

The Fruit You Want to See

Fallen Fruit: Matias Viegener,
David Burns, and Austin Young

Fallen Fruit Portrait, 2005
© Fallen Fruit



The Fruit You Want to See

Fallen Fruit: Matias Viegner,
David Burns, and Austin Young

Strolling in a new neighborhood is quite different than strolling in a familiar one. When you walk near your home, landmarks are not needed. They are either implied or unconscious, and you often move through these spaces in a manner that resembles a sleepwalker or even a ghost. Even if there is a church steeple, always a common landmark, you may not actually look at it. A new neighborhood challenges you more because its landmarks are blended with ordinary things within your sight. You notice a crack on the sidewalk or a tree bent over with ripe purple plums as much as the stone church at the end of the block. These are different kinds of walks, though often with the exact same elements. What we notice is partial. We see the parts that are necessary, the right turn, not the wrong one, with occasional interruptions of unnecessary yet perhaps meaningful details. These details often appear to us because they are anomalies, exceptional either in their identity or because they simply don't fit our expectations.

Let us take you past the house with the plum tree again. You've never been here before today, and the plums astonish you. The tree is literally bent over with their weight, almost crippled. The branches reach far across the sidewalk and nearly block your way. You crouch a little to pass under them, and while underneath, one plum seems to ask you to pick it. But, you wonder, is this *my* plum?

This is no simple question. You didn't plant the plum tree, nor did you care for it. This plum seems neglected. You ask for two reasons. The branch seems to come from nowhere and it crosses your path into public space. You are the public, after all. So is the man walking his dog down the block, and even the people inside all the houses nearby. But your status is different, and you know it. You are the passing public, the passer-by.

Without further thought, you pick the plum and eat it. It's delicious – sweet and slightly sour. Maybe it tastes so good because you weren't expecting it here, or maybe because you're not certain if it's right to eat it. The plum tree is as much a landmark as a church steeple, but the plum itself is transient, like you: here today and gone tomorrow. It's almost completely gone now, just a pit. As you eat it beside the tree it seems to taste different than it might taste in your kitchen. Perhaps it tastes even more like a plum than you expected. It is both sweet and sour, at the same time simple and complex. It has a perfume that might smell musky, almost animal. Perhaps it reminds you of other plums and other trees in other places, or, like many people, you never ate a plum before that didn't come from a supermarket.

Over the last eight years, fruit has become the recurrent object, trope, or figure in Fallen Fruit's art practice. We began our work in 2004 by mapping the neighborhood between our three houses for the fruit we found growing in public space. Our first interest was on the border of private and public property, and the way in which the slipperiness of that border could be examined as a commons. We coined the term "public fruit" as a way to talk about this "new"

resource of collectivity. It was a kind of *détournement*, which as McKenzie Wark explains, is the opposite of a quotation. "The key to *détournement* is its challenge to private property," says Wark. "*Détournement* attacks a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labor in the cultural realm can become a mere individual's property."¹ Fruit is hardly a modern fetish in the manner of personal technology, cosmetic surgery, and social networking, but it is an ancient symbol of the good, the beautiful, and the true. We like to work with fruit because it is so common, but still holds this glimmer of idealized desire.

Public fruit is the way we remap the city to open new lines of possibility, lines that cross the grid of the streets as much as they cross the boundary of public and private. Our maps are hand-drawn and the locations of the fruit trees are approximate. The goal of these maps is to get people to walk either a new or a familiar neighborhood and to look at it in a different way. Knowing there are two peach trees and a plum tree on one block but not knowing exactly where they are, people look at everything – they see what is otherwise incidental or secondary to the city: they look at what is growing there.

This sets the stage for us to invite our audience to re-imagine the city as a place that sustains more than housing and commerce, a place to integrate not just sustainable agriculture but a sense of wonder. Like many utopian fantasies, it plays off the idea of a recaptured golden age, but it does so with an overt and glaring appropriation. Public fruit is less an object than a symbolic device that uses an old form of property, the commons. This symbol opens up possibilities for new forms of property, beyond public and private, and new forms of urbanism.

