

Politics of Green Spaces

Darko Fritz, 2015

Contemporary art practices that investigate the role of urban political economy and private-public property relations in the social production of green spaces, we may classify under the umbrella of the **Politics of Green Spaces**. Such art practices do 'not just create a new aesthetics' but literally get 'involved in patterns of social, scientific, and technological transformations'¹.

Using natural substances and related processes as the building blocks of art projects and dealing with broader social implications of the state of nature, the Politics of Green Spaces operate mostly both in the open air and by using a variety of technological hardware and communication systems. Such practices are rather different from those one finds in bio-art, where artists work with live tissues, bacteria, living organisms, and life processes as well, but use scientific processes such as biotechnology producing works indoors in (wet) laboratories and galleries. Instead, art laboratories of the Politics of Green Spaces operate mostly outdoors, often confronted with social reception outside of the comfort zone of galleries' and museums' art context.

In most cases, inequitable social and environmental relations invoke the Politics of Green Spaces. This term considers the relations of a variety of living organisms (humans among others: animals, mushrooms, plants, viruses etc.). As such, it expands the notion of networks of living organisms and objects in complex relationships within the post-digital paradigm (where technology is interwoven in almost all parts of contemporary world) but still related to nature that is not completely computable, and therefore accessible to 'big data' analytics.

The *Politics of Green Spaces* may point to limitations of both humans and constructs designed by humans (as technologies), e.g. as in an episode of the famous sci-fi series Star Trek: *"We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile."*² On the other hand, examining the notions of resistance, deconstructions and decontextualisation of power structures is yet another subject of the *Politics of Green Spaces*. Taking this enduring political agenda

¹ Introduction text of the Field exhibition, Riga, 2014. Curators: Rasa Smite, Raitis Smits and Armin Medosch.

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In the graphic novel Star Trek: The Manga, the Borg resulted from an experiment in medical nanotechnology gone wrong. The Borg was designed to evoke Transhumanism. The phrase *"Resistance is futile"* became prevalent in popular culture from its use in the television show Star Trek: The Next Generation.

into consideration, the inter-relational fields of action encompass biology, zoology, horticulture, growing processes, network culture, real-time processed data, site-specific art, technology and social interaction in a wide spectrum of interests, all within the post media art discourse. Especially, drafting network culture, embedded in the vast and incomprehensible sphere that summons and communicates ALL nature (even what is not perceivable neither by human senses nor machines made by humans), we could also propose expanding the existing notion of culture into Nature Embedded Netculture. Bruno Latour urged that we - humans - must rework our thinking to conceive the existence of the "Parliament of Things"³ whereby natural phenomena, social phenomena and the discourse about them are not seen as separate objects to be studied by specialists, but as hybrids made and scrutinized by the public interaction of people, things and concepts. Following Latour, we could think of the possibility of conceptualizing larger networks where non-human actors resist programmed subdue frame of proportion and appear rendered by being observed in the light of processes they take part in.

Case studies

What follows is a description of three examples of art projects, selected from the group exhibition "*Fields*"⁴, that will show some of the possible approaches to the *Politics of Green Spaces*, "**Foraging fields (2014-2014)**" a multi-media installation by **AnneMarie Maes**, "**Seeds Underground (2013-2014)**" by **Shu Lea Cheang** and "**200 OK (2014)**" by **Darko Fritz**.

All mentioned artworks belong to post-media art practices, and draw upon histories of advanced conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s. One may see Cheang's work as an update of socially engaged video art (and communities) of the 1970s and 1980s, Fritz's installation in public space as a comment on Land art and Maes' work as part of the rich history of intersection of art and science. In other hand, all artworks take into consideration histories of media art of the 1990s and 2000s, including Internet art as a part of it.

Each artwork we may see at least at three levels: "*Foraging Fields*" by Maes acts upon bio diversity at the macro level, urban green environment at *mezzo* level and bee culture at micro level. Cheang's "*Seeds Underground*" performs the genetically modified food critique on the macro level, at *mezzo* level it gets involved with green activism and at micro level deals with Monsanto corporation. The horticulture unit "*200 OK*" by Fritz operates at macro level with a critique of technological determinism, at *mezzo* level with transgression of digital interfaces and at micro level with creating a new context for the internet error message.

