



Full citation: Price, Jennifer. "A Brief Natural History of the Plastic Pink Flamingo." Chap. 3 in *Flight Maps: Adventures With Nature In Modern America*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. (Adaptation for The American Scholar) <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6448>

Rights: © Jennifer Price. All rights reserved. Made available on the Environment & Society Portal for nonprofit educational purposes only.

# The Plastic Pink Flamingo

*A Natural History*

---

JENNIFER PRICE

**F**ive years ago, I visited the Union Products factory, the birthplace of the plastic pink flamingo. It nestles among a flock of plastics factories in Leominster, Massachusetts, on Route 117 west of Boston. I have come to believe, and would like to persuade you, that the blow-molding department in the basement, where they still melt polyethylene crystals with pink dye and extrude the hot pink plastic into flamingo-shaped molds, can be just as useful a place to search for the deepest meanings of nature as the most remote wilds of the Rockies, where I have also looked.

Since then, to plumb my nature-loving instincts and the fierce attachments to nature harbored by many members of my generation, I have been tracing the flamingo's history through the annals of landscape architecture, south Florida, middle-class inventions, Las Vegas, fifties styles, sixties rebellions, organic gardening, John Waters movies, Elvis, wilderness areas, Andy Warhol prints, the Culture Wars, and my fellow baby boomers' thirty-year march to economic dominance. At some point, I began to listen carefully to the stories people told me. My graduate-school adviser heard a National Public Radio report on a kidnapped pair of flamingos that sent back postcards from the Eiffel Tower. Friends had stolen the birds off lawns on drunken late-

---

~ Jennifer Price, a freelance writer in Los Angeles, recently completed a doctorate in history at Yale University. This essay is adapted from *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, which is being published this May by Basic Books.

night outings in college. A *New Yorker* editor had a famous collection. My roommate's traveling partner had taken a flamingo named Eudora backpacking, mountain-biking, and cross-country skiing through the White Mountains, the Arctic, and the Sierras before forgetting it one summer in a cabin at Donner Pass.

And so, by degrees, I became cathected to the plastic bird that the nature writer Terry Tempest Williams has branded "our unnatural link to the natural world."

The plastic flamingo was invented at Union Products in 1957 by a young designer named Don Featherstone, but its provenance—the prehistory of lawn ornamentation—can be traced back many centuries. I'll begin in mid-eighteenth-century England. At that time, a revolutionary English school of landscape architects created a "natural" lawn aesthetic that would rival the "artificial" seventeenth-century gardens of Versailles as a paradigm and cast a great shadow forward onto American landscapes, American lawns, and the do's and don't's of American yard art. Led by the great landscape architect Lancelot "Capability" Brown, the new designers turned the estates of English aristocrats into rolling expanses of meadows, trees, lakes, and streams. At Versailles, the royal architects had lined the perfect parterres with quantities of dragons, satyrs, swans, wolves, nymphs, and Greek gods. But as Brown and his minions blotted out geometry from the English countryside—a near-complete feat by the mid-1800s—they gave lawn ornaments a tenuous welcome. Their bastions of nature featured rustic hermitages and a modest handful of stag and dog statues. They much preferred to deploy real animals, such as sheep, cattle, and—best of all—native deer.

And yet, to turn an estate into nature required great efforts of human intervention. The architects built hills and dug lakes. They planted trees by the tens of thousands, chopped down grovesful of others, added dead trees back in for effect, and cropped vast acreages of new grass. They made rivers bend. They made sunlight dapple. In some cases, they evicted longtime tenant farmers and razed their villages. They set out, as Brown's famous protégé Humphrey Repton enthusiastically put it, to "conceal every interference of art, however expensive." It is tricky to say whether the "nature" they left behind contained less artifice than the perfect avenues and precision topiary of Versailles, or whether it required less human labor and capital to maintain. The architects created not nature itself, but an idea, a *definition* of nature as a place that is free of humans and human artifice.

A seedbed of urbanization, industrialization, and modern market capitalism, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England also saw the privatization and enclosure of once-common agricultural lands. Many people began to define nature as a realm that was as yet untransformed—

not the parts of the natural world that humans use or change, but the parts that they *do not* use. Nature was not urban and had no industrial factories. It was a place without economic activities. It was a refuge from social upheaval. As a Place Out There, it was fast coming to represent everything that life in early-modern England was not. Above all, people in the throes of becoming modern appealed to nature as a timeless source of authority. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Hume and Burke propounded “natural” theories of moral philosophy and politics. Adam Smith described the new market-based economy as a “natural” set of laws. Gainsborough painted a “natural” aesthetic. Wordsworth sought aesthetic and spiritual truths in nature. Even etiquette manuals lauded the value of “naturalness” in manners and posture. And Capability Brown made the landscape an idea you could walk around in.

