

Making Art Responsibly

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Chair: Terry Smith

Wood Design

This essay is a written defense for the body of work titled, “How Does Your Garden Grow?” as well as an examination of how art can behave responsibly in regards to the social process.

MAKING ART RESPONSIBLY

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by

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For Jeremy, whom I couldn't get through the day without, and Mable, who is a constant reminder of what is important.

Thank you Ron, for making me aware that there are no givens.

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INTRODUCTION

Being an artist can perform itself as a selfish act, making art merely because it “feels right” and as “symbolic of the artists emotions or ideas.” I have always enjoyed the artistic processes but have also experienced guilt and regret when I have resorted to the self absorbed attitudes of defending an object because as if meaningful for reasons other than utility or fashion.

But, it would also be certainly unfair to assume all artists practice art in this sense. I know that there are many individuals who have worked hard to create art as a tool for changing social processes and institutional givens. More credit should be given to those individuals, and I hope more artists take their creativity into other socially and environmentally just acts. What is unfortunate is that these artists continue to be written off by those who practice “art for art’s sake.”

Back to the guilt and regret, that doesn’t mean there isn’t something social in the traditional techniques of art. But, this will require a different sense of the act of making, painting, building and producing art than what the ideas of Fine Art have framed them. For the purpose of this thesis, art is defined here as an object, idea, a movement or performance representing social values.

With these thoughts about art I set out to make work that I felt was socially responsible. So what can that even mean? There are many avenues to giving an

aesthetic form to social responsibility; what follows is my way of participating. I set out with food in hand, and sustainability in mind. My narrative will be in reverse, I will work through my research beginning with the idea of sustainability: one of the most important ideas currently affecting human life.

SUSTAINABILITY

To understand how sustainability should be accounted for in art, an understanding of the discourse on sustainability should be determined. Definitions for sustainability are easily acquired through many sources and it typically is broken into three schools of thought.

The first that sustainability is the way an ecosystem reproduces itself over time, the second, how an ecosystem reproduces for human needs over time and then there is the U S federal land management version of sustainable development- that is how to sustain a developing capitalism. Ecologists John C. Vucetich and Michael P. Nelson have identified problems with these approaches to sustainability. In their essay, "Sustainability: Virtuous or Vulgar?", they have accounted for an ethical approach that defines sustainability as "meeting human needs in a socially just manner without depriving ecosystems of their health" I think that this definition is the most reasonable, responsible and important definition that I want to use when approaching solutions and identifying problems within the sustainability discourse.

What makes sustainability such an important topic of today is the lack of it, at least for human needs. We will soon exhaust our resources, and as of now, cannot compensate for the reckless actions that has every rational scientist and concerned individual scrambling for a solution. But to say that there is no solution to our current versions of sustainability, that there is no reason for a supportive type of art, of all things, to address such a lost cause, is not an artistic option.

Every action, decision, and thought in a given day should take into consideration the sustainability affect and must also consider the art act. The choice we make about our homes, our food, our transportation, our technologies, all are sustainable choices, or not sustainable choices. As an artists, those choices are prevalent in art making as well, regardless of being a potter, a painter or a conceptual artist. All efforts, or lack there of, are accountable to for sustainability. Some actions are absolutely more profound in their role as a solution to sustainability, but all efforts towards achieving sustainability should be recognized.

There has been a lot of effort to locate and define a role for art that accounts for sustainability. Sam Bower, director of The Green Museum, has set out to define a variety of terms that are related to this role. Environmental Art is used as an umbrella term to define art that deals with restoration, collaboration, protection, exposure and sustainability of the environment and ecosystems. There are many identified eco-artists, that is artists that participate intentionally in eco or environmental issues. The range of projects are wide from re-landscaping damaged earth to using recycled products in artworks amongst other actions. I would also like to note that there is room in eco art for traditional artists to locate sustainable practices within their work, and they should do such.

A LOOK AT EATING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Eating: this task seems so simple, yet, as countless titles in the bookstore suggest, millions of Americans get it all wrong. Since the 1950's industrial agribusiness has been on the rise producing many processed foods such as cereals, breads, boxed dinners and many, many more. This process has created many negative side effects for our bodies and the environment. Chemicals have crept their way into breads and grain products by way of preservatives and pesticides. The same is true for produce and dairy.

Goals of industrialized agriculture are to be profitable, productive, uniform and durable. Natural production hardly operates this way and consumers have been coaxed into believing that it should. These capitalist characteristics have penetrated the produce, the seed and the land.

The land and soil husbandry, has radically changed over the last 70 years. Soil fertility (throughout the world) has now degraded and needs to be constantly treated to support the business of plants. Soil used to be nourished with rich compost and crops used to be rotated and the land was given time off to let it rejuvenate. Now the soil is treated with chemicals, planted with the same crop and almost never given a season off. Adding chemical fertilizers does not replenish the soil and, in the long run, depletes it even more of its nutrients.

The seeds of the plants we eat are particularly fussed over and picked for their properties. This isn't all bad except industry has begun a process that creates genetically modified organisms, or GMO's. These seeds have been genetically reduced on a cellular level. It is not like selective breeding, where plants are selected and then cross-pollinated. Scientists are now reducing the genetics complexity of plants and crossbreed under a microscope by way of bacteria and viruses. Two such invented crops that have immense commercial value are BT and Roundup Ready. These crops were produced to produce their own pesticide in all parts of the plant. So far the impacts on health and environment are unknown, but studies and speculations are not producing a positive outlook. The chemical Bt is so abundant in the plant that it leaves 25 times more residue in the food product than topical treatment and has yet to reduce the amount of topical pesticides used. Bt and Roundup Ready are specifically modified corn crops but are being adapted into others such as beets and alfalfa.