3 Latour, Bruno (1993), *We have never been modern*, Harvard University Press.

⁴ same as 1. See rixc.org/fields/en/exhibition

"Foraging fields" (2014) is a multi-media installation by **AnneMarie Maes**, presenting the interaction of bee colonies and their surroundings on different levels. The author states: 'My beehives are augmented with webcams, microphones and sensors to monitor the behavior of the colonies, whilst the surrounding ecosystem is scanned by analysis of the pollen and nectar that the bees bring back from their foraging flights. The different hives are all nodes in a distributed Guerilla Beehives network.' The installation consists of a series of artworks made during Maes' research and on-going five-year long *"Bee Laboratory"* project: *"Flightroute" (part 1 and 2)*, mapping with real-time data transmission and mapping of the surroundings; *"SEM"* - series of microscopic photographs of bees and pollen; *"Guerilla Beehives Network"* - beehive equipped with biodegradable sensors that make distant, non-intrusive monitoring possible; *"Honey Batteries"* for alternative energy production; *"Peephole (dancing bees)"* presenting a stream of images made during ten months of filming inside the beehive and *"Wax Beehive"*, a sculpture based upon bio-mimicry, made of organic beeswax and composed of more than 300 different chemical components. The hive is a system of homeostasis, a property that regulates its internal environment and tends to maintain a stable, constant condition of properties like temperature or pH. It can be either an open or closed system. As nature is polluted by industries in most countries of the so-called "first world" (that includes Belgium, where Maes operates from), it shows that bees start to prefer the less polluted urban environment than the very polluted countryside full of pesticides, fertilizers and so on. Monitoring bees shows the state of biocoenosis⁵. That includes the broader environment with all its inhabitants, whereby humans are acting as the most influential change-makers.

Unlike military or financial research and monitoring, artistic research and monitoring provides self-reflection based on an open social imaginary. These artistic procedures create an index of possibilities for further actions which do not aim at short-term advantages or profit, but look for a long term-solution on a micro or macro scale - as politics supposes to do. Here the *Politics of Green Spaces* enables new models, which leads beyond the normative environmental policies of green political spectra.

Shu Lea Cheang goes directly into a political action with her project **"Seeds Underground"** against the genetically modified food and related industries that took over the wholesale markets worldwide. The transgenic biotechnology has been commercialized by the patent-protected corporate sectors, showing once again that industrial civilization has been built on "surplus repression" where "not only people but also animals and nature were subjected" ⁶. Cheang draws upon the monopolizing tendencies of large seed

⁵ biological community, ecological community, coined by Karl Möbius in 1877.

⁶ Armin Medosch, *"The Broken Mirror - Art after the dreamworld of digital utopia"*, keynote lecture for the Fields exhibition, as delivered in Riga 16th of May 2014.

producers in the USA and the attempts of the EU to draft a new seeds directive. Cheang organized a series of "*Seeds Underground Parties*", public invitations to exchange traditional seeds and young plants in people-to-people events, with the possibility of following their development via the Internet. She is using the word "broadcast" not for distribution of signals of electronic media, but for sowing, distributing the seeds: "In the direction where the wind blows, take the handful of seeds, apply a wrist action, flick the seeds out into the field. This is the ancient way of seed broadcast."⁷ Her installation "*Seeds Underground*" revisits the court case of Vernon Hugh Bowman vs. Monsanto (held in Washington, D.C 2013). Ever-replicating seeds are "transmitted by divine wind and distributed by human/machine power across the vast farmland". To propel the notion of socially engaged and activist art practices, Cheang has been working with viral bio art hacking as well.

"**200 OK**" by **Darko Fritz** is a horticultural unit made of *Sesleria* plants. The installation is made in a form of a low-resolution screen reading the text "200 OK". A live internet video stream shows the site of the installation embedded in natural and social (inter)actions over three months, and later available as the visual archive. "*200 OK*" is part of the "*Internet Error Messages*" series of artworks that have been developed by Fritz since 2001. Artist's statement: 'The interpretation of the work "*200 OK*" is open, and does not necessary fit into any single interpretation frame.' When an Internet browser requests a service from web server, an error might occur. A machine communicates with another machine about protocols of failed communication, thus providing the user with the insight into the problem. In particular, the message "200 OK" is a status code showing that the request has succeeded. The information returned with the response is dependent on the method used in the request. Art historian Vesna Madžoski wrote on "*Internet Error Messages*": "Through those actions of decontextualization of system messages, Fritz erases the illusion of their functionality; he turns them into what they actually are – ornamental screens whose purpose is to hide the holes in the system. Fritz decides to take them 'out' and put them back in an 'unnatural' natural environment, using land and flowers to replace pixels and electronic signals. (...) Those visual expressions that I dare to name the aesthetics of failure function as a constant reminder that things might and do go wrong, and the failure of a machine to fulfill its promises of bringing us perfection and eternal happiness becomes the condition of its actual existence. Stripping them off of their functionality, Fritz shows the gaping holes those messages try to hide, warning us of the ongoing processes in highly bureaucratized present-day societies to transfer all decision-making to machines as being dangerous in its essence."⁸

⁷ <http://www.seedsunderground.net/index.php?mod=broadcast>

8 Vesna Madžoski, Error to Mistake > Notes on the Aesthetics of Failure, in: *Darko Fritz: Archives in Progress [Projects 1987 - 2007]*, ed. Darko Fritz, HDLU, Zagreb / Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Rijeka, 2008. Available at http://www.leoalmanac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/07_LEA_Vol_17_No_1_Madzoski.pdf

Instead of a Conclusion

Practices of the Politics of Green Spaces demystify the notion that nature will self-regulate into equilibrium, the myth that is still spread both within the community of scientists and among common people.

The question lingers: is resistance futile?

And another one: who is asking whom?

Related artworks:

Annemie Maes (Okno): *"Foraging fields" (from the "Bee Laboratory" project)*, 2014;

Shu Lea Cheang: *"Seeds Underground"*, 2013;

Darko Fritz: *"200 OK" (from the series "Internet Error Messages")*, 2014.