We like fruit because it lies beyond modernity yet still allows us to think of the contemporary city. The opposite of a new resource, fruit is ancient and ubiquitous. It is present in virtually all cultures around the world, over many centuries. While certain fruits were once objects of luxury, the global marketplace has created a classless commodity, standardized for everyone. Norwegians in the Arctic Circle eat the same bananas as Spaniards, North Americans, and Colombians. Ironically, for being the most ordinary of food, fruit is often symbolic of the extraordinary, from the cornucopia symbolizing bounty to the apple in the Garden of Eden. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan reminds us that "our sense of plants as passive objects is a failure of imagination, rooted in the fact that plants occupy what amounts to a different dimension."² Fruit is anything but passive and empty, it is loaded with symbolism. Sometimes we like to say that fruit is the lens by which we have chosen to view the world. It is our medium.

¹ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life of the Situationist International* (New York: Verso, 2011) 36

² Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001) 247



Nocturnal Fruit Forage, 2006, documentation
© Fallen Fruit

Fruit appears more in works of art than any other food, and it is often a metaphor for the wondrous; a symbol of divinity, knowledge, or redemption. We especially love the Greco-Roman symbolism of the grape, which evokes indulgence and divine delirium, the symbol of Dionysus. It's the opposite of the moral message of Eve's apple, which tells us to beware of temptation. The hanging grapes in a Roman fresco tell us to indulge, commune with the god of wine, and forge a community through our delirium.

In September 2011, in conjunction with an exhibition and residency at the Salt Lake Art Center, we took a group on a tour of the Salt Lake City neighborhood known as 9th & 9th. The three of us had explored the neighborhood months before, on an earlier visit, and we mapped all the fruit trees we found growing in public space. Some neighborhoods are generous in this respect, and others are stingy – often wealthy neighborhoods have no fruit trees at all in front of the buildings; if they exist, they're hidden behind fences and gates, while the parts we can see are often carefully landscaped. Conversely, socially mixed neighborhoods that have housed generations of different immigrants are the most fertile, with an eclectic variety of decorative and productive plants spilling over their boundaries.

On these tours, we define public space as the street and the sidewalk. We include, for example, the branches of an apple tree hanging over the sidewalk, despite its roots originating on private property. In this sense, we are teasing out the distinction between public and private, playing with grey zones and loopholes in municipal laws and regulations. In a less obvious sense, we are teasing out the oft-unrecognized ways in which social class marks the urban landscape.

When we lead these tours, or "fruit forages" as we often call them, we're often in the strange position of knowing more about a particular neighborhood than people who have lived there a long time. We don't know everything, but we know a lot about the fruit. We can tell when the tree was planted, and by reading the clues we can guess if the current owners planted it or those before them. In California we can often guess the original planter's ethnicity, based on the variety of the fruit and the history of the neighborhood. Often we turn a corner, point out

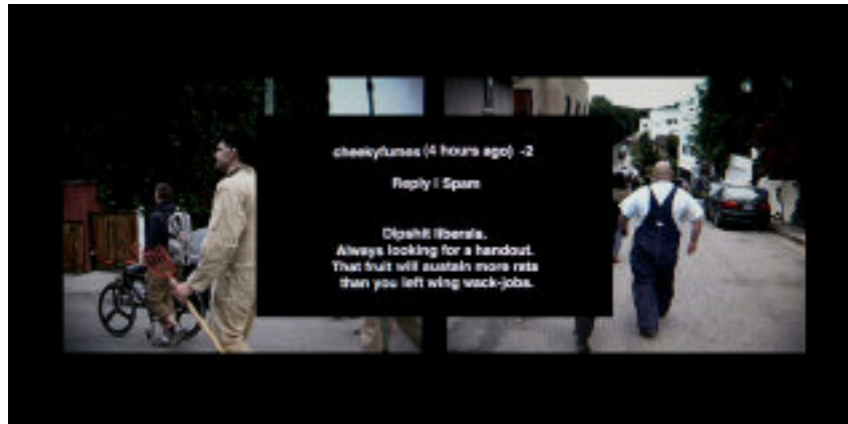
a grouping of four or five fruit trees, and someone exclaims "oh" or "aha". Instead of seeing the neighborhood as a collection of residential and commercial spaces, we see a new resource: the fruit growing there that is technically available to anyone, or everyone. Hanging on an isolated branch, just within reach, it offers the passerby a socially radical potential. Other than the immediate potential of food, there is the potential of a different kind of city, the idea that, as urban sociologist Manuel Castells says, another city is possible.

