ‘Raw Art’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artist Jean Dubuffet’s term for art created by those seen to exist outside of cultural influence</li> <li>Work is characterized as compulsive, intense, abstract</li> <li>Artists do not consider themselves artists or consider their creations art.</li> </ul>
Neuve Invention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coined by artist Jean Dubuffet</li> <li>Neuve Invention describes Art Brut works made by creators who have contact with society</li> </ul>
Art Singulier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>French translation of outsider art</li> <li>Refers to culturally sophisticated work</li> </ul>
Folk Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Untrained art reflecting traditional culture and values</li> </ul>
Visionary Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Works based on elaborate and/or religious visions.</li> <li>The term “compulsive visionaries” was coined for the 1992 exhibition <i>Modern Artists and Outsider Art</i></li> </ul>
Intuitive Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Urban folk art</li> </ul>
Naïve Art/Modern Primitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artists of ‘instinct’, ‘untroubled’, ‘spontaneous’</li> <li>Works have a ‘child-like’ simplicity</li> </ul>
Visionary Environmental Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Environments, buildings and sculpture parks built by intuitive artists</li> </ul>
Outsider Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Originally intended to be an English language version of the spectrum of Art Brut and Neuve Invention</li> <li>Describe any untrained artist who embraces unconventional views and laboriously handcrafts work from available materials</li> <li>Typically marginalized from the mainstream</li> <li>Artists do not consider themselves artists or consider their creations art.</li> <li>Has currency within the contemporary art market</li> </ul>
Contemporary Outsider, Non-academic, Non-Professional, Self-Taught, Vernacular, Untrained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academics and curators are looking for new terminology to emphasize the term’s connection to cultural production rather than the producer.<sup>37</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>37</sup> At the proceedings of the *Contemporary Outsider Art: The Global Context*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, Oct. 2014, the issue of language was repeatedly addressed. At a plenary session attendant speakers and audience were asked to put forward suggestions and vote. Consensus around language could not be reached.

**Figure 4:** Summary of work undertaken on site visits

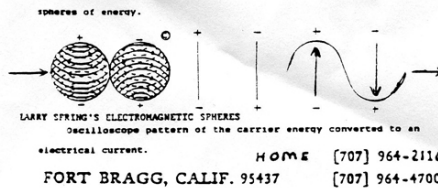
Date	Activity	Research-creation
August 2014	Catalogue Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curated display of figurative works with teaching tools</li> <li>• Photo documentation of figurative works and teaching tools</li> <li>• Dissemination of process on social media and blog</li> <li>• Reflection paper</li> <li>• Programming: Theatre de la Liberté: Life of Objects</li> </ul>
December 2015	Recover and Identify Artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catalogue: Incomplete Inventory of Salvage and Recovery</li> <li>• Documentation of objects and process</li> <li>• First Friday<sup>38</sup> exhibition of recovered objects</li> <li>• Dissemination of process on social media and blog, paper.</li> <li>• Programming: artist/physicist Wu Li Leung installation and artist talk.</li> </ul>
September 2015	Final Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stills, audio and motion documentation</li> <li>• Archival research</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Dissemination of process on blog</li> <li>• Programming: Theatre de la Liberté re: Plants and Utopia</li> <li>• Paper and website</li> </ul>

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<sup>38</sup> On the first Friday of every month, Fort Bragg galleries and museums open to the public for exhibitions and performance. The Larry Spring Museum of Common Sense Physics has become a popular destination on these evenings.



225 REDWOOD AVENUE



Dear Librarian:

This book, entitled "Magnespheres & The Spring Atom" by Larry Spring, is an extract from a much larger compilation of knowledge collected through experimentation, observation and logic. This is an important step beyond the quantum theory.

This book, hand bound in limited quantity, defines the shape, size, magnetic structure and bounce characteristics of the free flying radiated spherical magnetic fields, herein called MAGNESPHERES, which transfer energy from a radiating source to a receiving location. Also it describes a logical model of the ATOM.

At the request of Sumner Davis, on April 24, 1996, I delivered to the Berkeley Lab of the University of California a complete set of my own inventions which demonstrate the forces that transfer audio by bumping molecule on molecule, the repulsion of electron to electron which gives the atom size and in a metal conductor causes the electrical current, and the attraction of electron to proton which creates the neutron. A demonstration of Oersted's circular magnetic field around a conductor created by movement of the electrical current, and conversely drives the current in a conductor when the field is moving across the conductor. This interaction gives rise to the electric motor and generator. A demonstration of radiation of the magnetic field when one circular field is formed inside a previously formed circular field, and their collection and concentration in a parabolic dish. The shape, size, magnetic structure, as well as their bounce (reflection) action is analyzed and demonstrated. (this was hitherto considered impossible by most main stream engineers).