The final fruit, the produce of the plant, now loaded with chemicals absorbed from the earth, is again treated with more chemicals to ensure preservation. Many crops are picked early, just before ripening, and treated with a chemical to prolong the ripening process. Additional chemicals are added to produce to extend the growing period and preserve them for travel. These preservatives create toxins that are carried into the bloodstreams of eaters, soil and waterways.

With a proper sense of biodiversity, food production could easily be done in an organic, sustainable manner. Biodiversity would mean that fields were planted in rotation and given time off. This would ensure soil fertility. Planting a variety of species within a field

is a good plan to create a pest resistant environment. The different species all have their own repellent to pests. If one species were attacked, the entire crop would not be compromised.

The solution to these problems are to buy local, organic and by IPM's (integrated pest management). Food can be bought at farms, farm stands, farmer's markets, CSA (community supported agriculture), co-ops or independent grocers. These practices make it necessary to buy in season. If needed, traditional methods of preservation are friendlier, at home canning or freezing.

The excess production of processed foods has easily overtaken our homes because it is convincingly sold to consumers as a necessary, convenient way of eating. Excess boxed and canned foods have become staples in the American diet with the invention of nutritionism. Nutritionism is the science of food that has turned eating into a false comfort of health. Scientists have spent the past 4 decades determining what nutrients, and how much we should put into our bodies. As a result, food companies tailor their products to meet these requirements. As new nutritional 'discoveries' are uncovered daily, and with new products that promote the findings. The problem is these products, although rich in vitamin C may come at a price. Other "bad" ingredients might be lingering in the ingredient list, let alone the studies that show that many nutrients are absorbed better when eaten from the source. For example, beta-carotene is an immune booster that helps fight off colds, flu, cystitis and skin problems. A study of smokers showed that those who ate more beta-carotene had a lower incidence of lung cancer,

but this was true only when the beta-carotene was acquired from food, not a supplement.

Eating has become a science, carefully calculated and packaged in a cardboard box, the result being more Americans are overweight and suffering from unique American diseases than any other country. Common sense, and scientific study point to imitation foods, preservatives and pesticides to be the culprit.

EATING AND ART

To address that nagging voice inside that tells me making art is selfish, I decided to marry my concern with food sustainability to my interests in making art. The start of this project was object oriented. I wanted to make gardens, ones that could be accessible 365 days a year whether you live in a college dorm or on a farm. The result was a rickety looking painted box, hung on the wall equipped with a compact fluorescent light, (CFL). This indoor garden provides an opportunity for people to grow plants such as herbs or lettuces in places where there is little or no natural sunlight. The second of the series was an indoor approach to a public garden. These gardens were freestanding boxes, set inside of an art museum that had access to natural light.

“How Does Your Garden Grow? Indoor Garden”, brings awareness to food production and offers fresh, local foods in an interactive, intimate environment; the home. They are constructed with reused woods and non toxic milk paints, further addressing issues of sustainability. The indoor gardens, when used, address these issues and offer a positive response to food matters, but the interactive nature of the project could not exist without addressing how these gardens will get into the hands of people.

To address this I took the gardens to an outdoor, local farmers market. The gardens were well received and I was able to speak to people about the origins of their meals. I came across something that should have been so obvious to me from the start: most of these people were already familiar with this stuff! I should have been sitting in front of a

grocery, or big box store. I could have passed out farmers market flyers at fast food chains! With my attention being so focused on the object, I overlooked what is possibly more important; the attitudes and practices of my intended audience.

In “How Does Your Garden Grow? Public Garden”, the act of installing garden planters inside of the museum space offers an opportunity for the public to acquire the private museum space for a public activity. Seeds, water, trowels, shears and collection bags were available for garden tending. The garden beds were made of old fence materials to suggest re-appropriation of goods in effort to avoid over production. The location was intended to transition the attitudes of the museum that are ideological in that they naturalize the cultural aspects of art with their idea of fine art. Mine is a social practice where art is recognized as a valuable cultural practice.

I will confess that the idea of a public garden in a museum could be played out as a remarkable interaction; however, my garden was unsuccessful in its intentions. In hopes of creating an opportunity for the museum to willingly participate in the social and for the social to take the opportunity to bring ecological practices in the museum, just the opposite happened. By putting the gardens in the museum, the viewer assumed the gardens to be fine art instead of acknowledging the museum as a public space. It is an unfortunate act of the public to not question the role of the museum, but it was an irresponsible act of the artist to not address the possibility of this outcome. In any case, I have learned that the role of the museum is still widely assumed as an outside of culture experience to the public.



"How Does Your Garden Grow? Indoor Garden"



“How Does Your Garden Grow? Public Garden”

CONCLUSION

Making indoor gardens has lead me to feel somewhat better about making art. It feels a little less selfish to make something that not only is useful but carries with it indicators of sustainability; real, fresh, local food. The process was fulfilling and enlightening, opening my eyes to all elements to sustainable measures. I know enough to realize that my project was not a solution, but it was an initiative, it was a small spark that planted seeds in some other minds as well as more in my own.

The efforts to make art and be socially responsible can definitely be challenging. It requires us to look at art differently, as a part of culture and as an agent of change. Ecology is having a difficult time accounting for sustainable practices and thus art should not expect to come to any finite solutions. It is important; however, for all of society to make choices and initiatives that support sustainability in a socially just manner without depriving ecosystems of their health. All small steps could lead to something bigger than our intentions and are worth exploring.

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