In fact, what could claim the authority of nature more effectively than ownership of a vast expanse of it? Only wealthy squires could enjoy the benefits of this definition—landed aristocrats who could take prime agricultural acreage out of production and urban merchants who could purchase country retreats. The urban poor and working classes couldn’t afford to travel out of the cities. And rural peasants could hardly afford to treat the landscape as a non-farming-or-hunting zone. A Brown-designed estate made as definite a statement of social power as Versailles, only it did it by declaring that wealth and status were *natural*. Of course, no one in England, during that era of explosive economic growth, was using and changing nature more than the wealthy elites. And much of the future history of this idea would unfold as a battle among the more monied social classes over exactly who would get to claim the authority of nature, and for what purposes.

**T**he plastic pink flamingo was still two centuries away. Meanwhile, in the late 1700s, French landowners were hiring English architects to convert their exquisite gardens into Nature. Across the Atlantic, American landowners such as Thomas Jefferson took to the English aesthetic like birds to the sky. Americans, after all, have always embraced a vision of nature both as countermodern and as a source of social and political authority—from Jefferson’s pastoral ideal, which wed rural roots to republican independence and virtue, to Thoreau’s faith in wilderness as an antidote to overcivilization. From the Puritans’ “city on a hill” to myths of the American West to the remarkably literal Mount Rushmore, Americans have made nature meaningful as a powerful source of authority for national identity.

The English school found its great American apostle in Andrew Jackson Downing, a nurseryman in upstate New York. In the 1840s, he made meadows roll, streams meander, and trees clump irregularly on country estates throughout the Hudson Valley, where the Hudson River school of

landscape painters committed similar visions to canvas. And he approached the question of lawn ornaments circumspectly. “Vases,” “rustic baskets,” and “other harmonious accessories”: Downing deployed these only near the manor. A bit farther away, he planted “rockwork” and wooden “moss houses.” However, on the farther reaches of one’s lands, human artifice had to vanish entirely. A vase way out there, he admonished, “[does] violence to our reason or taste.” At his own residence in Newburgh, Downing instructed his all-too-visible grounds staff to use “invisible hands” to mow the lawns at night.

His real passion, however, was to downsize the English principles for smaller estates. In the democratic United States, a growing middle class owned property, too, and Downing was from a middle-class background himself. How should Americans with less land—he recommended at least fifty acres but consented to work with ten or twenty—“render their places tasteful and agreeable?” “We answer,” he said, “*by attempting only the simple and natural*; and the unfailing way to secure this, is by employing as leading features only trees and grass.” Downing preached restraint and naturalness above all else. He generally referred to them as “taste.” “An humble cottage with sculptured vases,” for example, “would be in bad taste.”

What *is* “taste”? You can have taste in clothes, wine, furniture, art, decor—almost anything you purchase. The concept emerged with a vengeance in the early 1800s, as spreading wealth and new mass-production technologies equipped the growing numbers of urban middle-class consumers with the resources and tools to decorate and accessorize. Taste, you could say, is a style of consumerism. It is also a statement of identity—and it’s exactly in this era that American identity became inextricably connected with consumerism. Taste was, to some degree, an upper-class injunction of restraint that cautioned the new consumers not to presume to be truly wealthy. And yet the middle classes rapidly made taste their own and counterdeployed it to reject the showy excesses of the rich. If you consumed tastefully, you advertised that, unlike the working classes, you had abundant resources to buy things—but that you exercised the middle-class American virtue, and the admirable market-economy ethic, of self-control.

But is good taste supposed to be a middle-class style of consumerism? No, it just *is*: a universally superior sensibility (or so goes the assumption) that would logically turn to nature, that bedrock of American identity, to legitimize its aesthetic of simplicity. And what better place to prove one’s good taste than on the bit of nature that was closest at hand—one’s own front lawn?

The yard-art wars escalated exactly as fast as the suburbs spread outward. After the Civil War, Downing’s student Frederick Law Olmsted—the legendary architect of New York’s Central Park who fiercely promulgated parks and lawns as refuges from urban stress—retrofitted Downing’s prin-

ciples to the scale of the largish lawn. He converted Nature into the rolling, tree-dotted, upper-middle-class neighborhood. In the 1880s, Frank Jesup Scott, yet another Downing student, adapted the guidelines for medium-sized lawns. In his do-it-yourself manual, *The Art of Beautifying Home Grounds of Small Extent*, he advised callow landowners to “avoid spotting your lawn with . . . plaster or marble images of any kind, or those lilliputian caricatures.” His rules left space for grass, a tree or two, and a few flowers close to the door. This remains the archetypal vision for the middle-class suburban front lawn.

The homeowners, however, were getting restless. In the 1920s they bought cast-aluminum animals. In the 1930s do-it-yourselfers made deer, rabbits, and frogs out of cement, the Depression material of choice. Each new decade brought more suburbs, more lawns, and cheaper mass-produced ornaments. The down-classing of lawn art was well under way.

**T**hese trends culminated (or bottomed out) after World War II in the dual explosions of suburbs and plastics. In the 1950s developers plowed an average of three thousand acres of new suburbs each day. Many lower-middle-class and some working-class Americans earned enough to buy single-family houses: ranches, split-levels, Cape Cods, Tudors, Colonial revivals. It was the era of upward mobility, of undreamed-of new levels of consumerism, and of the baby boom, when my own parents moved into a tiny house just outside the St. Louis city limits, and four children and five years later—in 1960, the year I was born—traded up to a spacious French colonial farther out.

The plastics industries, energized by wartime technologies, set out to accessorize the split-levels inside and out. Nylon, rayon, vinyl, polyester, Lucite, Plexiglas, Saran, polyethylene. The companies could make almost anything cheaply with the new petroleum-based plastics, and did: radios, polyester pants, Barbie dolls, hula hoops, “walnut” paneling, “leather” car interiors, vinyl wallpaper, Tupperware, Naugahyde lounge chairs. “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry,” a DuPont slogan went. After 1946, Union Products manufactured “Plastics for the Lawn”: dogs, frogs, ducks, and a two-dimensional flamingo that sold well.

In 1956 the company hired Don Featherstone, a recent art-school graduate, who for the sake of accuracy on his first project—a three-dimensional molded-polyethylene bird named Charlie the Duck—spent six months sketching a live model in his studio. In 1957 Featherstone designed a three-dimensional flamingo, which sold even better than the flat version. Union Products retailed its wares at Sears, Woolworth’s, and Ben Franklin’s. “Flamingo pink,” said the 1957 Sears catalogue. “Place in garden, lawn, to beautify landscape.” “Lifelike.” “Lovely.” In the decades ahead, the flamingo would only rarely outsell the duck—but it would become far more famous.

The bird took up residence in working-class subdivisions. Middle-class suburbanites gave it a wide berth. A fifties taste literature flourished: *Good Taste Costs No More; How Good Is Your Taste?* And on medium-sized lawns, Nature—and a lawn that advertised leisure, refuge, and economic independence—mandated the near-total “grass, trees, a few flowers” ban on artifice. Swing sets, gardens, and barbecue pits were all consigned to the backyard. An absence of human life remains a signature feature of the middle-class suburban front lawn. Of course, a second aspect of these lawns is that great investments of money and labor, and a vast herbicide industry, are required to maintain them. Like a Capability Brown masterpiece, this no-artifice zone of nature actively hides much of the abundant human artifice that the homeowner uses to create it.

On a small lawn, you’d have to scale down to grass and perhaps a tulip or two. And you had precious little space in which to exercise restraint. A plain lawn in front of a large house stated “affluent, but tasteful.” But an unadorned swatch in front of a very small house said “inexpensive, and can’t afford more.” Below a certain level of wealth, taste ceases to operate. Working-class consumers generally favored more conspicuous strategies to landscape their pieces of the American Dream. They emphasized, rather than underplayed, their human presence. They found ample space for artifice. Many planted their lawns with squirrels, frogs, lighthouses, windmills, and flamingos. In Catholic neighborhoods, the plastic creatures became a logical extension of the religious figures that immigrants in the cities had placed on their porches and in their window boxes (though as second- and third-generation Catholics moved to middle-class enclaves farther out, many would reject their parents’ lawn displays with embarrassment, or at least move their own to the backyard). Sears did a brisk business in pink flamingos, at only \$2.76 a pair.

When the pink flamingo splashed into the fifties market, it staked two major claims to boldness. First, it was a *flamingo*. Since the 1930s, vacationing Americans had been flocking to Florida and returning home with flamingo souvenirs. In the 1910s and 1920s, Miami Beach’s first grand hotel, the Flamingo, had made the bird synonymous with wealth and pizzazz. After a 1926 hurricane leveled Millionaire’s Row, developers built hundreds of more modest hotels to cater to an eager middle class served by new train lines—and in South Beach, especially, architects employed the playful Art Deco style, replete with bright pinks and flamingo motifs.

This was a little ironic, since Americans had hunted flamingos to extinction in Florida in the late 1800s, for plumes and meat. But no matter. In the 1950s, the new interstates would draw working-class tourists down, too. Back in New Jersey, the Union Products flamingo inscribed one’s lawn emphatically with Florida’s cachet of leisure and extravagance.

The bird acquired an extra fillip of boldness, too, from the direction of Las Vegas—the flamboyant oasis of instant riches that the gangster Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel had conjured from the desert in 1946 with his Flamingo Hotel. Anyone who has seen Las Vegas knows that a flamingo stands out in a desert even more strikingly than on a lawn. In the 1950s, namesake Flamingo motels, restaurants, and lounges cropped up across the country like a line of semiotic sprouts.

