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2013

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An urban quest for chlorophyll

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Editors' introduction

Jenny Gillam & Dieneke Jansen

The bringing together of *An Urban Quest for Chlorophyll* was motivated by an awareness of creative practices that engage with the cultural mediation of nature in an urban context. It focuses on practices that explore the sociopolitical constructs of ecology, nature and culture in urban Aotearoa New Zealand.

The renegotiation of our urban public space in Aotearoa mirrors many contemporary cities. One can feel quite cynical, as Martha Rosler does, about the take-over by 'new creatives' and their sustainable 'greening' idealism which, in its revisiting of 1960's Placemaking,ⁱ overwrites the city of the existing urban dweller. Bringing nature into the city can be seen as part of the gentrification process that opens up a sanitised version of an urban pseudo-industrial experience for the creative class at the expense of displacing a working class through the associated heightened property values. Rosler comments,

... we must consider the newfound municipal enthusiasm for parks and park-like experiences, and the sanctioning of 'neo-hippie' chicken-keeping and urban and rooftop farming... as bound up with the shift in the class composition of the urban fabric.

The greenmarkets sited around New York City, the bicycle lanes, and the outdoor patios built in the middle of busy streets, express the conviction that the city is no longer a concrete jungle but a cultivated garden enclosing a well-managed zoo or kindergarten, in which everyone and his or her neighbor is placed on display, in the act of self-creation, whether you choose to look or not. The gardens, urban and rooftop farms, water slides, and climbable sculptures that have replaced the modernist model of public art works (which had itself displaced the state-sanctioned monumentalism of previous eras) must be understood as of a piece with the increasingly suburban character of creative-class politics.ⁱⁱ

Indeed, urban rooftop and hanging gardens, social actions such as Park(ing) Days,ⁱⁱⁱ city farming and guerrilla gardening are gaining momentum internationally. In Aotearoa, crown and local governing bodies who have a mandate to facilitate and support both community

and environmental activities, have supported numerous projects with an ecological and community emphasis, and at the same time, a number of our cultural institutions have developed off-site projects, often with a community focus.

As widespread ecological concern for our planet grows, it is hardly surprising artists and designers are addressing environmental issues in their work. *An Urban Quest for Chlorophyll* presents four creative works from 2011 – 2012 that engage with these broader concerns, each with distinct philosophical, formal and material orientations...

Tanya Eccleston and Monique Redmond are the Suburban Floral Association and their project *Shopfront* was commissioned by Letting Space^{iv} as a part of the Auckland Arts Festival 2011.

Amanda Yates' *Civic Square Pop-up Garden*, 27th January – 19th February 2012, was part of Edible City, a Massey University research project located in Wellington.

Dieneke Jansen and Jenny Gillam's *Ever Green* was a public light box project for Wellington City Council, exhibited in Courtenay Place Park, 3rd April – 6th August 2012.

Lara Strongman's text, *Post-Disaster Gardening* reflects on unscripted public memorial acts by Christchurch residents following the devastating earthquake that struck New Zealand's 'garden city' on 22nd February 2011.

All four works operate outside the gallery/museum context and it is this shared public, urban space that is the core of their motivation and mode of practice. Each engages members of the public in different ways, some requiring participation to activate a project or test an hypothesis, such as the Suburban Floral Association's *Shopfront* and Amanda Yates' *Pop-up Gardens*, which encourage the sharing of plants, food and ideas in a convivial manner and act as reminders of activities usually associated beyond a city's commercial zone. *Ever Green* operates differently—in the context of a proliferation of advertising, the large scale photographs intervene in an attempt to seduce passers-by into reconsidering their inner city environment. While Lara Strongman considers the collective actions generated and led by members of the Christchurch public following the earthquake. All explore the aesthetics of 'greening' our urban environment.