All these animated physical actions are explained in my book, and are readily observed on video. They enhance, rather than replace the precise mathematical physics necessary for engineering.

In the exciting words of Sumner Davis "It shows the action".

Sumner Davis, a revered physics instructor of more than 50 years, now at the University of California at Berkeley, discovered the LARRY SPRING SCHOOL OF COMMON SENSE PHYSICS while on a trip through Fort Bragg, California on November 26, 1995.

Much of the information in this book comes directly from my experimentation, so is not available in other books.

I am donating this one of a kind book to libraries to make this knowledge available to thinking people who can perform the experiments that prove validity. It will be a valuable addition to your collection.

A \$5.00 donation check is enclosed to assist you in cataloging this book, or returning it to me.

Sincerely Larry Spring  
Larry Spring

Figure 5: Sample correspondence from Larry Spring to a mainstream institution. c.1995. Estate of Larry Spring.

# GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY

EDWIN C. KRUPP, PH. D.  
DIRECTOR  
KENNETH WARREN  
BUSINESS MANAGER  
JOHN E. MOSLEY  
OBSERVATORY  
PROGRAM SUPERVISOR  
EARL VANDER WALL  
OBSERVATORY  
TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR



2800 EAST OBSERVATORY ROAD  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90027  
TELEPHONE (213) 664-1181  
FAX (213) 663-4323

DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND PARKS  
CITY OF LOS ANGELES

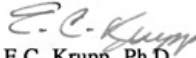
27 February 1997

Mr. Larry Spring  
225 Redwood Avenue  
Fort Bragg, California  
95437

Dear Mr. Spring:

Thank you for your report concerning your book *Magnetospheres and the Spring Atom*, and for the copy of the book. Although I do not endorse its content, we have added it to our library, which is not open to the public but which supports programming and production at Griffith Observatory. We have gratefully accepted the accompanying check for \$5.00 as a contribution to the City of Los Angeles, to which we belong.

Sincerely,

  
E.C. Krupp, Ph.D.  
Director

AN EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY - AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER

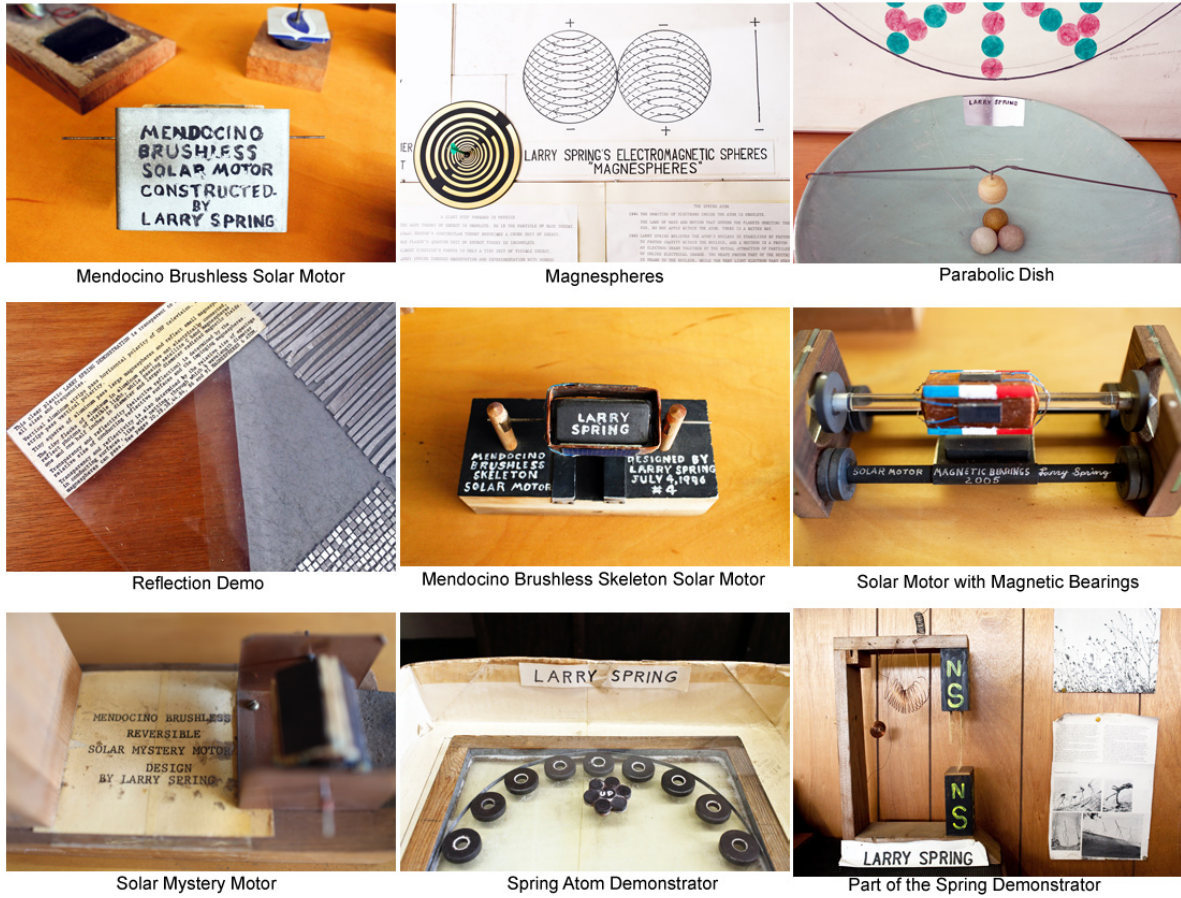
**Figure 6:** Sample response from a mainstream institution to Larry Spring. 1997. Estate of Larry Spring.