And the flamingo was *pink*—a second and commensurate claim to boldness. The plastics industries of the fifties favored flashy colors, which Tom Wolfe called “the new electrochemical pastels of the Florida littoral: tangerine, broiling magenta, livid pink, incarnadine, fuchsia demure, Congo ruby, methyl green.” The hues were forward-looking rather than old-fashioned, just right for a generation, raised in the Depression, that was ready to celebrate its new affluence. And as Karal Ann Marling has written, the “sassy pinks” were “the hottest color of the decade.” Washing machines, cars, and kitchen counters proliferated in passion pink, sunset pink, and Bermuda pink. In 1956, right after he signed his first recording contract, Elvis Presley bought a pink Cadillac.

Why, after all, call the birds “pink flamingos”—as if they could be blue or green? The plastic flamingo is a hotter pink than a real flamingo, and even a real flamingo is brighter than anything else around it. There are five species, all of which feed in flocks on algae and invertebrates in saline and alkaline lakes in mostly warm habitats around the world. The people who have lived near these places have always singled out the flamingo as special. Early Christians associated it with the red phoenix. In ancient Egypt, it symbolized the sun god Ra. In Mexico and the Caribbean, it remains a major motif in art, dance, and literature. No wonder that the subtropical species stood out so loudly when Americans in temperate New England reproduced it, brightened it, and sent it wading across an inland sea of grass.

**I**t was bound to get noticed. Flamingos and lawn art ran afoul very quickly of the arbiters of culture. Art critics launched the most direct attacks. In *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, Gillo Dorfles singled out the new lawn-and-garden creatures as the “archetypal image” of bad taste. Dorfles took his cue from Clement Greenberg’s 1939 diatribe against kitsch as “the debased . . . simulacra of genuine Culture.” Kitsch, Greenberg had warned, “[drew] its life blood” from real Culture, and Dorfles agreed: “vampire kitsch” had evolved into “one of the crucial problems in the history of art.”

American critics had been assailing the mass-produced arts for many decades. But in the 1950s, the evils were multiplying as fast as plastics, and postwar intellectuals responded aggressively. “Mass culture,” Dwight Macdonald charged in 1953, “is . . . a cancerous growth on High Cul-



ture.” “The epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times,” Greenberg had warned. Dorfles agreed: it “killed all ability to distinguish between art and life.”

*Reality*: in the 1950s, it emerged with full force in dialogues on American society. And just as taste was fortified by the idea of nature and a countermodern sensibility, Reality often expressed a set of rising worries about the modern mediation of experience and about replication. Many Americans defined whatever seemed enduring, unique, and absolute as real. *Un-Reality*, by contrast, was human artifice run amok. What more logical authority to appeal to than nature? And plastic lawn creatures—whether flamingos, madonnas, or Union Products’ new lines of mice and ladybugs—emerged as the epitomization of the inauthentic.

Mass tourism came under attack, too, as the dire proliferation of ersatz experience. South Florida and Las Vegas—where working-class Americans presumed to extravagance at cheap French provincial motels with Versailles-like parterre gardens—merited special attention (from Tom Wolfe, among others) as centers for tastelessness and black holes of the ungenue. In the geography of un-Reality, the suburbs attracted their own set of critics. In the 1956 sociological study *The Organization Man*, William Whyte characterized the suburbs as a cultureless void that negated the very individualism that so many Americans had moved there to pursue. Suburbs were mass housing for the mass consumers. As the 1963 song went, “Little boxes made of ticky-tacky . . . little boxes, all the same.”

Nothing symbolized the suburbs more visibly than the regulation lawn, which also came under attack from a very different set of reality advocates. In the 1960s, the natural-lawn and organic-gardening movements rejected the lawn as an alien planting of non-native species whose survival depended on an industry led by ChemLawn and Techniturf. The eco-advocates called the lawn not just a bastion of toxicity, but also “lifeless [and] artificial.” The lawn was anti-nature. In other words, natural-lawn advocates and ChemLawn clients adhered to the same countermodern definition of nature as anti-artifice. But the anti-lawn camp pitted the gaining embrace of reality against the traditional canons of taste. The eco-advocates promoted more natural planting strategies, from native grasses and a moratorium on mowing to wildflower gardens, wetlands, vegetable gardens, and burn-your-own prairies. The conflicts grew heated. “Are you or have you ever been,” a prosecuting attorney in Wisconsin asked one suburbanite whose grass had exceeded the legal twelve-inch limit in the Sun Shadows West subdivision, “a member of any of those groups interested in preserving all types of plants?”

By the mid-sixties, these battalions of postwar critics had all raised direct or indirect objections to lawn flamingos. Gillo Dorfles, Tom Wolfe, and the home-prairie advocates weren’t exactly bowling buddies. But by

1970, even Sears had withdrawn the Union Products flamingos from its catalogue and replaced them with fiberglass waterfalls whose “uneven layering . . . resembles the natural, rugged beauty of authentic slate.”