There wasn't much fruit in Utah in September, but there were some apples, some pears, and many kinds of grapes. As in other neighborhoods with alleys behind the houses, more than half the fruit growing in public was in the alleys, usually the province of cars, children, and the occasional wanderer. We stopped by each grape vine to nibble its grapes. Some people take one or two and others handful after handful – something of their character is revealed. Every grape tastes a little different, perhaps depending on how much sun it has had. But between vines you really notice a difference. Even vines of the same variety planted in a different place tasted different, depending on the water, soil, and sun the vine grew with.

As we ate the grapes, one of our guests pointed out that each grape tasted of the place it was grown. They tasted of their place. It's an idea much trumpeted by European wine makers – *terroir*, the taste of place that every wine captures: how the grapes of one vineyard taste different from the one next door, even made by the same vintner in the same way. The romanticized and essentialist notion of *terroir* is an old one, but in this context – standing in the alleys of a dense suburban neighborhood – it was also funny. We understood we were tasting the specificity of a place, the small differences that everywhere comprise the system of meanings behind the *local*, that which exists in a different way here than there.

Most of the people walking with us had never met before. But as we navigated through the sidewalks and alleys, the strangers became a group, or even a clan or a tribe. There is no faster way to bond people than through food. It's a radical equalizer. Grandparents have equally strong opinions as children and the rich have as many opinions as the poor. Every person believes they possess the expertise needed to choose which grape is superior to the others. While eating some especially sweet red grapes, one woman observed that pre-modern people must have always had this experience, only eating the food nearby, and even talking together as they did so, comparing the berries or the wild apples. Or did they? Did they just walk together and eat, hunt, and gather, and not need to talk so much? Maybe they didn't know they were tasting the place. *Terroir* as a concept can only arise once food is displaced, and especially, of course, once food is industrialized. Our phantasmic pre-modern people would have no sense that they could eat food from farther away than they could walk. And maybe they didn't talk about how it tasted at all. It could be they believed it tasted the same to everyone, or these niceties didn't matter to them nearly as much as having enough to eat in the first place.

One of the suppositions that Fallen Fruit works with is that fine distinctions of food have always mattered. Anthropologists cite the beginning of culture in at least two social practices other than the rituals of music, dance, or art: in the use of language and the transactions of food. The rituals of hunting and gathering bound ancient peoples and paved the way for concepts of the



Double Standard, HD video, 30min TRT, video still, 2008 © Fallen Fruit

table; meals shared with others became the starting point of the concept of the guest and the host. This relation is at the core of *philoxenia*, the Greek concept of hospitality. Combining the word for friend, *philos*, with that for foreigners or strangers, *xenia*, hospitality means taking in a stranger as a guest into one's house and accommodating him as a host.