At the same time, each text is approached differently—an artist’s reflection of their process, a response to an artwork, a transcript of a conversation, and a writer’s observations of the community of which she is a part. It is our intention that by revisiting these works through documentation and critical reflection it allows them to be re-contextualised, extended and compared, particularly alongside Christchurch which, in responding to a natural disaster rather than embracing a gentrification process, puts things sharply in perspective. Certainly for our own project, *Ever Green*, it has been very satisfying to have Kate Linzey’s thoughtful analysis and to consider the project in relation to how others are working, positioning ourselves alongside those with similar interests in enhancing the urban experience, each practice operating as a critical yet also aspirational intervention. It is also our hope that the individual projects, considered together, will extend insights and possibilities for new kinds of ecologies and approaches to working and living in our cities.

At some point we realised that each project had multiple authors—collaborations between artist/artist, designer/research assistants, writers/photographers not to mention project authors and community—suggesting that temporary public art offers a context for, or at the very least, encourages collaborative modes of working. We also noticed that, while by no means a criteria for selection, the works were all made by women. Does this indicate a particular female concern for our communities and the contemporary ecology of our cities, and perhaps a leaning towards working collaboratively?

Although these projects critically challenge the ways in which we consider our urban spaces, they also, with the exception of *Post-Disaster Gardening*, operate comfortably within current public art programmes and all are transitory in form and duration. This provisional nature may well be in acknowledgment of the urban as a transformative site, yet also points to practices that are speculative in nature. Do more ambitious modes of production need to be tackled? Those that are likely to challenge and inform current urban council plans? As this publication is being produced Auckland residents are considering the contentious draft Unitary Plan (the most significant changes to the city’s urban spatial planning document in two decades) in the context of expected population growth of more than a million in the next 30 – 50 years, Wellington City Council is asking for submissions on its draft annual plan in a climate of stagnant economic growth, and Christchurch continues to debate every aspect of its rebuild. The work

in *An Urban Quest for Chlorophyll* offers a compelling argument that urban space benefits from greater engagement by artists and designers and asks if it is time for greater acts of chlorophyll kindness.

- i. Placemaking is a philosophy to create social life in public space as advocated by Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte in the 1960s. A current example of this is PPS: Project for Public Spaces, in their Placemaking blog – <http://www.pps.org/blog/creativity-placemaking-building-inspiring-centers-of-culture/>
- ii. Rosler, M.(2011) Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part III. *e-flux journal* #25, p4.
Retrieved from <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-iii/>
- iii. PARK(ing) Day is a global event where designers, artists, activists and others transform metered parking spaces into temporary public places.
- iv. Letting Space is a public art programme based in Wellington, New Zealand, curated by Mark Amery and Sophie Jerram. Since 2010 it has commissioned temporary art works in public and commercial inner city spaces.

Foreword

Mark Amery

I'm looking at a photograph of a corner of the Wellington Botanic Garden from 100 years ago, with hilly Kelburn beyond. There are stands of Conifer (the 'Wellingtonia' named after the Duke of Wellington) and Pine. The Pine is New Zealand's first stand of *Pinus Radiata*, being trialled for commercial use. Today, samples are being sent back to Monterey where the *Radiata* originally came from, and where it is now endangered. Behind these stands in the photograph are scoured hillsides, upon which new houses perch with freshly cut zigzag paths and newly planted flower and vegetable beds. The Wellington cable car has recently been opened. There's not a native plant in sight.

One hundred years earlier this would have all been bush. Yet, down on the flat the gardens and cultivations of Te Aro Pa (where Wellington city is today) extended across the most fertile spots of Te Aro, Aro Valley and as far as Owhiro and Island Bays. The forests that covered these areas had been cleared for gardens long before Europeans arrived. I have similarly been shown, from the top of Maungawhau (Mt Eden) in Auckland, where gardens once stretched impressively into the distance.

We have no photographs or paintings of this time, but we do have a kind of landscape art. I was told recently there are dendroglyphs (carvings) from pre-1800's marked by Maori into trees to be found in the Wellington town belt (public space preserved by The New Zealand Company in 1841).ⁱ If so, they are lucky to have survived. Hillsides were cleared of bush and replanted in pine. Recently many of these old pine trees have been felled, and hillsides replanted again—this time in natives. This is how we play the circle game.

What will our cities look like in one hundred years' time? Around the world old industrial sites are being replanted as parkland and sculpture parks, city streams are being uncovered, their edges replanted with plants indigenous to their location, and guerilla and community gardening is rampant.

In my current city of Wellington the council's *Towards 2040 strategy*ⁱⁱ calls for an 'eco-city' reflective of sustainability and biodiversity concerns. Yet at the same time the city has 240,000 square metres of vacant office space while new offices continue to be built. It's likely our

cities will at some time require a form of open heart surgery to be made more liveable. In Christchurch, nature has made the decision for usⁱⁱⁱ—artists and gardeners are busy ‘greening the rubble’, designers staring at lots of blank squares and considering what the city of the future should look like.

All of the projects in this book explore the role of plants in urban public spaces. In tandem with this they also find new ways to extend contemporary media (photography, installation, spatial design and relational art). They push around our thinking about our environment through new experimental configurations of media in relation to site. They ultimately lead us to consider acting differently.

Plants have long played a crucial role within art’s frames as a powerful aesthetic and symbolic presence. The artists and designers in this book engage with the complexity of that presence in the shifting cultural terrain of today’s urban environments.

Public art and public plantings go hand in hand. Imported trees and flower beds were planted in our cities as memorials alongside public statuary. They are markers of history and time (consider the traditional flower clock), and assertions of beliefs and values. Yet values and beliefs are always changing. Now in our built-up urban environments we’re looking for art to activate spaces and help us rethink the role of plantings: to be valued for function as well as aesthetics. Art projects are, somewhat paradoxically, employing plants as mobile or temporary motifs. Moved around, to consider where and why they should be planted. The tension of moving around the rooted—to consider how we ourselves can be more grounded—is something these projects exploit.

This is keenly the case in the Wellington City Council commissioned Courtenay Place light box project *Ever Green*. Jenny Gillam and Dieneke Jansen’s photographs of plants are quite different to those we are accustomed. They play with how photography might be extended in public space as a poignant *trompe l’oeil*, inserting plants into boxes that typically see lit commercial advertising replacing greenery in giving a city light and energy. Young native saplings are out of their nursery pottles, between spaces, struggling for air in their glassed containment. Spare a thought for the plight of the urban tree and where it practically might best be placed.

Flowers are also far more than just decorative ornamentation. Not only an important aesthetic structural element in design, they are what artists Monique Redmond and Tanya Eccleston might describe as ‘the welcoming committee’. Used in memoria, for birthdays and making acknowledgements (‘say it with flowers’), they have an important role in engendering exchange and helping create living spaces. With a strong

installational and sculptural eye, the Suburban Floral Association's project *Shopfront* explored the plant and flower as important elements in providing social space. The work also challenged our often too-puritanical contemporary notion of 'natives good / introduced blooms bad'. Working in a barren new concrete space in the central city, they screened images of flowers and traded cuttings from established plantings in the Auckland suburbs, recognising that in such exchanges we carry forward, and form, histories.

In Christchurch, as Lara Strongman writes, plants have been a balm in dealing with the open wound left by the earthquakes. Flowers have often featured as a surprise performative element, and guerrilla gardening has felt like a natural response to the city's razed spaces. Like Suburban Floral Association (Redmond and Eccleston), gardening is recognised as an important community engine, bringing people together. With groups like *Gap Filler*, *Greening the Rubble* and *Life in Vacant Spaces*, there is in Christchurch a very active investigation of the role the pairing of art and plants can temporarily play in working towards permanent revitalisation of urban space.

When children can't afford to bring lunch to school (attested in so much media coverage over recent years) the very least we can do is plant a fruit tree. For her 2007 – 2011 art project *Freedom Fruit Gardens*, A. D. Schierning planted orchards in both Auckland and Wellington in the areas of the highest and most condensed financial deprivation according to the deprivation index. Schierning's work continues to deal with plantings in ways that address the history of the whenua (land) they are sited on. In 2010 and 2011 Kim Paton's *Free Store* project, again in both cities, saw the redistribution of fresh fruit and vegetables amongst other foods that were otherwise going to waste. Both projects squarely addressed issues of poverty, and pointed towards the reintroduction of growing food in inner cities. We are now seeing an increase around New Zealand in the community planting of fruit and nut trees, alongside native plantings, in public spaces.

Edible City, a Massey University design project led by Amanda Yates, created a pop-up fruit and vegetable garden in Wellington's Civic Square, where many office workers take their lunchbreak and not far from the historic site of Te Aro Pa. As a piece of design the work considered a transplantable form of garden ideal for inner city public spaces, but it also made the public consider the boundaries of what they should and shouldn't do (as I plucked a cherry tomato, I pondered how safe from contamination it was).

A noticeable tension of the pop-up garden for me was how quickly the plants in their boxes went from being something ordered and con-

tained to straggling and unruly, their baroque tendrils growing out from beyond their confine. It was as if trying to make a run for more permanent ground.

Long predating all of these works, and providing some kind of bridge between the present and our cities' pasts as productive gardens, is Barry Thomas' 1978 artwork *Vacant Lot of Cabbages*. Amongst other actions, the artist planted cabbages in the shape of the word cabbage on the corner of Manners and Willis Streets in Wellington and as part of the closing festivities provided free coleslaw. Two scientists measured the lead content of the cabbages and found them fit to eat. Afterwards the site was replanted in native trees, and murals were painted by school students. Today evidence of such activity on this site has long been erased.

Chlorophyll is the green pigment to be found in all plants. It is a biomolecule that allows plants to absorb energy from light. This is where the green comes from. Likewise we absorb energy from art. Both are catalysts for change. Both provide light to our cities and, working in tandem, as they do in these projects, offer valuable space to consider our futures in connection with our pasts.

- i. Wellington City Council's History of Town & Green Belts.
Retrieved from <http://wellington.govt.nz/recreation/parks-and-reserves/reserves/history-of-town-and-green-belts>
- ii. Wellington Towards 2040: Smart Capital.
Retrieved from http://wellington.govt.nz/your-council/plans-policies-and-bylaws/plans-policies/a-z-index/wellington-towards-2040_-smart-capital
- iii. The devastating earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 that have seen large unsafe parts of the central city torn down.



Vacant lot of cabbages, 1978, Barry Thomas.
Image courtesy of the artist



Free Store, 2010, Kim Paton.
Photograph: Murray Lloyd



Freedom Fruit Gardens, 2010, A. D. Schiering.
Photograph: Sam Hartnett

Mark Amery is an arts editor, curator, critic, broadcaster and writer with a particular engagement with art in public spaces. He has been visual arts critic at *The Dominion Post* for the last ten years and with www.eyecontactsite.com. Amery has been commenting, producing and reviewing on radio and in print since 1989, and currently hosts a podcast at www.circuit.org.nz. He was part of the curatorial team at City Gallery Wellington 2000 – 2002, involved in *Artspace*, Auckland in the early 1990s, and was more recently Director of *Playmarket*, Wellington. Since 2010 he has been co-curator of national public art programme *Letting Space*.

Andrew Douglas is a senior lecturer and Postgraduate Strand Leader in Spatial Design at AUT University, Auckland, where he teaches cultural history of space, philosophies of movement and urban history and theory. He has practiced architecture in Auckland and London, more recently has co-edited issues 12 and 13 of *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, and is completing a PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London on Oedipus and observational walking in the cities of modernity. He is currently establishing AUT's Urban Research Lab.

Tanya Eccleston is an artist, writer and teacher now living in Auckland, New Zealand. Her interests as an artist are in working with social contexts (people and places), and with making installations both within and outside the gallery. She has written a number of articles and papers on art practice, including essays addressing specific art practices and artists that explore perception and illusion, political democracy and the work of women, and socially situated art practices. She is currently working collaboratively with Monique Redmond as the Suburban Floral Association and is helping to establish New Zealand's first online Jewish Museum.

