

Urban Ecological Consciousness at Wave Hill

By providing more information than viewers might process, the show's dense, small-font text highlights an aesthetic challenge that confronts social practice art.



Louis Bury August 11, 2018



Lillian Ball, WATERWASH Bronx River wetland view in May, with recycled glass vortex sculpture for overflow leaving wetland and entering river (photo by Lillian Ball)

Curated by Jennifer McGregor and Eileen Jeng Lynch for Wave Hill's Glyndor Gallery, ***Ecological Consciousness: Artist as Instigator*** showcases artworks that perform quiet yet consequential interventions upon New York City's urban ecology. The exhibition focuses on ecological social practice projects that are local to the city; Joseph Beuys' concept of "social sculpture," in which an artwork strives to shape society or the environment, is a pervasive influence. This practical bent means that, despite what the exhibition's title suggests, its artworks are aimed as much at tangible environmental remediation as they are at abstract consciousness

raising. In aggregate, they make a humble and hardworking case that pragmatic-minded ecological art can function as a form of guerrilla urban design.

This design sensibility is evident in both Lillian Ball's *WATERWASH Bronx River* (2010-2015) and SLO Architecture's and Bob Braine's *Daylighting Tibbetts Brook* (2018). The former is a 2010 human-made wetland park that filters stormwater runoff to the Bronx River; measurements taken by Community Drexel Engineering estimate that the park has improved the immediate area's water quality by 15 to 20 percent. The latter is a proposal, part of the 2034 Van Cortlandt Park Master Plan, to daylight — that is, redirect a stream into an above-ground channel — the Bronx's Tibbetts Brook, which the city diverted into a sewer in 1912. Both projects illustrate how this type of artwork is collaborative in nature, requiring efforts from local communities, outside experts, government agencies, and other organizations and institutions.



Outer Seed Shadow (OSS), commissions artists to work with communities to build gardens that incorporate public art, storytelling, urban farming, public programming. Timeline presented with website and video (courtesy of artist and Wave Hill, photo by John Maggiotto)

Juanli Carrión's and Jacki Fisher's inviting *Outer Seed Shadow* (OSS) initiative exemplifies this collaborative ethos. The recently incorporated nonprofit organization commissions artists to build gardens in partnership with local communities. Conceived as "living sculptures," the gardens host a range of topical programming, such as readings, panels, and performances, as well as workshops on gardening and cooking. The term "outer seed shadow" refers to a botanical phenomenon in which a plant has been introduced into a new ecosystem but, due to adverse

conditions, cannot reproduce itself and become part of that system. It's a fitting metaphor for how OSS tends to the conditions under which human communities, especially transplanted minority communities, languish or thrive.

For all of *Outer Seed Shadow's* conceptual and practical power, its information-rich gallery display highlights an aesthetic challenge that confronts the works in *Ecological Consciousness* and social practice art more generally. A timeline of photographs, graphics, and colorful text rectangles, along with two openings that contain iPads, represents OSS. The dense, small-font text rectangles contain more information than viewers are likely to process, if they read them at all. Transplanted from the outside world to the gallery, social practice works can struggle to balance contextual explanation with visual appeal.



Leonard Ursachi, "What a Wonderful World" (2018), pigmented acrylic resin, 24k gold leaf (image courtesy of the artist)

This challenge is compounded by the extended time horizon and near-invisibility of much ecologically-minded social practice art. Projects such as *WATERWASH Bronx River*, *Daylighting Tibbetts Brook*, and OSS can take years, decades, or even centuries to realize their full effects. Other projects — for example, Jan Mun's *The Fairy Ring: Mycoremediation Mother Patch* (2018) and Greg Lindquist's *Newtown Creek Sampling* (2016-present), both of which work toward the remediation of Newtown Creek, a Superfund site on the Brooklyn-Queens border — pursue ends that are quite literally imperceptible. Gallery representations of such artworks

abstract or excerpt phenomena that are difficult to perceive even in their intended non-gallery forms.

