



**take back
the fruit:
public space
and
community
activism
matias
viegener**

PERMITS

to remake the city, to imagine it as a green place of sustainable agriculture or permaculture. The divorce of the agrarian from the urban is as old as the Industrial Revolution; the suburbs have been the one place in which fruits and vegetables re-emerge in the popular imagination—flight to the suburban homestead was motivated in part by the desire to have a piece of land and a garden. More and more modern cities follow the late-twentieth-century pattern of displacing the formerly green perimeters with unbounded sprawl, with little thought given to public spaces beyond malls and churches.

Every tree we find tells a story. The oldest remain from the time when much of Los Angeles was a citrus orchard, and many testify to the history of immigration: Latinos planted cactus, passion fruit vines and avocados; Asians the loquat and the kumquat, fruits still hard to find in local stores. We are especially fond of drought-tolerant tree crops, such as citrus, avocado, loquat, walnuts, and carob. As we advocate for new plantings, we stress their suitability to our climate. As we researched further, we found that each city has its emblematic fruit. The apricot thrives nearly wild in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and on almost every block in Los Angeles you will find a loquat tree. With a soft, fragile skin, a hard seed, and a flavor that combines an apricot with a mango, it is nearly unmarketable. It often occurs overhanging the street as what we call “drive-by fruit,” pickable from the seat of a car—a commentary on the car culture of this city.

Urban fruit is blessed by neglect, almost always untended and thus organic; it is like the electric wires or the water systems underground, a layer of urban infrastructure that could be utilized far more than it is. Many people are uncertain about its basic edibility. They don’t need to worry; it is entirely safe to eat. Even automobile soot simply wipes off. Its essentially organic status, never sprayed or fertilized, often barely watered, is striking to the health-conscious con-

sumer who usually pays dearly for the same thing at exclusive retailers like Whole Foods. In a mixed-class neighborhood like Silver Lake, this places the middle-class consumer in potential competition with the poor and the homeless. The question of public fruit goes to the heart of the relationship between those who have resources and those who do not. In a playful way it asks if these differences might entail any kind of obligation or hospitality.

Fallen Fruit regularly leads nocturnal fruit forages, which enable newcomers to see the neighborhood but also to see it differently. It’s rare to walk in LA, much less after dark. Foraging at night heightens people’s senses; most of us associate fruit with sunshine in the country, not urban darkness. We meet a lot of residents when we stop in front of their houses with flashlights, shopping carts, paper bags, and fruit pickers. It’s an aspect of leading fruit tours at night we really value. Homeowners or residents are usually curious about us and we tell them what we are doing; invariably they tell us they have too much fruit to pick themselves or sometimes that they haven’t ever picked it—the trees were just there when they moved in. Generally the exchange ends with an offer to let us pick more fruit inside their properties.

It’s uncommon, at least in LA, to find people who actually use all the fruit growing on their property. The city has a policy of not planting fruit trees, though they will tend established fruit trees in public space (since their mandate is to keep the city as green as possible). The primary reason they cite, and not without justification, is the litter problem: fruits fall to the ground and end up feeding the city’s unstoppable rodents. Thus the choice to plant a public fruit tree entails a commitment to its care and harvesting, so that the fruit will be an asset and not a liability to the neighborhood in which it grows.

We have come to see mapping as just the beginning, the opening

into our project. The point of philosophy, said Karl Marx, is not just to understand the world, but to change it. By intervening in the geography of the space rather than describing it, you alter the texture of people's experience and hopefully their social relations. We encourage all who can to plant their property's perimeter with fruit trees to share. We're making plaques that announce this intention to passersby. Echoing the principles of public fruit, the plaques encourage pedestrians to sample but not hoard, to leave food for others and to explore the neighborhood on foot. They articulate a kind of gift economy: the residents are offering the public their fruit, some if not all of it, without expectation of any payment or return.

In the last two years we've submitted two fruit park proposals to the city and the parks department. A public park planted with only fruit-bearing trees echoes the tradition of the commons, property held in common for the benefit of all, such as pasture or woodlands. The fruit park would be designed in part to be educational, with informational displays on the various fruits and their role in the area's history. It would have a central gathering area in which fruit picked on the site could be cleaned, and excess home-grown fruit brought to the park could be left for others to share.

