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Street Art: Mirror Reflections on and Meshing with urban Agriculture

11.1 Introduction
This chapter will look at the way socio-political commentary exists in street art and how it has tended in recent times to be displayed in concert with cultural activities endemic to community urban gardens. The urgency with which inner suburban councils in Melbourne and Geelong, Australia, have dedicated themselves to carving out recreational and environmentally sound spaces is a reflection on the expectations of multi-cultural groups whose culture incorporates the growth of vegetable and fruits (and flowers) close to their place of residence.

Street art, famous for its commentary on urban ugliness, has integrated its philosophy and aesthetics, along side notable community gardens in Melbourne. The images incorporate the aims of urban agriculture whilst often simultaneously critiquing the alienation of the urban dweller cut so relentlessly from the means of growing food and from accessing land that might produce it. Community gardens in the twenty-first century go some way to reversing a state of being in which 'workers' were alienated from the source of their labor and their survival.
Simultaneously, graffiti management policies are being developed in Melbourne to curb illicit graffiti. Alison Young points out in her interrogation of these policies that: 'requests for graffiti removal from private property in the City of Yarra increased from 2500 in the City of Yarra in 2010 to over 4000 in 2012' (Young, 2012). This however does not indicate a widespread disapproval of graffiti but more that those who do disapprove do so intensely and go to some lengths to make their views heard. This point is made here to emphasize that graffiti art is capable of transforming cultural preferences and prejudices and that this happens most effectively when there is a perceived tension between how it is valued and how it is despised. This is a new social relationship mediated by images.

11.2 Graffiti and Community Gardens Join Hands
It is a worthwhile exercise to probe the extent to which street art in the inner laneways of Melbourne, Australia, incorporate in to their designs fauna and flora. This reference to all that is organic in environments devoid of vegetation draws attention not only to that absence but also for the need to address it. This work will therefore deal with two interrelating themes: 1. Street art that complements community gardens; 2. Street art that engages with agricultural imagery and images of fauna and flora with the aim of subverting the continual growth of unregulated concrete jungles. Furthermore it is integral in this analysis to look at how different artists (including graffiti artists) throughout the world have decided to remind city dwellers that they may have forgotten the sheer beauty involved in incorporating into city spaces, dominated as they are by concrete highways, powers lines and an absence of fauna and flora, a reminder that they are of nature and that cities have imposed a superstructure on their lives that have compromised their own humanity.

In Melbourne Australia, in the suburb of St Kilda, a bayside suburb, there exists a vegetable plot overseen by Luna Park, a place of carnival treats: a scenic railway, giggle palace and other assorted rides designed to terrify and excite simultaneously (Figure 11.1). Each weekend families arrive at the plot with fertilizers, watering cans and garden tools and as they get their hands embroiled in the dirt and chat to their weekend friends the screams of the riders of the scenic railway, as it takes them down a near perpendicular descent, punctuate the conversations of the urban gardeners. St Kilda is a sophisticated suburb providing its residents and weekend visitors a long street (Acland St) of the most delicious cakes, stores sporting hand-made bags, paintings and jewelry and restaurants offering cuisine from all over the world: Indian; Malay; Indonesian; Italian; Turkish to name a few. On Sundays the beach walkways are lined with craft shops and the streets are crowded, music plays, and people walk the beach or play volleyball on it. As one walks from the line of cosmopolitan shops towards the beach it is alluring to watch the weekend gardeners at work. Surrounding the garden there exist small art-studios often tagged by local graffiti enthusiasts. Art, of course has long drawn on nature for its content and it makes sense in a rather whimsical way that as families cultivate their vegetables, just a few meters away artists create their art. (Figure 11.2, Figure 11.3, Figure 11.4, Figure 11.5).

11.3 Inner City Street Art: Fauna and Flora
It was with this combination of garden
and ecology with public art in mind that I walked the streets of Melbourne, particularly in Fitzroy, Collingwood and surrounding suburbs where graffiti is welcomed and appreciated as a significant cultural presence, to see how much of the graffiti brings to the walls animals, fish, and natural environments. The walls of these neighboring suburbs are extensively covered with the works of Rone; Phibs; Meggs; Sync; Wonderlust; Prizm; Makatron and The Tooth to mention but a few of the street artists that work under a collaborative collective known as Evofresh.¹ Most of this artwork is geometric, intensely colored and includes cartoonish characters ensconced in industrial frames. (Figure 11.6). In recent

months though a giant fish has appeared in Brunswick (Figure 11.7), a huge galloping monkey being ridden by smaller monkeys and a young girl wraps itself around a house that sits at the junction at the point where Brunswick St changes into St Georges Rd (Figure 11.8) and animals, applied as stencils, appear prolifically in the most unlikely of places (Figure 11.9).