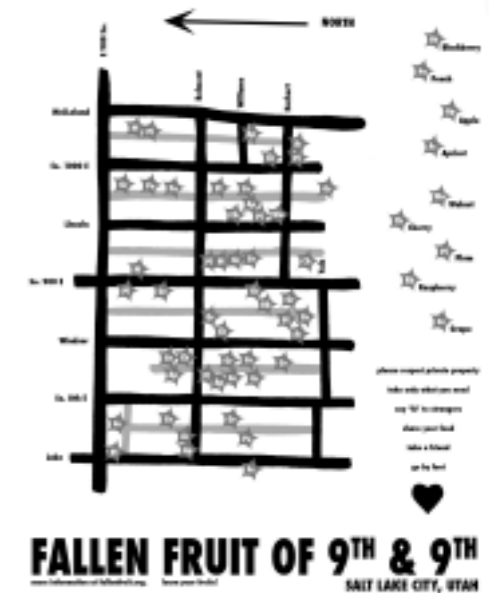
Hospitality was the instrument for consolidating two different households, cultures, and even city-states, where the power, influence, and relationship of the two households are thus strengthened through the embodiment of the host's reception of the stranger and his gift to him. Encountering persons from outside his political territory brings the host a kind of knowledge that even frequent contact with usual strangers from the same political, social, and cultural domain would not have made available. The code of *philoxenia* embodies in itself the possible confrontation of heterogeneous elements in every possible level – cultural, social, political, and even psychological. This encounter of different cultures and the acceptance and re-incorporation of the other becomes crucial as far as the differences and conflicts of the two cultures are concerned. There is nothing quite so intimate as offering food, or placing the food of a stranger in your own mouth.

The daylight was beginning to fade as we stood eating the grapes together with our group of about twenty. As we compared the different grapes in the alley near Windsor Street and Belmont Avenue, we understood that we were guests of some kind. The vines were growing on the back fences of a gentrifying middle-class neighborhood, similar to many throughout the urban world. We were not a foraging tribe, of course, we were guests eating an absent host's food. We were strangers to this host, and to each other, and as we stood by the vines talking and eating, we understood that standing under the dark leaves there was also an altogether other kind of host beside us: the vine itself. Can we have a relationship with this vegetative host?

People started talking about how we live today is already so different from how people lived a generation ago. We eat oranges from Florida, cherries from Chile in December, apples and pears from Argentina in June. Like place, seasons are rendered irrelevant; both are universalized.

The grapes we were eating near Windsor Street and Belmont Avenue were beside the vine itself – in the same place they grew, and at the exact time of their ripeness. Everything arose in comparisons. How is this green grape different from that purple one, how is your sense of taste like mine, and how is my neighborhood different from yours? Just as we could have different possible group relationships among strangers, is it possible to have another kind of city?

A week after we returned to Los Angeles, we received an email from one of the women on our tour, artist Julie Dunker. She lives in the 9th & 9th neighborhood of Salt Lake City, and she walks her dog every day. Since our tour, she and her dog have developed a new trick. The dog leads her to neighbor's apple trees, almost like a truffle pig to a truffle. Julie Dunker then eats the apple, and when she's done the dog eats the core. Each gets what he wants – it's an arrangement between two species involving a third. It echoes other triangular relationships between these species, for example the elk and moose in North America and Europe who are occasionally found in drunken stupors from devouring fermented apples.³ Underlining this is the fact that the apple tree is not native to these countries, but planted by people. This arrangement between two species results in pleasure to the point of delirium, with humans amused perhaps because they recognize something of themselves in the drunken animals – a curiosity of nature in both action and form.



Fallen Fruit of 9th and 9th, 2010 © Fallen Fruit

How indeed do we differentiate ourselves from all the other animals? Descartes does this in discussing the concept of the soul. He follows a tradition that goes back to Plato, differentiating among forms of life by assigning animals “mechanical” souls (they can sense and respond to the world) while plants have “vegetative” souls (they grew in response to their environment). Humans are the proper stewards of animals and plants, in that human souls are “rational” in addition to vegetative and mechanical. Descartes desires, of course, to separate humans from other animals, and he endows true souls to only humans through the distinction of reason. Interestingly, he describes the fire fueling the animal's “mechanism” to be an energetic process like “that which causes fermentation in new wines before they are run clear of the fruit”.⁴ The mechanical magic of animals, their ability to sense things and respond, is related to a kind of delirium, a different kind of “ghost in the machine”.⁵