Artificiality, mass conformity, false experience. These were fast emerging as the targets of the 1960s counterculture as well. The baby boomers in the expanded middle class had grown up in the suburbs, and as we came of age, we famously rejected the pink washing machines and trimmed green lawns. We made “Get real” one of our most memorable slogans; we criticized a wide range of social, economic, and political policies as “unreal”; and we appealed, with the weight of historical logic behind us, to nature as the counterforce. In fact, we used the terms “reality” and “nature” almost interchangeably, and made nature less a supporting authority, and more a reigning ideal, than it had ever been. Some baby boomers joined back-to-the-land movements. Many of us went camping and backpacking. But whether or not we ever donned a five-pound pair of hiking boots and actually went *to* nature, many of us drew on Nature as a metaphor. The Revolution, as Robert Gottlieb has remarked, was definitely “an Earth Happening.” *The Greening of America*, Charles Reich’s best-selling generational manifesto, championed the counterculture’s mission to replace “the false culture that goes with false consciousness” with a new “culture that rejects the substitution phenomenon . . . wherein artificiality replaces the natural.”

Alongside the postwar critics, the baby boomers armed themselves with Reality and Nature, and converged on the ersatz. And in the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, all the hostile forces pounced on one target, above all others, with unanimous and utmost scorn: PLASTIC. Its production and use continued to soar. But plastic crashed from a metaphoric peak, as the exemplar of “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry,” to the cancer at the core of America’s soul. As Joan Didion put it, America’s “most publicized self-doubts [were] Vietnam, Saran Wrap, diet pills, [and] the Bomb.” Gary Snyder wrote poems against “plastic spoons, plywood veneer, PVC pipe, vinyl seat covers.” A New Left manifesto excoriated the “white honkie culture . . . handed to us on a plastic platter.” And in 1968, when an affluent white honkie suburbanite put his arm around Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* and said, “I just want to say one word to you. Just one word . . . *plastics*,” the line captured perfectly the disaffections of an entire generation of middle-class baby boomers. And what could be more plastic in 1968 than a hot pink plastic flamingo (for \$3.69 a pair) that stuck out like a UFO on a lime green suburban lawn in Iowa or New Jersey?

When, exactly, did it become the very definition of anti-nature—the gewgaw to end all gewgaws, the *ne plus ultra* of lawn art? It is hard to say. But by 1972, when John Waters’s movie *Pink Flamingos* opened with a shot

of the eponymous birds outside the trailer of a three-hundred-pound woman played by the transvestite actor Divine—who vies successfully for the national title of “filthiest person alive” by eating dog feces and murdering her competitors in front of tabloid and TV reporters—it clearly had happened.

And that’s when people began to laugh. Divine wears garish makeup and print housedresses. She drives a ’58 Cadillac, urinates on suburban lawns, and has an incestuous relationship with her son, who himself is fond of dead chickens. Waters advertised the movie as an “exercise in poor taste” and “liked the understatement.” The underground press loved *Pink Flamingos* and crowned Waters the Prince of Puke. “It’s like getting a standing ovation,” Waters explained, “if someone vomits watching one of my films.” He enjoyed the reviews, too: *Variety* called it “one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made.”

Waters had grown up in an upper-middle-class suburb. And what more enjoyable and satisfying way for the rebel baby boomers to reject their parents’ values than to assault the middle-class faith in taste—and to use a blatant symbol of artifice? Still, Waters’s cohort itself defined American society as plastic: his exaggeration of artifice—which converted the flamingo into a tool for rebellion and gave it a second, ironic life—presupposed the critique. In his movie *Desperate Living*, which showcased cannibalism, a sex change, and female wrestling, the heroine yells, “ALL NATURAL FORESTS SHOULD BE TURNED INTO HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS! I WANT CEMENT COVERING EVERY BLADE OF GRASS IN THE NATION!” To “understand bad taste,” Waters has written, “one has to have very good taste.”

Led by Andy Warhol, pop artists, too, brazenly sought out the cheap, the fake, the mass-produced, the plastic. Warhol’s grids of identical Mona Lisas and Campbell’s soup cans deliberately tapped the deepest fears of the standard-bearers. “I am for art you can pick your nose with,” Claes Oldenburg proclaimed in his manifesto, “for the majestic art of dog-turds,” “for Kool-art, 7-UP art . . . Ex-lax art . . . Meat-o-rama art.” Just as Waters transgressed taste, the pop artists mocked nature to transgress the established boundaries of both taste and art. And like Waters, they, too, commented on mass culture in terms that at once celebrated and critiqued it. As Oldenburg wrote, “I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top.”