The more I wandered the streets the more I saw cultural ecology revealed in images exhibiting animals in varied states of distress (Figure 11.10; Figure 11.11; Figure 11.12). Characteristic of these works of art is that they vanish as swiftly as they appear. Nevertheless there was something new happening. Art and gardening/ and presentation of vegetation/flowers are finding a new meeting place.

Figure 11.4 Public Art, Backdrop to Garden

Figure 11.5
Art & conserving Water
11.4 Sunflowers, Art and Industry

In the last few months a Melbourne artist, Ben Morieson, has married gardening with art. Morieson was influenced by Cuban city dwellers, when visiting Havana, who since the 1980s have created prolific gardens that were designed primarily to feed the residents but which also beautified their city. The idea of turning an industrial site into a garden became a reality for Morieson when he decided to bring to an industrial site the fact of nature. In doing so he created art calling the art-work 'Fieldwork' which Megan Blackhouse, reviewing the site, noted was ‘a play on the color field painting’ that was rampant in the late 50s in Melbourne and elsewhere (Blackhouse, 2014). In the inner suburb of Kensington, Morison and his team planted thousands of sunflowers on a site covered in old scrap-metal, rusty from the elements, amongst greasy mud puddles. The impact is spectacular. In visiting the site I was overwhelmed with the dominance of that yellow that only sunflowers can quite embody. The choice of site was inspired as this vast field of sunflowers had a backdrop of warehouses and factories covered in graffiti. In view, when standing amongst the flowers, there is a freeway overpass and rail tracks suggesting transport of industrial waste rather than people. Interestingly the artists/gardeners did not remove the scrap metal nor did they fill in the pools of dead water; they simply became part of the artwork. The message was nevertheless clear (Figure 11.13).
This garden of sunflowers created quite deliberately on what could be termed an abandoned industrial waste site creates quite a contrast to the city of Guiyu in China's Pearl River Delta. Here is the place where all the old laptops go to die. McKenzie Wark in his book *The Spectacle of Disintegration* intent to show what actually happened to developed societies when desires were met excessively in a society reliant on cell phones and computers describes this place as one of hopelessness, ugliness and as far removed from nature as conceivable. It indicates that the old adage 'take out time to smell the roses' would need to be deconstructed as an old myth for contemporary workers in industrial societies. The place, Wark describes as 'something like the electronic-waste capital of the planet. He writes: 'Some sixty thousand people work there at so-called recycling, which is the new name for the old job of mining minerals, not from nature but from this second nature of consumer waste'.

11.5 Glimmers of Hope

Nevertheless whilst the postindustrial age creates cities of waste (even though heralded as 're-cycling') there are architects, urban agriculturalists, ecologists and town planners intent on improving cities in order to promote 'livability, productivity and sustainability'. Under

Figure 11.10 'Polar bear', in car-park, Rose St., Brunswick, Melbourne

Figure 11.11 'Magpie' by Alstark
the title ‘ECOSPINE- An Integrated Ecological Concept for the Regeneration of Geelong CBD’ a group of researchers led by Professor Elkadi are in the process of working towards implementation of what is termed an ‘Ecological Spine’ in the city of Geelong. The plan is one that involves integrated planning to enhance ‘livability, productivity and sustainability’. Professor Elkadi writes:

‘One of the six catalyst projects proposed was the establishment of an Ecological Park running east west through the central activities district. This concept involves transformation of key features in the city back to a more ecologically sen-

sitive infrastructure linking people with place and nature. The concept extends the Johnston’s Park precinct between the Geelong Train Station and the CBD in its first stage’ (Figure 11.14).

The project in its entirety is a complex one and includes ‘engineering and environmental opportunities’ one of which is an opportunity to provide water cycle management options in the design which may include a wetland park and more efficient storm water management in the park. Alongside this project and relevant to the theme of this chapter concerning ‘Food, Art and Nature’ there is the planned feasibility study which ‘will develop regional understanding on current and future urban and peri-urban

food producers and systems, building a better understanding of the local and regional food economy. In a city where industries related to manufacturing are in decline this study will identify the possibility of bringing to the fore local food production, not only in terms of current needs but, also, needs projected into the future. At a time in which people have become increasingly aware of the impact of climate change, a new agribusiness has emerged; subsequent businesses such as organic locally grown food provide new business opportunities and in themselves embody a cultural change in the way we see our cities. What is being identified here is a transformative period in which

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5 Ibid.

architects, business people, city dwellers, urban planners, and researchers in these areas are becoming attuned to and influencing the ways in which cities can re-integrate with agriculture and to see this as connected to how places are designed and built. Art plays its part in these transformations not only in raising consciousness but also in reflecting changed consciousness via images in public places.