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2034630/Drunken-moose-stuck-inside-apple-tree.html>

⁴ René Descartes, Discourse on the Method, www.feedbooks.com/book/677/discourse-on-the-method (Leiden, Netherlands: Imprimerie de Ian Maire, 1637) 37

⁵ Ryle Gilbert, The Concept of Mind (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002 (orig. pub 1949)) 11. Ryle introduces this phrase to underline the mysticism of Descartes' dualism of mind and body.

These three kinds of souls - vegetative, mechanical and rational - all seem important: they fuel our concepts of space and time, the way we live in a place: we roam and vegetate, dwell and reside. We use our reason to domesticate, categorize, or study animals and plants – and fruit trees. Our capacity to separate the three types of souls, echoing Descartes' separation of the body and the mind from spirit and Hegel's unbundling of content and form from subject, is the essential gesture of Western industrial culture. Capital unbundles value from goods, rationalism unbundles reason from truth, and subjectivity unravels or unbundles the individual from the fabric of space and time. Parallel ruptures can be seen in how modern forms of transportation separate or unbundle the individual from the tribe, and separates the source of our food from its destination, our mouths, our stomachs, and our bodies.

In our research in different cities and countries around the world, we have learned that the laws and customs around food are culturally variable. These laws are always local; the concept of theft of crops is much stricter in rural areas than urban ones, since in the country food production is central to the economy. Much of Europe has customs of gleaning (allowing the poor to gather the "fallen fruit" that remains after harvesting), while gleaning in North America has until recently been forbidden, judged unsanitary, and thus a liability to the landowner. Food everywhere is a commodity, perhaps the first one, and our work with Fallen Fruit seeks to play this commodification against its opposite, the worthless or the cast off: fallen fruit in all its signification, a thing that anyone can take.

The focus of Fallen Fruit is also on space and its social meaning, which we often pry open through the fruit growing there. Space in the United States is governed by rules of property – there is little that escapes this binary. Public space is highly controlled while private property grants great freedoms, but only to its owner. As we have studied our neighborhood and others, we've been guided by the way Henri Lefebvre has woven the three strands of the social, the historical, and the spatial through his study of the structure of everyday life. To the question "what exactly is the mode of existence of social relationships," Lefebvre replies, "The study of space offers an answer according to which the social relations of production have a social



Public Fruit Jam, 2009, documentation
© Fallen Fruit

existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself."⁶ Without such an analytical tool, these relations remain purely abstract, or "in the realm of representations and hence of ideology, the realm of verbalism, verbiage, and empty words."⁷

Celebrated as the "Dionysian Marxist" for his study of festivals and street fairs – "excess, intoxication, risks"⁸ – Lefebvre's research seeks out the exceptional event that breaks through consciousness. He identifies this with a surplus of energy that fuels both the living subject and the social organism. Lefebvre uses the term "lived moments" to describe actions that transform everyday capitalism – they "disalienate" everyday life, and often involve collective and personal feats of resistance. They might be serious but are often also playful and, more than anything, are characterized by serious play.

It is the spirit of the seriously playful that we bring to the project of Fallen Fruit. One example is our ongoing participatory events called Public Fruit Jams. In them we invite the public to join us in making fruit jam in alternative art spaces, combining our street-picked "public fruit" and their homegrown (or even store bought) fruit. We avoid using recipes and create an atmosphere of collaborative improvisation – playing off the other sense of the word "jam." Perfect strangers work together to create experimental combinations such as lemon fig lavender jam, and though the finished product might resemble a work of art – it has color, form and symbolism – it is not given by an artist to a viewer but rather the outcome of a participatory process. The Public Fruit Jam is a kind of participatory performance that effaces the heroic stance of the artist as the deliverer of aesthetic meaning. As it unfolds, people who don't know each other learn how to make the jam at the same time they get to know each other. The jam is a tangible instance of what Edward Soja, following Lefebvre's spatial thinking, calls a "real-and-imagined" Thirdspace, a space that produces communities of resistance and points the way to spatial conception of progressive cultural politics.⁹ Taking a step beyond our public fruit jams, the jam synthesizes our ideas on green urban space with social participation, a literal combination of public and fruit.