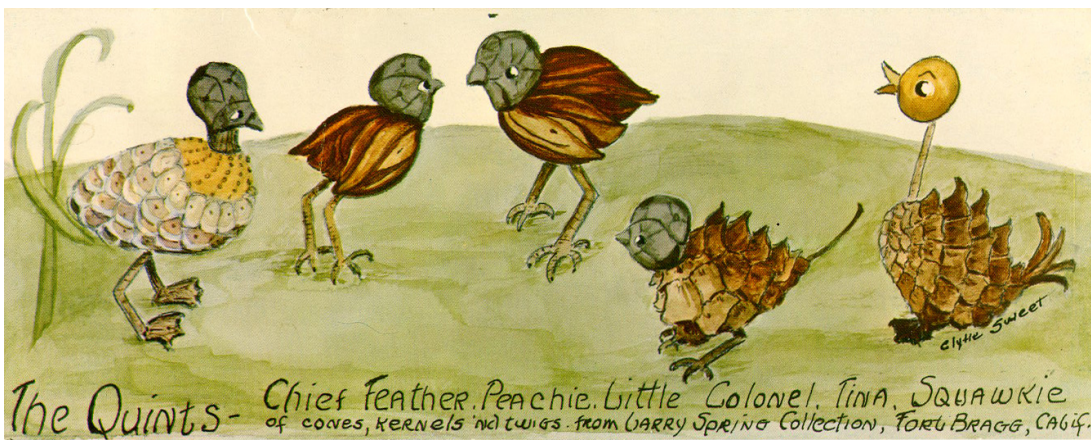
**Figure 7:** Snapshots depicting visual jokes with handwritten text were a popular form of expression during the 1920's. 1926. Estate of Larry Spring.



