

## ***A Lot of Possibilities***

“A garden is a place of sanctuary, a space free from the particulars of place and from conventional or clock time, which, as linear and sequential, only moves from the past toward the future”.

*Stephen Horne (artist and writer)*

### Introduction

*A Lot of Possibilities* is a project by artist Anna Lise Jensen that belongs to a practice of contemporary art that reflects the concept of artwork as communal and participatory. A socially engaged artist, Jensen can be considered as an activist artist.<sup>1</sup> Through her work she supports, creates and manages social art activities to spark a communal sense of space, sharing and happenings. *A Lot of Possibilities* has brought together a roster of drastically different artists who, joining the coalition, have generated an uncanny number of works inspiring one another, interacting with public spaces, combining a range of mediums and strategizing small forgotten islands of urban fabric.

At its original and early state, *A Lot of Possibilities* aimed to place contemporary artists' work in domestic and non-conventional spaces to offer artists a place to showcase their work. The first group show featured Nanna Debois Buhl, Laura Fayer, Sandra Eula Lee, Sandra Mack-Valencia, Mark Inglis Taylor and Jonathan Velardi who made their interpretations on a theme of transplantation and transformation in "interior lots" at WinterSpace in New York City, in 2009.

While numerous artists have given their contribution to *A Lot of Possibilities* the project has moved forward and opened up to more opportunities. It has started to place contemporary artist works in city community gardens, and to create dialogue between artists, gardeners and city officials, mixing up the private, public and functional aspects of exhibition spaces. The desire to turn these gardens into partial sculpture gardens is driven both by aesthetic sensibility as well as municipal strategy: by adding the layer of cultural site, the community gardens stand a greater chance against future demolition.

*A Lot of Possibilities* originated in New York City but the project, true to its name, has become suitable for other locations. New York City, like many other cities, has experienced an on-going urban re-organization largely benefiting the middle and upper classes. Despite the destruction of the older neighborhoods—whether in the interest of commercial, civic, or other forces, such as enhanced mobility for trucks and private cars—extirpating the haunts of those beyond the reach of law and bourgeois proclivities, adversely affecting the lives and culture of the poorer residents. The poor are removed from a free social life in the street and pushed toward the more remote neighborhoods.

In his work “The Urban Revolution” Henri Lefevbre says: “The big social groups (consisting of classes, parts of classes, or institutions ...) act with and/or against each other. From their interactions, strategies, successes, and defeats grow the qualities and “properties” of urban space. The urban paradigm has overtaken and subsumed all others, determining the social relations and the conduct of daily life within them.

Offering a space of openness and freedom, *A Lot of Possibilities* aims to re-categorize the urban garden and emphasize art's potential to contribute to critical perception. It is a social strategy as well as a critic and a stimulus to the society. The critic is framed within the intent of placing an urban garden in a vacant lot in contrast with the urban order; at the same time, the stimulus is in the purpose of conducting a life within the realm of art affirming its autonomy from the urban system in a provocative way, though trying to stimulate amity.<sup>2</sup>

*A Lot of Possibilities* left the intimate dimension of domestic spaces and has become a player among big social groups opening up to a multitude of options combining art and activism. Such discourse has a long history of experiences in contemporary art, from the Avant-gard to Situationism till the most recent manifesto of the Istanbul Biennial.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion *A Lot of Possibilities* powerfully affirms that art not only thrives when not separated from category of life, but also that art and cultural institutional frameworks are useful strategies for improving living conditions on a multitude of levels.

## ***A Lot of Possibilities, North Adams***

I met Anna Lise in New York in 2009 through a mutual friend, Jo Q. Nelson. At that time Anna Lise had already started to work on *A Lot of Possibilities* showcasing artists four times a year through a seasonal coalition. Our mutual friend, who managed a studio-loft in Queens, NY, asked me to curate “SpringSpace”, one of the four appointments of the project which opened in May.