Gay men, too, adopted the plastic flamingo in the sixties. Waters planted his movies firmly in the camp sensibility, in which transvestism and drag queens have long played an especially conspicuous part. Gay men waged arguably the most creative celebration of the extremes of artifice—and the most transgressive, since for what mainstream social standard have Americans appealed to the absolute authority of nature

more vehemently than for heterosexuality? Versailles emerged as a camp Eden. Drag queens donned pink and plastic. And the pink flamingo settled in to enjoy a secure berth in the symbolic arsenal of the gay and camp subcultures.

In the early 1970s, Union Products issued a pig in a three-piece suit. It marketed a “flamingo deluxe,” too—with more natural, yellow legs—but it didn’t sell. Who would prefer it? Not the working-class fans, or the tasteful middle-class homeowners, or (especially) the baby boomer fans. By the late seventies, pink flamingos began to disappear into the hands of thieves under cover of night. Having become an established symbol of the insurrectionary—as a marker of the transgression of the unmovable boundary of nature—the bird became a useful thing to have around more generally to mark anything rebellious, outrageous, or oxymoronic. It became an effective way to post a sign: “Something subversive happening here.” What did pink flamingos have to do with real flamingos? Not much. But in the 1970s, we began to use them as a ubiquitous signpost for crossing the various, overlapping boundaries of class, taste, propriety, art, sexuality, and nature.

And then the uses and meanings of the pink flamingo became really complex. In 1984, *Miami Vice* splashed a glitzy vision of south Florida across American TV screens. Plastic flamingo sales boomed. In 1986, for the first time, Union Products sold more flamingos than Charlie the Ducks. Soon you could order them through a *Rolling Stone* ad, or from the flamingo specialty store Cat’s Pyjamas, where a box of two birds cost \$9.95, two dollars more than the same pair at Kmart.

The 1980s had arrived. As the sixties rebels moved into the economic mainstream, the new thirty-something yuppies still liked to think of themselves as social critics and cultural rebels. The early-sixties Port Huron manifesto for the New Left had begun, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort . . . looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” In the Reagan eighties, we began uncomfortably to inherit the world in immodest comfort. The crossing of boundaries remained a badge of identity, but it was now safer, and very often a matter of style. The flamingos at poolsides and on condo porches were like blue jeans in boardrooms and Jeeps in Upper West Side garages—or the Don Johnson combination, in *Miami Vice*, of a white Armani suit with a two-day beard and no socks. As the Cat’s Pyjamas catalogue advertised, just above a listing for a pink-flamingo vinyl doormat: “On every page, you’ll find just what you need to ruin your neighborhood.”

In the 1980s, Americans traveled with the birds across the borders of states and nations. We gave flamingos as birthday, housewarming, and moving presents. They showed up as wedding decorations, and we substituted them for reindeer in Christmas lawn tableaux. In sum, once the

flamingo became a baby boomer signpost for boundary violations in the eighties—after having evolved, in the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, into the metonymy of artifice and anti-nature—we logically began to use it, in an unorchestrated rash of gestures coast to coast, as a marker for crossing into new places, times, eras, stages of life, and even the most sacrosanct reaches of nature itself. At the same time, the truly transgressive crossings had become less dangerous. Thieves, for example, still snatched the birds at night—but the owners now met ransom demands with play money and pink champagne. In the early seventies, by contrast, such thefts had shared the same reception, and the same nocturnal defiance, as the leftist missions to repaint black lawn jockeys with African liberation colors.

The boundaries of art, too, had become safer to cross. In the 1980s, art galleries featured kitsch exhibits. In 1983, Christo wrapped eleven islands off the coast of Miami with bands of hot pink polypropylene plastic. The project was at once a self-conscious transgression from high art to mass culture—which, like Warhol's soup cans, maintained the boundaries by commenting on them—and a convincing proof of the erosion of these same borders. Inevitably, it also made a statement about nature and artifice in modern American society. The pink flamingo, of course, made exactly the same statement for less than ten dollars and without a fleet of boats. In 1987, the governor of Massachusetts issued a proclamation that the pink flamingo was an essential contribution to American folk art.

Still, the pink flamingo had graduated to Art not so much because of its aesthetic merits but because of the baby boomers' ascendance. In the eighties, artifice consolidated its firm place in the adult boomers' identity by at least two routes. First, the thirty-somethings began to wax nostalgic about the 1950s. The pink flamingo effectively called up a collective childhood past—the innocence, optimism, and exuberant fakeness of the era of passion pink kitchens. Flamingos manufactured in the fifties began to appear with Art Deco bric-a-brac in antique stores—even though these fifty-dollar birds had been manufactured from essentially the same mold as the ones at Kmart. But the fifties children had been sixties rebels, too. We'd embraced the extremes of artifice to rebel against taste, but also to show that the un-Reality of American society could be fun to play in. In the 1980s, many middle-class baby boomers would exude a cool, ironic, half-affectionate, half-mocking stance toward TV, lawn ornaments, and the rest of what Dwight Macdonald had once labeled the "spreading ooze." Some of us worried and wrung our hands about mass culture. Some of us enjoyed it. Many of us did both.