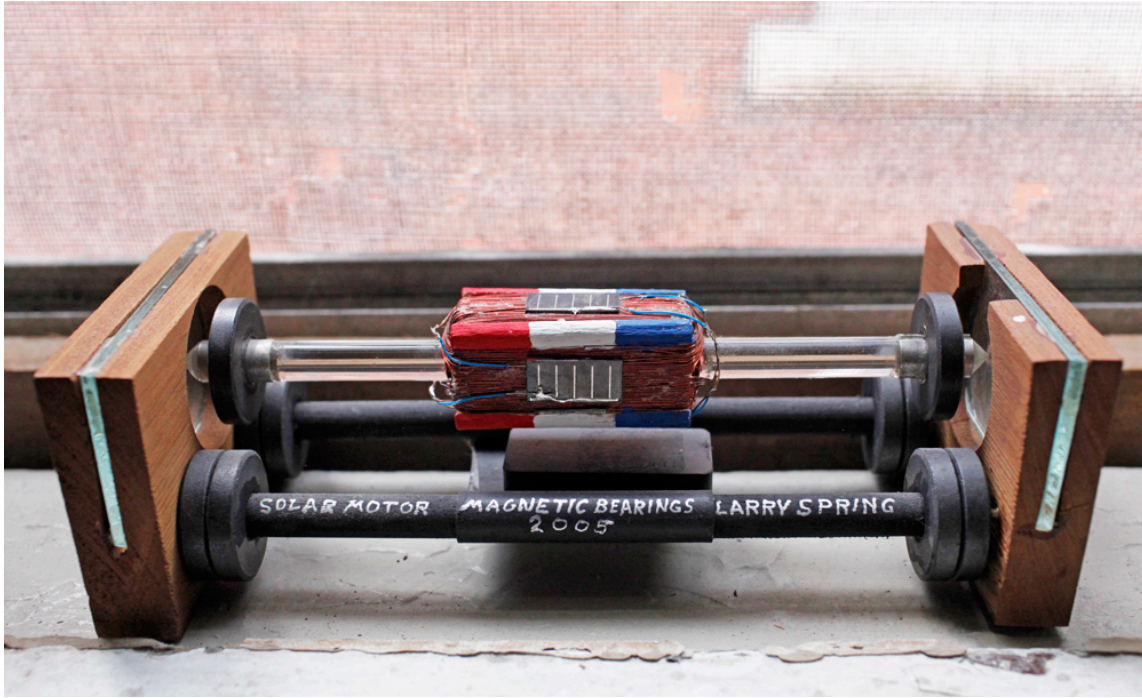
**Figure 8:** Spring had a sense of visual humour. This picture of a fellow soldier was made in Crete c. 1945. Estate of Larry Spring.



**Figure 9:** Partial views of some of Spring's demonstration models. 2013. Estate of Larry Spring



**Figure 10:** Postcard designed by Larry Spring advertising *The Quints* which were a part of his collection of Little Woods Creatures that he created and displayed in his television repair shop. c., 1975. Estate of Larry Spring.



**Figure 11:** Larry Spring's handcrafted solar motor. 2005. Estate of Larry Spring.



**Figure 12:** Shadows cast by Larry Spring's redwood and chicken wire Magnesphere Measuring screens. 2015. Estate of Larry Spring.



**Figure 13:** Brief overview of western artistic and institutional engagement with ‘outsider art’

DATE	EVENT	PLACE
1864	Cesare Lombroso published <i>Genio e Folio</i> (Genius and Madness), a study of the work of 107 institutionalized patients	Italy
1906	Psychologist Friederich Mohr looked to patient drawings to categorize and diagnose a patient’s ‘abnormal’ pathology	Germany
1921	Dr. Walter Morgenthaler publishes a monograph <i>Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler</i> (A Psychiatric Patient as Artist) of works on paper by patient Adolph Wölfli (1864-1930). Contemporarily, Wölfli is considered a master.	Switzerland
1922	Art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn’s 1922 publication, <i>Bildnerie der Geisteskranken</i> (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) had considerable influence on the Surrealists’ aesthetic ideas. The collection now resides at the University of Heidelberg.	Germany
1938	MoMA director Alfred Barr presents <i>Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America</i> (1938), which was the first institutional effort to exhibit the work of the self-taught.	New York
1942	Collector Sidney Janis publishes <i>They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century</i>	New York
1947	<i>Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme</i> at the <i>Galerie Maeght</i> features a component dedicated to the art of the mentally ill	Paris
1949	Artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) advanced a personalized vision of the ‘primitive’ through the criteria he developed for works he called <i>Art Brut</i> (raw or rough art) that he developed after a tour of Swiss psychiatric institutions.	Switzerland
1950	<i>International Exhibition of Psychopathological Art</i> at the Centre Hospitalier Sainte Anne	Paris
1950’s	Psychologist Tarmo Pasto discovers Martin Ramirez’s work at DeWitt State Hospital. This was a chance encounter as it was standard practice in the United States to destroy patient artworks in order to maintain standards of hygiene	Auburn, CA
1963	James Castles’ (1899-1977) works are shown at the <i>Boise Gallery of Art</i>	Idaho
1970	Herbert W Hemphill’s <i>Twentieth Century Folk Art and Artists at the Museum of American Folk Art</i> shows a disregard for categories by featuring known outsiders, new discoveries and anonymous artifacts	New York
1970’s	Gallerist Phyllis Kind shows Ramirez and other American autodidacts at the <i>Phyllis Kind Gallery</i>	Chicago
1970’s	Florence Ludins-Katz and Elias Katz develop a new methodology for supporting artists with developmental disabilities. This leads to the founding of Creativity Explored in San Francisco, Creative Growth Center in Oakland and NIAD in Richmond. All three studios have developed artists with international art-world connections.	Bay Area, CA
1970’s	John Michael Kohler Arts Center dedicates resources to the study and preservation of artist-environments.	Sheboygan, WI
1972	Harald Szeemann features Wölfli’s and other autodidacts work at	Kassel