Sue Gallagher is a spatial designer and academic based in Auckland, New Zealand. Working between performance and architecture, installation and moving image, Gallagher explores spatial design as an unstable platform that transgresses many art forms. It is her understanding, from training as an architect and performance designer, that spaces are not static and fixed creations, but are subtle, transformative and communicative. Gallagher is the Associate Head of School Academic at the School of Art & Design at AUT University, Auckland.

Jenny Gillam's exhibition practice engages with aspects of current debate around ecological tensions, 'place' as a construct, and nature and its artifice. This manifests as installation practice and includes elements of photography, audio, moving image, video mixing performances and has recently extended to exhibiting living organisms within the gallery. She develops series of exhibitions, sometimes in a site specific manner, often produced collaboratively with other artists or with practitioners from another field. She is a senior lecturer in the School of Art, Massey University, Wellington.

Dieneke Jansen's photographic practice focuses on the relationship between designed and indeterminate aspects of urban and residential areas, and how they are inscribed with particular socio-political spatiality. Within specific sites she explores and expands the opposition of simultaneously recording and making up reality. She exhibits in artist-run spaces, public art institutions and their off-site projects. In 2012 Jansen was awarded a five-month CK12 artist residency in Rotterdam that concluded in the exhibition *Between a Brick and a Tender Place*. Dieneke Jansen is senior lecturer for the Bachelor of Visual Arts and Masters of Art & Design programs at AUT University, Auckland.

Kate Linzey is an academic based in Wellington, New Zealand. Since completing a Masters of Architecture degree at the University of Auckland in 2001, she has been committed to developing knowledge in the margins between architecture, art and urbanism. She is a current PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, School of Architecture, in the Architecture Theory Criticism History (ATCH) research centre. Her thesis investigates proposals for large scale kinetic sculptures developed by artist Len Lye in the 1960s. The topic focuses on an investigation of the relationship between an individual's and a community's experience of art in urban and natural landscapes.

Monique Redmond's art practice is formed primarily through collaborative and installation processes. The suburban context, its sites, architecture, planting and gardens are a source for installation and photographic works that both draw upon and document the lived spaces of her everyday. Redmond has been involved in a number of long-term collaborative projects and has exhibited extensively in New Zealand, Australia and Asia. The ongoing nature and the idea of possibility and contingency within the collaborative conversation are core to her research. Redmond is the Visual Arts Programme Leader and leads Visual Arts Postgraduate in the School of Art & Design, AUT University, Auckland.

Amanda Yates' practice-led research moves between urban and spatial design and installation practice in order to explore issues of indigeneity and ecology. Yates' work has been published in *Architecture in the Space of Flows*, *Taone Tupu Ora: Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Urban Design*, and *46 Square Metres of Land Doesn't Normally Become a House*. Her current research focuses on the city as an urban laboratory within which ecological/sustainable strategies can be foregrounded or tested. Yates is a senior lecturer at the School of Art & Design at AUT University and directs the Emergent Ecologies Lab that focuses on urban design, indigeneity and ecology.

Lara Strongman is a writer, curator, and art historian based in Christchurch. She has recently completed a PhD on the relationship between high art and mass culture in New Zealand, and writes widely on culture and society through the lens of contemporary art. Strongman is a regular contributor to art magazines and journals, and reviews television for Radio New Zealand. She was previously Senior Curator/Deputy Director at City Gallery Wellington, and is a member of the Christchurch Public Art Advisory Group.

Colophon



AN URBAN QUEST FOR CHLOROPHYLL
ISBN 978-0-473-26643-1

Published in November 2013 by Rim Books
PO Box 68896, Newton, Auckland 1145, New Zealand.
info@rimbooks.com / www.rimbooks.com

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Edited by Jenny Gillam and Dieneke Jansen

Graphic design by Jonty Valentine and Amy Yalland
www.index.org.nz

Printed by: Graphic Press & Packaging, Levin, New Zealand.
Stock: Munken Polar 100gsm, Core Cartonboard 300gsm.
Typefaces: Times New Roman, Futura.



With the support of:

Wellington City Council Public Art Panel



AUT University School of Art + Design /
Te Wananga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau

Massey University College of Creative Arts /
Toi Rauwharangi