Since its original inception *A Lot of Possibilities* became a city-base social intervention practice. The participant artists have been cultural free agents whose artwork had contributed to save public spaces creating an alternative fruition of their art.

In Summer 2010, I thought about bringing *A Lot of Possibilities* to North Adams making MCLA Gallery 51 an additional venue for some of the artwork originated through this project. Pushed by the desire to actively contribute to the ongoing debate about art and change, I was intrigued by the challenge of adapting site-specific installations to a more traditional white box space.

I have been exposed to the art featured in the several coalition exhibitions throughout the years and when I was asked to curate a show in North Adams I felt that this particular project might have served as inspiration to this community and decided to offer the coalition one more possibility.

Anna Lise's response was, as always, enthusiastic. She came to visit the gallery within a couple of weeks from my first e-mail. On that occasion, Alyssa Casey suggested to use the plants in my backyard for a papermaking workshop to be held in the gallery. Brainstorming and comparing our ideas we started a conversation that brought us to the current exhibition.

From paper salad with cable dressing to small, unique, beetles glass sculptures, from ceramic and neon cows to pink flamingos, the sculptures, the prints, the installations, each and everyone of the works on view along with the coalition archive allow the viewer to wonder among the animal and vegetable kingdom in a playful and, in some occasion, dramatic way.

We also wanted to expand the concept of community engagement to North Adams' gardeners and farmers. Maria Mazzocco of the Houghton Community Garden positively responded to the call and decided to create a winter garden in one of the gallery windows. Along with that particular installation, the show will feature old and new works of eleven artists: Alumbrados (Laura Fayer & Sandra Mack-Valencia), Norbert Francis Attard, Suzanne Broughel, Alyssa Casey, Lisbeth Langkjaer, Caroline Parks, John Tursi, Petra Valentova, Jonathan Velardi, and Virginia Vergara.

*A Lot of Possibilities, North Adams* aims to sparkle a thoughtful, positive conversation across a community that has demonstrated to be extraordinary open to sharing, discussing and seeking new approaches to public spaces as well as finding new ways of life, without nostalgia, but looking back to farming, supporting local produce and contributing to deepen our relationship with food and nature.

Valeria Federici

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<sup>1</sup> Activism consists of intentional action to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change. Activism became an important factor of contemporary history and art in the 70s. See: *The Citizen Artist, 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena, An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978-1998* edited by Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland; for a more recent conversation about art and activism see *Beneath the Bureaucracy, the Beach in Art Papers, January-February 2011, pp.24-29*

<sup>2</sup> A garden is an expression of what, from our perspective in historical time, is an ideal conception of place - outside conventional time - in short, "paradise". As such, it not only frees us in the phenomenological moment but also offers a model that relativises dominant capitalist, technological constructions of space and time, revealing the existence of alternatives. In this sense, then, relieved from conventional time and the everyday world it constructs, we are freed from that version of the past and the future that have each offered only two possibilities-either alienated labour of development or the labour of mourning. *Stephen Horne – The Avant-Garden: Offering a Space of Freedom in Border Crossing No. 116 – December, January, February 2010/2011, pp.59-65*

<sup>3</sup> “ (...) Brecht's question “What Keeps Mankind Alive” is equally urgent today for us living under the neoliberal hegemony. We add the question: “What Keeps Mankind Not-Alive?” We acknowledge the urgency in these times when we do not have the right to work, we do not get free healthcare and education, our right to our cities, our squares, and streets are taken by corporations, our land, our seeds and water are stolen, we are driven into precarity and a life without security, when we are killed crossing their borders and left alone to live an uncertain future with their potential crises. But we fight. And we resist in the streets not in corporate spaces reserved for tolerated institutional critique so as to help them clear their conscience. We fought when they wanted to kick us out of our neighborhoods .....the crucial questions of this Biennial is “how to ‘set pleasure free,’ how to regain revolutionary role of enjoyment.” We set pleasure free in the streets, in our streets (...)” Extract from the Istanbul Biennial Manifesto 2011.