Ironically, or conveniently, as we fortified a vision of nature as a Place Apart that erases people's economic *uses* of nature, we were consolidating our own affluence. And the retail landscape was changing fast to tap into

yuppie desires. Forever Flamingo, Do Wah Diddy, and Sarsaparilla Deco Designs catered to the nostalgic embrace of the fifties. A second set of companies, which included Cat's Pyjamas, Poor Taste, and Archie McPhee's Toy Store and Espresso Tiki Hut, marketed Waters-style irony. All these stores prominently featured pink flamingos. On the other side of the divide, The Nature Company, Natural Wonders, and The Natural Selection were strict anti-artifice zones. The St. Louis Zoo gift shop did sell a polyester flamingo named Laverne and a music box, with two revolving flamingos, that played "The Way We Were." But here, as at other nature stores, the standard plastic flamingo was *avis non grata*.

By the late 1980s, the flamingo had acquired a great measure of legitimacy. Other lawn ornaments came and went—Granny Fannies and fuzzy lawn sheep in 1987–88, a lawn-mice revival in 1989–90. In 1987, flamingo fans nationally—a few in new clubs such as the International Society for the Preservation of Pink Lawn Flamingos—celebrated the bird's thirtieth birthday. In reaction, John Waters gave away every flamingo he owned. At Union Products, Don Featherstone was promoted to vice president. He signed with an agent and moved into a large home in Fitchburg with his wife, their poodle Bourgeois, and a large flamingo collection. And in 1987, Featherstone made the first major alteration to his original mold: he inscribed his autograph on the bird's flank, to distinguish his design from copies marketed by two other companies. "We're trying," he explained, "to protect its image as the original." From that point on, Kmart shoppers could check to be sure that they were purchasing the real and legitimate symbol of inauthenticity and artificiality.

And so the fifties children entered the 1990s—a decade in which we've been obsessed with boundaries, and in which the Internet challenges even the borders of time and space. The culture wars raged fiercely in the universities, where baby boomers elevated African folk tales, yard art, and Pearl Jam to the same level of cultural legitimacy as Shakespeare, Rodin, and Beethoven. As multiculturalism became a watchword, affluent white Americans rifled cultural traditions worldwide, in a sort of global rummage sale, for food, clothes, music, and religion. Sexual borders became roiled in their own set of battles in the arts, the courts, the universities, and the military. In 1997, the comedian Ellen DeGeneres's coming out drew as much media scrutiny as a small war.

It's not surprising that pink flamingos flew off the shelves in the 1990s, even as concrete "fashion geese" reigned as the new rage in ornaments that people actually put on their lawns. We continued to travel with flamingos—you don't do that with Charlie the Duck or a concrete goose wearing a dress—and a pair showed up at Cape Canaveral before a rocket launch. We use the birds, in old ways and new, to mark the whizzing traffic across borders—intact, blurred, safe, dangerous, social, cultural,

national, aesthetic, spatial, temporal, sexual, planetary. Campers post flamingos outside their tents at national forest campsites. You can now hire the company Flamingo Surprise to plant forty-odd flamingos on a friend's lawn the night before his birthday. A flurry of crime novels—*Flamingo*, *Neon Flamingo*, *A Morning for Flamingos*—send outsider heroes into a seedy Southern underworld. And my own fast-growing collection of flamingos? It didn't happen entirely on purpose, most of it having been bestowed on me by friends and relatives, with the exception of a special pair autographed for me by Don Featherstone. Still, I'm a baby boomer, raised in an affluent suburb, and at once a onetime scholar and a "nature person." So perhaps the birds mark my forays into a topic that doesn't seem, on the surface, to be either scholarly or natural—tame border traffic, really, compared with the "pink flamingo relay" at the 1994 Gay Games in New York that featured a combination swim race and costume pageant.

In the nineties, the affluent baby boomers entered their forties and fifties to achieve new heights of status and power; the flamingo swept into its middle-aged years of glory and reward. The *Annals of Improbable Research* awarded Don Featherstone the 1996 Ig Nobel Prize in Art. In 1997, a new Internet site on pink flamingos named On Stagnant Pond—a counter-Walden of anti-Nature—swiftly garnered a raft of awards. In the art scene, lawn ornaments moved from art galleries into museums. The Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, housed in an Italianate Renaissance-style villa, posted a plastic flamingo in a pot outside a 1996 exhibit on Marilyn Monroe and Elvis. As baby boomer nostalgia has turned hagiographic—the last five years have seen Pez conventions, hundredth-anniversary celebrations of Jell-O, and a new National Plastics Center and Museum in Leominster—the pink flamingo has reigned inevitably as patron saint. It's a featured entry in the 1990 *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* and the 1991 *Whole Pop Catalog*.

