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Profile: Anne Lise Jensen

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Artist Anne Lise Jensen became inspired by the public gardens of New York City to create work that both reacted to and with their existence — and empowered the communities that worked in them.

Jensen's original project, "A Lot of Possibilities," has been transformed into an exhibit at MCLA Gallery 51 that functions as the art version of transplanting a crop in another garden, with the hope that it will lead to further iterations.

The community gardens in New York City began in the 1970s, when the city went bankrupt and buildings and lots were abandoned. Citizens began to make use of the space.

"People within the neighborhoods started building the gardens, not just from scratch, but from having to clear out a lot of garbage and debris and what other people were throwing out of their windows," Jensen said during an interview this week. "Sometimes people would be literally throwing garbage out of their window and into the lot."

In the 1990s, there was a similar scourge sweeping the city — partially economic, but also social, with crack overtaking some neighborhoods. Jensen's apartment building — and the community garden her apartment overlooks — is situated in Manhattan Valley, which is close to Central Park, north of 96th Street, and at the end of the 20th century, considered a marginalized neighborhood. It was at that time that Jensen first encountered the garden.

"I was literally spending a lot of time on my fire escape trying to absorb having actually made the move as well as taking in what it was that was going below, because I couldn't quite figure it out," she said.

Soon, she ventured out in the garden and began writing about it, which was a springboard to social interaction and joining the community.

"I began to get to know my neighbors that way, through talking with them while writing about the garden," she said. "It was also my own tool for interacting with people, period."

Jensen discovered that the city wanted to take back a lot of the gardens, since the properties they inhabited were once again becoming lucrative. The communities that overhauled the properties and built the gardens — thus transforming their own neighborhoods into livable environments — weren't happy about this, and a movement began to try and save the gardens. Yet, across the city, they began slowly to disappear.

"The garden was used for both gardening and urban farming as well as social activities," Jensen said. "It really is a place where people interact and become a community. I was trying to think of different strategies of how it could be preserved. They have social capital; they have green capital, but there is this skepticism amongst the city politicians, especially because we're in a recession.

"I thought, what if we add cultural capital in terms of making it a cultural site? It's a lot harder to demolish an area that's also a cultural site, so it was also using art as a strategy as well as genuinely really loving the idea of making them into sculpture gardens."

Jensen's first move was to set up her own apartment as a gallery space, in which she exhibited artists who made art about the community garden outside her window. The following year, she secured a grant to begin placing artists in gardens. That movement grew, and the idea that these were spaces that a community was entitled to — and through which the city benefited — caught on.

With the show at MCLA Gallery 51, the idea is to transplant that idea — like a seedling — to another location, with the hope that it doesn't stop in North Adams and helps to build botanical connections that stretch from the personal to the universal and connect communities through art and gardening.

"It is exactly what you can do with vegetation and plants," said Jensen. "You can take it as a concept in a city like New York, where it's so varied where people come from. They will often have and grow things in the garden that remind them of home — some herbs that they used for healing or doing that with or plants that are a reminder — so that's transplanting your memories into this lot. You're going in the present and forging new bonds with people in the present."

She sees the power of that idea in its adaptability — that it can move from urban to rural, from outdoor to indoor, and mix up the cultures that partake of the movement.

“It can be what it is but also really adaptable, so that people can put in their own things,” she said. “It’s a very specific situation in North Adams, both in terms of the space as well as the fact that land is much more readily available. But it can still be a trigger to reevaluate how you go about these areas that you take for granted, that might be empty or might have no value.

“You overlook it, but suddenly it can be a site of ideas where you then take the idea and start to realize it with people. So hopefully it will be inspiring on a multitude of levels.”

At center, Jensen sees the show — and the ideas it portrays — as a call to unity in whatever communities public gardens, and the accompanying art, take root. She sees the show as integral to this — a reversal of the process as she accomplished it in New York City, and a testament to the power of people working together.

“You could also have it in reverse, where there could be an exhibition of work that would then go — instead of traveling to another city or a warehouse somewhere — but go into the gardens and start them that way,” she said.

“That’s where the adaptability comes in. It has a real set purpose, but the idea is to not be close to any platform to help this happen.”