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 129.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lefebvre, 178.

⁹ Thirdspace is "an alternative 'postmodern geography' of political choice and radical openness attuned to making practical sense of the contemporary world." p. 61. "Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history." pp 56-57. "For Lefebvre, reductionism in all its forms, including Marxist versions, begins with the lure of binarism, the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements. Whenever faced with such binarized categories (subject-object, mental-material, natural-social, bourgeoisie-proletariat, local-global, center-periphery, agency-structure), Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility or "moment" that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an "in between" position along some all-inclusive continuum." p. 60. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

Let us return one last time to the ripe grapes in the alley near Windsor Street and Belmont Avenue in Salt Lake City. Which taste better, red or green? As we consume the grapes and talk about them, we are the guests of these two vines. It's an interspecies guest / host relationship, a reciprocal relationship with the world and with each other. The reciprocity of giving and receiving is complex: the host gets to give and the guest gives his attention, gives an opportunity to receive. This relationship is between tree and stroller as much as between the owner of the tree and public. We're very interested in the non-human host, the vine itself in this case, which stands in for the whole of the natural world for many of the people we take on these walks.

Like our agriculture, our urban landscapes are unnatural and unsustainable, decorative afterthoughts that index the world of plants while subverting most of their natural processes. To say we have lost contact with the natural world is perhaps a truism of all modern periods – and what period has not considered itself modern? Our food is produced industrially through factory farms, including much of what passes for organic. Fruit in this context appears as an “innocent” natural object, but it really isn't. All the fruit people grow is in fact a cultural object, often the product of millennia of human selection and breeding. The genius of Michael Pollan was to suggest that this domestication, rather than something we have done to certain species, is also “something certain plants and animals have done to us, an evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests.”¹⁰ Fruit tells us something about people, foremost about how we value sweetness. The inter-species nature of this exchange is what gives Fallen Fruit its own opening into a Thirdspace, a way to break open the apparent fixity of our world with utopian potential. The *détournement* of public fruit “dissolves the rituals of knowledge in an active remembering that calls collective being into existence.”¹¹

Conventional understanding holds that all the marks of human presence – the urban – are artificial, while the trees around us are natural. An echo of this is the way we imagine domestic animals as more natural than us, in distinction to our over-civilized humanity. The landscape and the forms of land use around us are a legacy of urbanization. If we assume urbanization is a constant (and it will be because of global population growth), what this implies is the ongoing erasure of the natural world to create a new, more aesthetically pleasing or modern and marketable form of the “natural”.

¹⁰ Pollan, p. xvi.

¹¹ Wark, p. 37.

For the three of us in Fallen Fruit, these questions are refracted through a public art practice, which some also call a participatory practice. The public is not something we take for granted – neither their attention nor their basic ontological category. The public is an abstraction meaning *of or concerning the people as a whole*. The ideal of wholeness is never attainable, since the whole is never present. There never really is a public in any specific sense, just a group of individuals, to whatever massive proportions. We have come to understand the public in our practice as something we constantly make and remake, each time we engage with people through our work. Like fruit, the public is nomadic and transient. The public is human, but like fruit trees and dogs, it is also given shape by its relationship to other species, which is an index of its relationship to the world. A variant to the definition of *public* defines it as *that which is open to everybody's view*. The plum hanging over the sidewalk is indeed open to view by any passerby, but it appears only to those who want to see it.