	Documenta 5	
1972	British art historian Roger Cardinal publishes <i>Outsider Art</i> and the term comes into use as the same name, and was seen as the English language equivalent of Dubuffet's <i>Art Brut</i> .	London
1972	Artist Joseph Yoakum was involved in the planning of his retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art – a rare occurrence for a living outsider artist	
1975	Michel Thévoz publishes <i>Art Brut</i> which details the formation of Dubuffet's theories. Thévoz later becomes the director of the collection.	Paris
1976	Artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) safeguards his collection in Lausanne.	Switzerland
1979	Richard Cardinal curates an Outsider Art show at the Hayward Gallery	London
1982	Bill Traylor's (1853-1949) work is featured in <i>Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980</i> a survey of African American art at the <i>Corcoran Museum of Art</i> . Show is critiqued for conflating folk art with the idiosyncratic vision of the self-taught.	Washington, DC
1985	Simon Rodia's (1879-1965) Watt's Towers are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a National Historic Landmark	Los Angeles
1989	John Maizels launches <i>Raw Vision</i> magazine -- a leading magazine for contemporary Outsider Art	London
1991	Intuit the only nonprofit organization in the US that is solely dedicated to Outsider Art opens	Chicago
1991	Jim Shaw curates <i>Thrift Store Paintings</i> at Metro Pictures, which features 100 works by unknown amateur painters	New York
1993	Launch of the New York Outsider Art Fair	New York
1993	Rebecca Alban Hoffberger opens the American Visionary Art Museum	Baltimore
1994	Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounts <i>Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art</i> – based on the premise that “Insiders and Outsiders are two sides of the same modernist tendency”	Los Angeles
2000	Museum of American Folk Art establishes the Henry Darger Study Center	New York
2003	<i>Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art</i> at the Museum of International Folk Art focuses on mid to late 20 <sup>th</sup> C artists	New Mexico
2004	Mathew Higgs starts to show Outsider art at White Columns gallery	New York
2008	James Castle is given a comprehensive retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. <i>James Castle: A Retrospective</i>	
2008	Ralph Rugoff curates <i>Amateurs</i> -- a show that explores amateurism in Contemporary Art	San Francisco
2009	James Brett founds the <i>Museum of Everything</i> , a nomadic museum dedicated to the work of untrained artists	London
2010	Artist Harrell Fletcher and curator Jens Hoffman mount the <i>People's Biennial</i> – an exhibition that examined the work of artists who operate outside of the mainstream - at five regional centers.	Pennsylvania, Arizona, North Carolina, South

		Dakota, Oregon
2011	<i>Create</i> show at the University of California, Berkeley features artists from the Katz's Bay area studios.	Berkeley
2011	Horst Ademeit's (1937-2010) heavily annotated Polaroids are shown at White Columns	New York
2011	Margaret Wertheim publishes a book about outsider physicist Jim Carter. Carter's work is later shown at the Institute for Figuring and the Hayward Gallery	Los Angeles, London
2012	<i>Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos</i> at the New Museum and curated by Lynne Cooke features work by outsider artists in dialogue with contemporary works	New York
2013	<i>Il Palazzo Enciclopedico</i> the 2013 Venice Biennale blurs the lines between professional and amateur artists	Venice
2014	Judith Scott (1943-2005) is given a solo show, <i>Judith Scott – Bound and Unbound</i> at the Brooklyn Museum. Scott was enrolled at the Creative Growth Center in Oakland, CA	Brooklyn, NY
2015	Leslie Umberger formally of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center is appointed curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum	Washington, DC
2015	Armory Show's modern section included Outsider Art dealers such as Fleisher/Ollman, Carl Hammer, Ricco/Maresca, and Edlin.	New York
Upcoming	Lynne Cooke is mounting an exhibition at the National Gallery about the relationship between mainstream and self-taught artists in the United States	Washington, DC, New York and Los Angeles



