

Botanical Interventions:

Open Source Landscape and Community Repair

by Oliver Kellhammer

The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.

Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, (2002)

Though I've been active since the early 1980's as a so called 'environmental artist,' I long ago lost interest in making work that only commented on issues of the environment. Complaining about the state of the planet just didn't cut it for me anymore and neither did sequestering my output inside the confines of the gallery, where nobody but a privileged few could see it. Working that way just felt like 'preaching to the choir' to me, so I decided to stop. Instead of my work being *about* the environment, I wanted my work to *be* the environment. It was time to leave the controlled space of the studio and step into the seething messiness of the world outside.

In the spring of 1986, I set myself the task of investigating how people would react if a small part of their controlled, urban environment was allowed to revert to something resembling an untended wilderness. To that end, I installed a work called 'Park' in front of the Garnet Press Gallery, in Toronto. Located on a busy downtown street, the gallery had the kind of tiny front

yard that would usually have been kept tamed under paving stones or meticulously maintained sod. A hundred and fifty years previous, the land would have been a lakeside riparian zone, teeming with biodiversity. I wanted to bring a sense of that botanical rampancy back to the architectural landscape. Fearing opposition, I began by surrounding the yard in a tall fence, topped in barbed wire. Then I introduced seeds and divisions from plants I collected from nearby feral zones, along railway rights of way and in the wetlands of the Toronto Islands. The ensuing growth was explosive and by the end of the summer some of the plants had reached over two metres in height. Once there was sufficient cover, I introduced a few Southern Ontario bullfrogs I had bought in a Chinatown fish market. These lived in a small pond I had dug into the middle of the compound. The sounds from their movements were picked up on a hydrophone and then broadcast on a loudspeaker into the din of the Richmond Street traffic.

I spent a lot of my time that summer hanging out around the 'Park' and it soon became apparent that it was having quite an effect on its surroundings. A lively conversation had ensued among the neighbours, some of whom enjoyed the work, while others were outraged by the sudden presence of what they deemed 'noxious' weeds, and wanted it taken down. Gradually, songbirds such as goldfinches and house finches started visiting the compound, drawn in by the lush vegetation and the availability of water. I noticed the birds were depositing seeds along with their droppings, some of which were starting to germinate. Had the project been allowed to continue, these plants would have matured, adding to the diversity of the species already in place. Butterflies too, started to appear, visiting the blossoms wiped out elsewhere in the neighbourhood by overzealous weeding. It was hard to believe that all of this activity was happening in and around this tiny (nine square metre) yard. It was then I began to see the true

potential of the practice I came to call '*botanical intervention*.'

In the more than twenty years since 'Park', a critical framework has begun to evolve, making it easier for me to talk about my practice. This is largely due to the emerging ideas of "*relational aesthetics*" and "*open source*." Though they have only recently come into common usage, these notions offer the language necessary to describe work, like my own, which is non-material, ever-changing and rooted in the interactions of its community.

"Relational aesthetics" was a label given, in the late 90's by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, to what he termed "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."

By this, Bourriaud was referring to art that doesn't just define itself through its relationship to the viewer but creates an entire *relationship space* in which the audience community can interact with *each other*, as an intrinsic part of the work.

The term "open source" originally emerged from the IT world, to describe a movement conceived in opposition to the over-commercialization and over-propriety of software tools. Instead, open source encourages the development of copyright-free, user-modifiable alternatives, which because of their open code base, evolve along with their community of users, who improve them constantly and function as a kind of immune system, warding off attacks by

viruses. My land art follows this same open-source model, because almost as soon as a *botanical intervention* is initiated, it starts changing as it continues to interact with the communities around it, evolving in ways I might never have imagined. Nature after all, has an open code base. And human communities are always full of surprises. Open source also implies that I am comfortable with giving up a certain degree of control. This is a key component to my work, and in most cases, I wind up disappearing from it almost entirely. The work lives on without me, absorbed by the community that has formed around it.

While ‘Park’ raised some interesting questions, it nevertheless existed within the distribution channel of an art institution. Because I had to take it down at the end of the season, I couldn’t root it into a larger human community. I wasn’t happy about that. In that respect, ‘Park’ was just another art exhibition. Troubled by this seeming disconnect between art-making and the world, I increasingly turned my sights to activism. By the end of the 80’s I was part of East Vancouver’s nascent guerilla gardening movement. Here, I spearheaded a squatting operation that eventually became Cottonwood Community Gardens – a three acre oasis of *ad hoc* urban agriculture, in the middle of an industrial wasteland.

