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The Tree Question:

Field research & cultivation practices in
community-based public art in an age of ecological crises

abstract

Since the pioneering 1982 intervention by Joseph Beuys, the *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* / *7000 Oaks – City Forestation Instead of City Administration*, tree planting, and cultivation more generally, have increasingly become contemporary art practice. Employment of such cultivation interventions, as contemporary art and not as landscape architecture, have nearly always used as a way to challenge particular notions and demarcations of the 'public', on one hand, and experiences of communities, landscapes and ecosystems, on the other hand. Such a set of oppositional tactics often contrasts itself with professionalized landscape architecture more often employed to re-enforce the status quo of public space. And since documenta 7, a raft of experimental artists have rifted on notions of agriculture (and silviculture, horticulture, and permaculture) as visual culture most notably Alan Sonfist (et al 2014, Landi 2011), Ron Benner (2008), the Fallen Fruit collective (Goodyear 2012), and Sam Van Aken (Brooks 2014). But precisely how 'contemporary' are such tree planting 'works' and how are associated practices and conceptualizations changing as ecological crises intensify, as cultural signifiers shift, as access to scientific information increases, and as data sources and ecological and social paradigms diversify? And how do these Western and often Eurocentric aesthetic movements, involving trees and urban space, construct relationships with recoveries and practices of indigenous communities often at odds with modernity?

One point of inquiry is provided by Claire Bishop's 2012 note that, "Beuys drew a conceptual line between his output as a sculptor and his discursive / pedagogic work" (page 245), the latter including his tree planting. But if cultivation is more of a conceptual disruptor and teaching opportunity than part of artistic production to produce an art work, why does the aesthetic importance of trees for interventions in public space

continue to increase? A more problematic and indefinite set of questions derive from the divergent and shifting uses of tree planting in contemporary culture. For example, there is no sign that the 1982 intervention in Kassel was intended to contribute to carbon sequestration or to conserve local habitat and species, or to build community through sharing fruit as in the recent tree planting work in Los Angeles of Fallen Fruit. Today, it would be difficult to plant a tree, as a contemporary art work, without professed relationships to countering climate change, gentrification, and homelessness and contributing to carbon sequestration, food security, and social equity. So like painting, drawing, and sculpture, the basic 'materials' of tree planting, however organic, are infinitely pliable -- as long as respective organisms and ecosystems can survive and be part of public space. There is an implicit aesthetic of survival.

What are the diverse roles of science in these forms of artistic research? In particular, how does tree-planting-as-contemporary-art challenge, expand, and re-enforce broader art movements such as,

1. various forms of community participation as art (embodied in the work of Suzanne Lacey and Martha Rosler),
2. scientific experimentation as in 'wetware' and biological modification,
3. traditional knowledge and other indigenous experiences,
4. relational aesthetics as new forms of education and community aesthetic engagement, and
5. micro-urban tactics that transform multiple publics?

Or do the heightened skills and artifice required to sufficiently manipulate a site in deteriorating environments, to insure that trees will thrive, represent another kind of cultivation of culture that signals a new and more tenuous phase of the "Anthropocene" (Wark 2015)? In other words, are the creative perspectives and practices of contemporary artists, particularly collaboratives and collectives, increasingly necessary to keep communities, ecosystems, and public spaces 'alive', diverse, and evolving?

Brochu-Ingram presents some early results from some of his ongoing investigations, designs, and interventions in the Vancouver and Geneva regions.

references

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