**Figure 14:** Marino Auriti with his Encyclopedic Palace. c1950's. Estate of Marino Auriti.

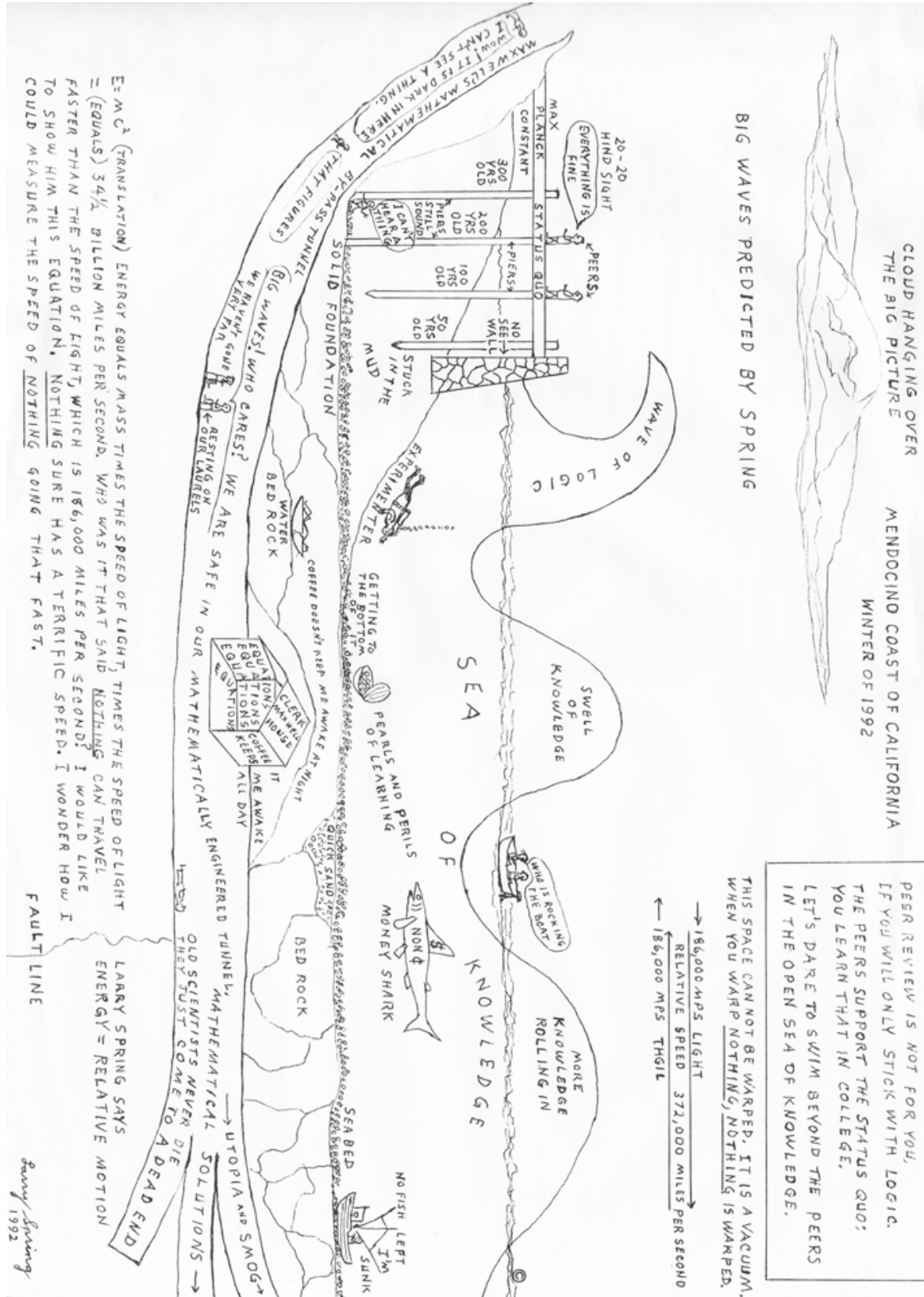


Figure 15: Larry Spring's unique worldview. 1992. Estate of Larry Spring.

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