In 1996, Don Featherstone bought and became president of Union Products. In 1997, the bird's fortieth birthday engendered national hoopla as Featherstone traveled to flamingo signings around the country. The birthday coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Pink Flamingos*, and Fine Line rereleased the movie nationally, with extra footage that included Waters's justification for killing a chicken: "Well, I eat chicken and I know the chicken didn't land on my plate from a heart attack. I think we made the chicken's life better. It got to be in a movie." *People* interviewed Waters's steadfast parents: "We're very proud of John, but we just don't see any point in subjecting ourselves to that film." Some reviewers, however, lost sight of the movie's rebellious and emetic role in the annals of postwar culture. "With all the plastic product around," the *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer wrote, "[this film is] a *nutritiously* entertaining event."

In 1995, faced with a dorm-room shortage, Princeton University rented trailers to house the extra students, who promptly planted pink flamingos outside. The boundaries of class and culture, which these birds crossed but also marked, haven't exactly crumbled into dust. In the nineties, my generation of midlife homeowners has spurred a renaissance in upscale garden ornaments, including eighteenth-century English antiques. The catalogues for Earthmade and other high-end garden-supply outlets feature \$299 rustic copper herons, \$179 Classic Fiberglass urns, even \$24.95 stone sharks ("Eats pink flamingos for breakfast!"). Yet the dialogues of aesthetics have come a very long way since Capability Brown and Andrew Jackson Downing. These borders—and so many others—are recognizable. But aren't they under intense negotiation?

All except one lone boundary: *Nature and Artifice*. In three decades, the baby boomers have broken down borders of every kind. But as we've done so, we've consistently made the wall between nature and not-nature more visible and powerful, and we've left it standing. And this is the last secret, so far, of the pink flamingo. In an age of ever more fluid and negotiable boundaries, an effective boundary marker itself has to mark a boundary that is defined as rigid and absolute. The pink flamingo still works so beautifully because it stakes the ur-boundary that we have used to mark and challenge all others. The countermodern definition of nature as anti-artifice has remained remarkably unchallenged. We've asked, What is art—and can it be a pink flamingo? What is good taste—and should we care? What is good literature or good music or good film? What is normal sexuality? *But has anyone ever asked whether a pink flamingo is nature?* If a few of us have called the plastic creature art, who has called it nature? And for all who have questioned the *nature* of art or taste or sexuality or moral right and wrong or even reality, how many of us have asked what *nature* is? The pink flamingo has told us very little about real flamingos or about the nonhuman natural world. And yet, within each plastic flamingo lies an unquestioned *definition* of nature—as anti-artifice, not-human, and countermodern.

When I visited the Union Products factory in Leominster, I watched two men use a large vacuum tube to suck the polyethylene crystals, flecked with pink dye, from outsize cardboard Mobil and Phillips 66 boxes and expel the mixture into aluminum molds. Other workers painted the bills yellow and black, using petroleum-based paints. They cut lengths of rolled steel, made from iron and other ores, for the legs. Very literally, the plastic pink flamingo is wholly real, and certifiably natural. It's just nature that's been mined, harvested, sold, heated, boxed, resold, and reshipped. It is nature mixed with human artifice—just like Andrew Jackson Downing's lawn, mowed in the moonlight by "invisible hands." The definition of nature as anti-artifice has always erased the human presence in our bastions of Nature, and the definition of artifice



as anti-nature has erased the nature used to manufacture it. My generation and class have wielded a vision of naturalness that sidesteps our own complicity in the aggressive and unsustainable uses of natural resources. And we've made it ever more entrenched as our economic power has grown. Would you believe that the history of the pink flamingo has a moral? The symbol of artifice is actually nature incarnate.

What *can* a pink flamingo mean? The garden writer Allen Lacy has written that "every garden tempts us to live within [the] illusion . . . that it is something natural, not the creation of artifice." "The plastic flamingo," he observes, "remind[s] us what gardens are: not the gifts of nature to deserving human beings but the products of human beings cooperating with the natural order to create utility and delight." Signposts everywhere, in the venues of nature and culture: flamingos on lawns, in movie theaters, on ski slopes, in the hands of thieves, in art galleries, and on the snowed-in shores of Hudson Bay. We've read the signs, uprooted them, and reinvented them. Yet the pink flamingos seem to me much like the Jell-O at the hundredth-anniversary Jell-O parties. The more variations we come up with, the more the plastic birds insist on their essential nature.

As for Don Featherstone, he's pondered the history and stardom of his creation with some wistfulness. "I really like how my flamingo looks," he says. "But I can't help but wonder, why not my duck?"

His duck, he adds, is more realistic.

And in that last observation, I suspect, lies the answer.