The public fruit park is not a new idea. For fifteen years, Earthworks, a community organization in Boston, has had a project called Urban Orchards, which plants and maintains fruit trees on recovered marginal land. The ethics of the fruit park is sharing, not hoarding. This kind of communalism and its basis in a gift economy is at odds with the capitalist system of exchange, since it asks for nothing in return. Conventional gift exchanges always imply a unspoken obligation, a kind of debt; it is expected that the recipient will eventually make a gift in return. It is perhaps not accidental that the fruit basket plays such a central, symbolic role in the giving of gifts.



Food, its preparation and sharing, is a cornerstone of culture. The domestication of fruit trees began at the point of human settlement (and the end of nomadism) and thus constitutes an early marker of civilization. Food is culture in the sense that it is at once an object, a crafted thing, and a symbol that, when exchanged, cements social relations. The public fruit park, with its gathering place and informational displays, is an embodiment of these communal precepts.

Another initiative of Fallen Fruit is the Public Fruit Jam, in which we invite the people of the city to join us in making jam. We've held these events mostly in art galleries. The jam is made from either public fruit or home-picked fruit that the participants bring along. Each batch is communal, created by at least five participants who negotiate the jam through basic recipes (which establish the ratio of pectin to fruit sugar), varying it with the selection of fruits, spices, and herbs that have been collected. Each jam is different, and each is collaborative. By this we intend to expand the event beyond the group of artists who established it to make it a truly public collaboration. The two art spaces with whom we have most often worked are Machine Project and LACE, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Both are artist run spaces and their programming favors alternative, political, and non-commercial work, in particular performance and installation.

The extra jars of jam are given away to visitors and participants. Because these events are mostly held in an art context, visitors often expect to pay for the jam, and are occasionally resistant when we explain that it is made from public fruit and intended to be given back to the public. But who is the public? This question is at the core of Fallen Fruit. One way we like to frame this question is to suggest that the public is the nexus between those who have access to resources and those who do not.

While we have no great investment in Fallen Fruit as solely or even primarily an art project, that perspective offers us a set of categories that recast the overtly political nature of the project. Fruit allows us to create new psychogeographies of neighborhoods, new ways to see and experience social space. A vigorous new strain of art-making over the last decade has been described as relational aesthetics, art practices that focus less on the creation of tangible artifacts than on the relations among people those practices invoke. These new instances of social relations generate new forms of social thought as well as perhaps a new way of thinking about the role that art might serve in a world in which most art has again become a luxury commodity for the elite. All art must permit one to enter into a dialogue.

The conceptual artist Joseph Beuys described his work as “social sculpture,” an interdisciplinary and participatory process in which language, ideas, and discussion are the primary “materials.” All human beings are seen as artists responsible for the shaping of a democratic and sustainable social work of art known as the world. Similarly this pulls the aesthetic from its confines in the media of “art” and relocates it inside an imaginary collective workspace that allows us to envision and reshape the world to actualize our creative potential.

The “medium” of food can never be separated from the question of place. Perhaps more than a relational aesthetic, food offers us a way to interrogate place with what we call locational aesthetics, a way in which all locations can be discussed not just according to the edible cultural objects they do produce, but also those that they might produce. Curator and food writer Debra Solomon has coined the term locative food to describe “food that tells me where I am and where it’s from by its very name and nature . . . food that is not created

by food product designers but by local people from local ingredients.” In studying how the public in Europe and North America think of their food and the system by which it is delivered to them, one of the primary things researchers found is that food is personal: people connect it to eating and health, and they resist thinking of food as having systemic and political implications. The proposition behind Fallen Fruit is that new social formations can be created when we link the personal to the political by careful and playful attention to the local, to our own neighborhoods.

Debra Soloman (2005)

All I really want is locative food

<http://www.culiblog.org/2005/10/all-i-really-really-want-is-locative-food/>

Sustainable Food Laboratory

Initiatives: Framing

<http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org/framing/>