11.6 Public Art in Unlikely Places

The tendency of artists to use flora and fauna to enliven cities or simply to wake people up to the barren nature of their utilitarian environments is a worldwide movement. The work of the Barsky brothers rendered succinctly in a recent text
titled Urban Recreation warrants attention. In many ways their art reminds me
of Biek Le Rat's comment about his urban art 'I love hidden places where I love
create a surprise. Surprising the passers by is a big strength of urban art'. The
Barsky brothers also are motivated to surprise. It is, though, to surprise people
who have forgotten their natural origins, who have been consumed by a form of
modern life in which there is daily travel through concrete freeways and hours
sitting in front of computers. In the forward of the book they ask: 'What if more
people turned the places where they ARE into places where they WANT TO BE: its
not so hard'. And to prove the point they constructed a cottage and placed it on an
elevated rock area above flowing traffic and industrial landmarks. The cottage
was given a small surrounding garden decorated with a Christmas tree when
the time was appropriate and changed to reflect the change of seasons and the ad-
vent of festivals. The impact was positive to the extent that the Department of Pub-
lic Works deemed that 'Traffic island', as it was named, was allowed to stay. At this
point the brothers developed it further creating a summer garden, which entailed
carrying 65 liters of water up a mountain each day to water the lawn. Kidpele who
is the spokesperson (in written word) about the Barsky projects makes the fol-
lowing pertinent points: The projects are not to be categorized as a particular kind
of art; they are projects that come about by action recognizing the propensity for
artists to fail before words; the city is the playground for these artists which is why
the text is entitled urban recreation and he notes: 'The Barsky Brothers show us
that its possible for people without cars, without permits, without grants or other

financial aid to just go outside and make something wonderful. If you have an idea
and you’re willing to put work into it, there are no excuses'.

Other Barsky projects have included: cut-out animals 'shadows' made from
plywood which were 'let loose' at Karberg stations; a luncheon party of diners set up
as a picnic on a grassy median between two busy highways; the placement of
swings in unlikely places throughout the city allowing those individuals 'who
would stop everything and just take advantage of the moment, allowing herself

to get swept away' and the scribbling Screen, aka Klotterulligarden, which in the
current cultural context in which there are strong anti-graffiti feelings in some
communities, provided an alternative for those who wish to express
themselves without provoking hostilities. The scribbling screen was set up on a
wall of the college of Architecture that is often plagued by tags. People passing
by had the option of either contributing to the screen or pulling it up as a form of
protest. What was interesting about the experiment was that no one wrote on the
surrounding walls during it. Neverthe-
less there is no intention here to suggest that graffiti, written on walls illicitly, is
necessarily an evil. It is clear that there
are environments where it enriches the cultural experience of the residents and
performs an important function in making public feelings and philosophies of a

community.

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1 Kidpele, Interview with Biek Le Rat, Melbourne, 2000.
3 Kidpele
11.7 Redefining the Use of Public Spaces: Mural Art Worldwide

Kiriakos iosifidis collated a book of almost one thousand examples of mural art worldwide.10 Mural art as he defines it relates to large art-works and graffiti that take up entire walls in public places. It is he argues ‘a journey to the victorious battles against the lack of public spaces, battles that redefined the use of public space ... every wall has its own history, from murals that children make at school on walls, to interventions on walls created by architects in their unending battle to balance their constructions with the environment, to the simple interventions of public agents to renovate buildings.’11 What is fascinating about this collection is the extent to which these murals encompass and celebrate nature drawing on for example: a giant sea wave on the side wall of a life saving club

on a beach in France (2002)12; portraits of birds spray-painted into a bus shelter (2007) and field of red poppies on a wall of an electronic station (2007); concrete bunkers turned into seascapes(2007); a painting of a squirrel eating leaves (2008)13 or the extraordinary paintings by the City of Philadelphia-Mural Arts Program (MAP) of a flock of birds flying over yellow hills at twilight (2007)14, as well as a vast mural of a garden called ‘into the Garden’ (2004) painted on the side wall of a three-storied apartment block15. At least one-fifth of these one thousand art-works represented natural landscapes, animals and seascapes and all were painted in stark industrialized areas.