One thing led to another and I was soon engaged in stopping land slides (and mitigating social outrage) in the nearby Grandview Cut railway corridor. I planted thousands of willow cuttings and installed nest boxes in its ravine, whose forest cover had been removed during the construction of a new bridge. As well as replacing lost bird habitat, this botanical intervention quickly stabilized the slope and gave the neighbourhood back some of its badly needed green

space, which would have been gone forever, had the city engineers built the massive, concrete retaining wall they were planning. This land art work, which I called *Healing the Cut - Bridging the Gap*, forced me to confront some interesting new questions about how to reconcile my art practice with the ecological and cultural communities around me. I began to look at my projects, not as a collection of things I had made, but as a system of relationships between me, other people and the landscape. I was more of a 'fixer' than a maker; intervening in situations where the relationship between people and nature had broken down and acting as a catalyst for the innate processes of repair to start working.

I took my *botanical intervention* methodology one step further, with a project I named *Means of Production*. Installed in Vancouver's North China Creek Park, the artwork consists of a neighbourhoodscale eco-forestry plantation where plants producing arts and crafts materials, as well as food crops, are grown and harvested. The work's title is carved into a low, granite monolith, commemorating Karl Marx's observation that land is a basic means necessary for people to produce material goods. My concept was to revivify, within an inner-city, urban neighbourhood, the idea of the *commons* as a place where people can produce some of what they need outside of the conventional market system.

Under the stewardship of community members, notably the Environmental Youth Alliance, *Means of Production* has already produced several crops of basket-making materials, fruits and vegetables, in a neighbourhood that is economically marginal and socially transient. Local artists and artisans have started to incorporate the materials they have harvested into their

own work and more crops are coming on stream as people take the initiative to plant and take care of them. Yet *Means of Production* also functions as an integrated whole; a piece of interactive land art that perpetually changes as its vegetation matures, gets harvested and regenerates.

Whether it is birds disseminating tree seeds next to a nest box I have constructed, or artists harvesting willow branches to make lanterns for a festival, my work facilitates processes of interaction and regeneration between natural and human systems. As the processes continue to play out, they become more complex, creating a reality that goes far beyond a static piece of art.

In all of these projects, my role as instigator or ‘horticultural dramaturge’ has a ‘best before’ date on it, after which time my authorial presence intentionally becomes more obscure. Gradually, I revert to the status of observer; watching the natural and human systems grow over and absorb the scaffolding I have created. The artwork’s appearance, more and more, becomes a function of the relationships between its ever-changing stake-holders. Often the people engaging in it have no idea they are participating in an “artwork” *per se*. To me this is just as well, because the work by then has already receded into what Walter Benjamin calls “the optical subconscious.” This is always my long-term intention.

Though Bourriaud’s analysis of relational aesthetics emerged years after I (and many others) started working this way, it accurately reflects my motivations as an interventionist. I’m not that interested in making *stuff*. I’m interested in making *stuff happen*. As an artistic

sentiment, this isn't exactly new. Some of my thinking, for example, clearly calls upon the ideas of the late Joseph Beuys, to which I was first exposed as a student in the late 1970's. Beuys spoke of "*social sculpture*" and the "*homeopathic role of the artist*" and called upon artists to engage in their surroundings in a way that went far beyond the simple manufacturing of objects.

Another precursor, from even earlier in that decade, was the work of the inimitable Gordon Matta-Clark. I am thinking primarily of his *Food* and *Fake Estates* projects with which he reconfigured New York City social spaces in such a way as to simultaneously critique them and to change them. There is a clear lineage here between these works and that of more recent artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and my own. Yet in my opinion, the imprimatur of the artist still lies too heavily on many of these efforts and it is my intention to proceed with an even lighter touch in the future.

In working with nature, I am assured of a collaborator who starts erasing my traces as soon as I begin my retreat. And in keeping with the spirit of open source, I know too that other people will take over what I have begun; negotiating for themselves the terms of the relationships that connect us to each other, and to the ground beneath our feet.