The Environmental Performance Agency, an artist collective formed in response to the proposed 2017 defunding of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, found a workable solution to these representational difficulties. Their *OnBehalfOf.Life* display, a medley of clipboards, photographs, and cardboard signage, has the same homespun quality as much of the other visual material in *Ecological Consciousness*. But its focal point — a set of five bulleted and large-font instructions for how visitors can submit public comments to the U.S. EPA on an adjacent wall-mounted iPad — contains minimal text. This arrangement avoids the pitfall of information overload and allows visitors to interface with the project's web component right then and there.

In general, the inclusion of audiovisual material adds a welcome layer of experiential immediacy to what is, of necessity, a text-heavy exhibition. On film, Carrión's OSS project comes to life as participants enthusiastically discuss their role in it. Lindquist's film footage of Newtown Creek turns seemingly innocent ambient sounds — water running; wind whipping — into portents of contamination. Brandon Ballengée's video, *State of the Arts* (2017), evidences the artist's rapport with workshop participants in his *Hunts Point Eco-Actions* (2018). Eve Mosher's and Clarinda Mac Low's sprawling wall and floor painting, *NYC Waterways* (2018), traces literal and figurative lines of connection across the exhibition. The FSDE (Floating Studios for Dark Ecologies) artist collective's audio tour of Newtown Creek's Nature Walk, *Oil Twitchers and Barge Spotters* (2017), verges on guided meditation.

Alicia Grullón's short film, *Surge* (2018), stands out in this context because it is a single artwork rather than a distillation of a social practice project. The film's clever conceit — that it is a trailer for a longer Hollywood movie — lampoons the sensationalism of pop cinematic representations of climate change. An imagistic montage of floods and political protests (such as Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock) passes onscreen, as the New York City Teen Poet Laureate Aaliyah Daniels voices over an untitled poem of hers about environmental racism. *Surge* is an important reminder that climate change impacts the present, not just a distant apocalyptic future, and that its harms are distributed unequally along race and class lines.

In their separate contributions, Jean Shin and Mary Mattingly both look toward the future while remaining grounded in the present. Shin's *Levee Proposal for Louis Valentino Park, Red Hook, Brooklyn* (2018) converts discarded denim jeans into sandbags; two prototypes — bunker-like walls of imbricated denim — embody the proposal's makeshift practicality. For her smart and prominent *Swale* (2016-present), Mattingly has been growing and giving away food on a barge that docks along New York City waterways. In their willingness to entertain alternative architectural and relational structures, both artists confront dystopian upheaval with practical utopian imagination.



Left wall: Tattfoo Tan, NERTM (New Earth Resiliency Training Module), teaches an ethos of self-reliance and living closer to the earth, especially within an urban environment. Building an herbarium is one of the skills to dry and preserve plants for further study and use. It is presented as a banner, 4 herbariums and booklet. Right wall: Greg Lindquist with Willis Eldkins/Newtown Creek Alliance, Newtown Creek Water Sampling, water samples, photos, video, illuminate relationships of biological and industrial circumstances of the creek (image courtesy of the artists and Wave Hill, photo by John Maggiotto)

This combination of pessimism and pluck finds its most acute expression in Tattfoo Tan's *New Earth Resiliency Training Module*. To prepare others for the possibility of civilizational collapse, Tan, in conjunction with Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, developed workshops and a handbook that teach survival skills including knot tying and water procurement. Tan conceives of his program as a process of "re-wilding," an emphasis that shows he's not indulging in doomsday prepper fantasies of chaos and despair but trying to preserve forms of knowledge that have become lost or endangered in many contemporary cultures.

At its best, ecological social practice art preserves not only the environment but also essential and sometimes imperiled forms of knowledge. Aesthetic questions — how and why humans make things and how those things ought to look — can sometimes seem like luxuries, but shift the context from gallery to catastrophe and suddenly the text-image balance of a survivalist handbook matters in new and urgent ways. Using the means its artists know best, and collaboratively drawing on others' expertise and assistance, the works in *Ecological Consciousness* undertake vital, back-to-the-wall forms of thinking and doing that many people today are unable — or unwilling — to perform.

Ecological Consciousness: Artist as Instigator *continues at Wave Hill (West 249th Street and Independence Avenue, Bronx) through August 26.*

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