11.8 The Spectacle of Disintegration

McKenzie Wark in his book The Spectacle of Disintegration examines the extent to which we are engaged with existence as a spectacle, so much so, that we have become disengaged from what is real. His introductory chapter draws attention to a large amount of professional people deciding to commute for up to six hours a day in order to own what they see as the appropriate house displaying all the desired attachments of contemporary high living. In examining the ways in which the developed world has become ‘overdeveloped ... which somehow overshot the mark’16 he points out that a change in direction may have brought about a qualitative transformation; instead all that was achieved was an excess that denied itself its own critique.

Urban agriculture, which includes art projects, that do more than offer mere critique, is a development that ensures action and transformation. It is a matter of reassessing the difference between needs and desires and recognizing that the realization of material desires in developed society simultaneously blinded the recipients. Wark notes when he attempts to represent the thought of the situationists: ‘It’s the past we need for the critique of this present’.17 This is what is fascinating about Wark’s book. In looking back at the Situationists’ theory he does so with an eye to the present and the future in how to ‘live without dead time’. This of course requires the ability to get outside a capitalistic system that in its organization was designed and driven by the continued insatiable desires of society. It raises the point on whether it is possible to get outside the system in

10 Kiriakos iosifidis, Mural Art Murals on Huge Public Surfaces Around the World (From Graffiti to Temples) (Self-Published), Verlag: und Handels GmbH & Co, 2008.
11 Iosifidis, p. 8
12 Anthony Dominique, Mural painted as a happening during the International Surf Competition on the beach in Hendaye, France in Iosifidis, p. 16
13 Kiriakos, Potsdam, Germany in Iosifidis, pp. 16-20
14 Phillip Adams and Rob Minervini Dreams in Iosifidis, p. 75
15 Ana Urbiz-Iosifidis, p. 76

order to conceptualize an alternative. It is the contention of this chapter that urban agriculturalists and artists at the community level do demonstrate that they can remove themselves from these insatiable desires. Those involved in related research however will be required to justify their studies in economic terms; that is the funding of such studies in the twenty first century will be granted only if the study whilst making life better for people must also argue that these changes will be financially profitable ones. Whilst the preference of families to grow their own food in built-up areas is indicative of a rejection of more established systems and a liberation of previously curtailed desire, the support of larger initiatives that requires governmental funding is more locked within the system in which profit is mandatory. This is the contradiction of our times. The argument of this piece however is that, in looking at urban agriculture alongside art there is an attempt to illustrate that representational forms embodied in the graffiti art or art projects I have presented achieve a collaborative meshing although not dictated by a political strategy are nevertheless not separate from it either. The reason that this short chapter is so enthralled and influenced by McKenzie Wark’s study of the ‘Situationalists’ is because he has shown brilliantly that there is a need in our own time to do what they did and that was that they found strategies for confronting their own time, to challenge it, negate it, and push it, however slightly, towards its end, toward leaving the twentieth century. Wark in his study of Guy DeBord, a notable situationalist, emphasizes that

Debord’s art-work, journals and books emphasized the need to see the relation between things, events, art-work and the actions of people. Artists of the street, architects and urban agriculturalists are thinking now in terms of these relations and striving to dispense not only with ‘dead time’ but also with cities that have forgotten the fact of nature and the possibility of it being replenished. An artwork in conjunction with a community garden has a certain amount of power in reminding us of what Nietzsche had predicted science would lead to: ‘the pretentious lie of civilization’. Nietzsche as early as the mid nineteenth century stressed the significance of the earth:

Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue. Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has always been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do – back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.

Nietzsche’s insistence that humankind had ‘been educated by his errors,’ that ‘he placed himself in a false order of rank in relation to animals and nature’, has long been acknowledged. The twenty first century, in its second decade has accepted the risks for a future, on a global scale. It is now seen as a world that no longer can afford to treat nature merely as a source of cultural or economic production. Nature has now an acknowledged agency and tells us of its presence and

18 This idea of the possibility of conceptualizing an alternative when embedded in a system was introduced to this chapter in discussion with Denise Spark who is currently working on a doctoral thesis on the novels of Dan O’Leary of which her novels deal with this entrapment.

19 Wark, p. 20

its destruction by human kind. Public art and community gardens are reflections of a discord amongst a people becoming increasingly aware of the need to re-think our cities and create environments that connect us with the natural world of flora, fauna and recreational space that challenges the dominance of concrete, technology and industrial waste.

References

All Photos in this chapter are by Ann McCulloch, unless mentioned otherwise.