



GREEN ACRES: ARTISTS FARMING FIELDS, GREENHOUSES AND ABANDONED LOTS CINCINNATI

Green Acres, curated by Sue Spaid for the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati [September 22, 2012–January 20, 2013], is a smart and thoughtful exhibition that includes work by Kim Abeles, Agnes Denes, Dan Devine, Field Faring, Futurefarmers, Anya Gallaccio, Avital Geva, Lonnie Graham, Harrison Studio, Mei Ling Hom, Homeadow Song, Patricia Johanson, Sakarin Krue-On, J.J. McCracken, Matthew Moore, N55, Permaganic Eco Garden, Mara Adamitz Scrupe, Bonnie Ora Sherk, Åsa Sonjasdotter, Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Tatfoo Tan, and Shannon Young. *Green Acres* follows two other related exhibitions at the CAC. In 2002, Spaid and Amy Lipton curated *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* for the CAC; and in 2007, the CAC mounted Stephanie Smith's *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*. Whereas *Ecovention* and *Beyond Green* were premised on ecological inventions and smart, eco-friendly design, *Green Acres* is concerned specifically with farming as art/activism.

An important component of this exhibition was the Satellite Projects: urban farms situated throughout the greater Cincinnati area were directed and organized by artists, often in cooperation with local community organizations. These interventions, many of them sited in abandoned lots, transformed what was otherwise a blighted urban landscape. Local artists Vickie Mansoor, Peter Huttinger, and Karen Egan/Homeadow Song produced *A Bundle of Sticks*, which documented the holistic remediation of Homeadow Song's orchard and included the building of a bioswale, a shallow landscaped ditch created to manage rainwater runoff in the orchard. Permaganic Co. planted a flourishing garden in an abandoned lot. *Red Bank PawPaw Circle*, by Susanne Cockrell and Ted Purves, included a "sculpture" made from pawpaw trees and edible plants. The traffic island, situated at the intersection of Red Bank Road, Erie Avenue, and Brotherton Court, was already the site of the Madisonville Foraging Project, hence the importance of an edible "sculpture" from which food could be foraged. At Findlay Market on Sundays, the Danish Collective N55's customized *XYZ Cincinnati Community Vehicles* were made available to move plants, tools, and supplies between the different CSA

(Community Supported Agriculture) microplots in the city's downtown. At Fountain Square, Shannon Young planted a mobile farm in repurposed grocery carts. Produce from the mobile farm and the Permaganic Co. garden was then sold at the CAC.

With its emphasis on sustainable farming and community building, *Green Acres* seems to hark back to the utopian, anti-commodity work of the late 60s and early 70s. Spaid makes that connection in the catalog, arguing that the earth/land art movement of the 60s made possible the idea of farming as art. The exhibition sited at the CAC included documentation—or, in some cases, re-creations—of pioneering art farm work. New installations of two farm model prototypes created by Harrison Studios/Newton and Helen Harrison's *Survival Series* (1970–1973, 1974/2012) were showcased in *Green Acres: Flat Pastures (Survival Piece #6, Part 1)* and *Upright Pastures (Survival Piece #6, Part 2)*, a section of the Harrisons' exhibition *Full Farm* (1974), originally commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston for *10*, the inaugural exhibition for the museum's Gunnar Birkerts-designed building. According to a description (posted by the Harrisons on their website), when *Full Farm* was first shown in *10*, the potato patch was attacked by blight, marijuana was guerilla-planted in the upright pastures, and peyote grew in the flat pastures. For the CAC, only lettuce and beans grew in the Harrisons' planters. During 1982, Agnes Denes planted a field of wheat in a vacant lot in New York City and went on to sell her Lower Manhattan harvest. *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, along with other works by Denes—*Rice/Tree/Burial* (1968/2012) and *The Book of Dust* (1989)—is represented by images that foreground the artificial valuation of land in an urban environment. Still images and videos also represent Bonnie Ora Sherk's *The Farm* (1985–1980), a farm performance piece that transformed a barren freeway underpass into a working farm. One of the first prototypes for an urban farm that was both ethnically and bio-diverse, Sherk's farm, which included a farmhouse, theater, library, darkroom, and a future café, was eventually absorbed by the city as a park. Patricia Johanson's never-realized plans for urban gardens, suggesting the simultaneously practi-

cal and utopian potential of making artist farms, provide the centerpiece of this exhibition. The Harrisons' models for self-contained farming, Sherk's community farm prototypes, and Johanson's designs for a garbage garden and a cornfield anticipate projects included in *Green Acres* such as Susan Leibovitz Steinman's *EOE (Equal Opportunity Eating) POP-UPS* (2012), a DIY model that included farming equipment and photographic documentation that demonstrated how to make a sustainable and edible art installation. Sherk's subsequent creation of a living library has affinities with Mara Adamitz Scrupe's beautifully produced artist's books based on plant science, and photographer Lonnie Graham's documentation of the *African American Garden Project*, two public garden plots in Pittsburgh's Homewood area that have sister gardens in Kenya.

The work in *Green Acres* also speaks to a desire to subvert global capitalism with local community initiatives while actively—and artistically—"performing" farming interventions and ritualistic actions. Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert's *the land* (1998–) is a working farm that doubles as an experimental laboratory and building site for installation art. Located in Thailand, *the land* is constantly in need of maintenance, a testament to the willingness of its residents to maintain it. Tatfoo Tan, who creates mobile gardens that he transports while wearing a paratrooper jumpsuit, is represented by his jumpsuit, as well as his *S.O.S. (Sustainable Organic Steward)* soil samples. In J.J. McCracken's geophagic performance, clay-drenched women ate clay cast into the shape of vegetables. The performance, part of McCracken's *Hunger: Philadelphia* (2010) project, is a visually compelling reminder that even in a wealthy American city where there is an abundance of food, there is also a continuing scarcity of resources.

Green Acres will travel to the Arlington Arts Center and American University's Museum at the Katzen Arts Center. It will include Douglas Retzler's *Gourd Palace*, an outdoor sculpture park/meeting place of structures supporting gourd vines.

—Jennie Klein

ABOVE: Installation views of *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots*, 2012 (photos: Tony Walsh; courtesy of Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati).