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Allison Carruth

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Urban Ecologies and Social Practice Art

ALLISON CARRUTH

A mobile app that turns smartphones into interactive guides for exploring a city's built and wild environments on foot. Hand-drawn maps of publicly accessible fruit trees in cities ranging from Madrid and Copenhagen to Los Angeles and Guadalajara. A lab-meets-kitchen where Philadelphia communities enjoy free soup and urban gardening primers in exchange for soil samples from their neighborhoods. And a yearlong, cross-country tour of the ecological and social landscapes of North America conducted by two intrepid writers with a portable interview rig.

The images that follow showcase these projects, the work of four groups that are reimagining cities: respectively, multimedia collaborative EcoArtTech (brainchild of Leila Nadir and Cary Peppermint), LA collective Fallen Fruit (co-founded by David Burns, Matias Viegner, and Austin Young), Bay Area-based Futurefarmers (founded by Amy Franceschini), and the yearlong journey around and multimedia exploration of North America known as Venue (a collaboration of writers Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley). By showcasing these projects in the inaugural issue of *Resilience*, we aim to highlight a vibrant site for socially engaged, activist art: in short, the ecosystems and environmentalism of cities.

Social practice has become a buzzword in the art world over the past five years, as MFA programs under this rubric have emerged and as a growing list of museums have tested out formats for the participatory and often ephemeral structure of social practice projects. In March 2013,

social practice made art headlines when the *New York Times* published a feature on the movement and its critics (who voice concern that social practice overemphasizes political activism and social engagement at the expense of aesthetic technique and artistic innovation). Artists aligned with social practice deliberately “blur the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism.”¹ While the *Times* reporter claimed that these artists are pushing the definition of art “as close to the breaking point as contemporary art ever has,” we can certainly identify fore-runners to social practice in, for example, the 1960s happenings and the flash mobs of the 2000s.

What is arguably most noteworthy, however, is how central the environmental histories and futures of cities have been in much social practice. The list of artist collectives that engage communities in reimagining and reinhabiting urban spaces is long, a list that includes internationally renowned artists such as Fritz Haeg (creator of *Edible Estates*) and Natalie Jeremijenko (director of the xDesign Environmental Health Clinic and Lab in Brooklyn) along with activist organizations such as Buenos Aires Libre (a group that is redesigning urban infrastructure from below by creating independent, local networks) and the LA Urban Rangers (a group co-founded by *Resilience* contributor Jenny Price that gives unofficial tours of the Malibu coastline and downtown Los Angeles). The varied projects that fall under the heading of social practice invite environmental humanities scholars to tune in and take note. What we might think of as the *social practice of urban terrain* offers a particularly rich case study in how fluid boundaries between art, writing, media, design, and activism are within contemporary environmental culture. This observation in turn raises the question of how the environmental humanities scholars might define their materials and methods and to what extent disciplinary rubrics (for example, ecocriticism, environmental history, green media studies, and so on) should team up with collaborative and cross-disciplinary modes of inquiry. As collectives like the LA Urban Rangers and EcoArtTech also cross boundaries of art, activism, and academe, social practice further invites environmental humanists to articulate the public engagements of the environmental humanities itself, that is to consider both the potentials and pitfalls for what we might call a *scholarly social practice*.

In the spirit of prompting scholarly explorations of social practice on the one hand and urban ecologies on the other we feature in this media section of *Resilience* the work of EcoArtTech, Fallen Fruit, Futurefarmers, and Venue.

Our first image gallery showcases EcoArtTech's mobile app *Indeterminate Hikes+*, which Nadir and Peppermint designed and released in 2012 for both the Android and Apple iOS operating systems. This technical detail underscores their intervention in the infrastructure and the culture of Silicon Valley. As their statement about the app notes, *Indeterminate Hikes+* "re-appropriates smartphones, which are generally used for rapid communication and consumerism, and turns them into tools of environmental imagination and meditative wonder."² In short the app provides a series of prompts (think of scavenger hunt instructions) to identify ecological, topographic, and technological features of the urban landscape around the user/hiker. The smartphone is a device that often distracts users from the physical environment around them and hence emblemizes Silicon Valley's promotion of digital connectivity and speed. In contrast, *Indeterminate Hikes+* accesses the digital network in order to turn urban landscapes around smartphone users "into sites of bio-cultural diversity and wild happenings."³

Our second image gallery features several interrelated projects that Fallen Fruit has created since 2005. The group is best known for its *Public Fruit Maps*, a "collaborative activist art project."⁴ The images we've selected to publish here highlight related projects that speak to the group's twin investments in public art and environmental commons. The first two are posters designed for outdoor installations that double as acts of civil disobedience: the *Urban Fruit Action/Acción Fruta Urban* that Fallen Fruit installed as "public service-like announcements" in Los Angeles and Madrid in 2005. Like their *City Hall/Fruit Protest* installation that same year (the third image in the series), these projects are a "fusion of populism, relational aesthetics and adolescent antics."⁵ They call on communities to make the city into "a communal garden" while also calling on the art world to redefine artistic practice to include urban agriculture. The final two images, *Elysian Park* and *Street Bananas*, show the three members of Fallen Fruit at night in acts of urban trekking and foraging. These photographs confront the dominant vision of LA as a sprawling non-place of freeways and disconnected downtowns

by zooming in on public parks and neighborhood blocks that are teeming with edible plant life (or “public fruit”).

Next we turn to two ventures that Futurefarmers and Amy Franceschini spearheaded: the group’s 2008 temporary installation *Victory Gardens* (a set of demonstration community gardens planted in front of San Francisco’s City Hall) and their more recent public art project *Soil Kitchen* (a community space in Philadelphia that serves as a soil testing laboratory, communal kitchen, and urban agriculture learning environment). Futurefarmers exemplifies the collaborative, exploratory, and activist dimensions of social practice. The group describes their mission in precisely these terms: “We are artists, researchers, designers, architects, scientists and farmers with a common interest in creating frameworks for exchange that catalyze moments of ‘not knowing.’ While we collaborate with scientists and are interested in scientific inquiry, we want to ask questions more openly. . . . Through participatory projects, we create spaces and experiences where the logic of a situation disappears.”⁶ Akin to Jeremijenko as well as bioartists such as Beatriz da la Costa and Critical Art Ensemble, Futurefarmers advocates practices of amateur (or DIY) tinkering, experimenting, and making. And like Fallen Fruit, they view the imperative of environmental art practice as enhancing cities’ public spaces and edible commons.

This media section concludes with a small sampling of the huge photographic and journalistic archive that has grown out of Manaugh’s and Twilley’s Venue project. *Los Angeles from Above* (an image of the LA Basin taken from a helicopter) and *Seismic Ruins* (a photograph of the University of Nevada at Reno’s earthquake simulation facility) together highlight how Venue has apprehended the complex relationships in North America between geological and social landscapes and among cities, towns, agricultural lands, parks, and wilderness spaces. We asked Manaugh and Twilley to provide extended captions for each of these photographs in an effort to show the importance of storytelling to the multimedia site where they have captured the interviews, photographs, and footage of their North American journey. The capacity of storytelling to reveal the connections but also the fault lines between different urban terrains is evident in Twilley and Manaugh’s post “from above LA.” Accompanied by photographs and engineering drawings, the post tells the story of the gigantic, soon-to-be-decommissioned Puente Hills landfill: “Puente Hills will become the intermodal transit site for

the new ‘Waste-to-Rail’ system that will funnel the County’s trash out to the new Mesquite landfill—which has sufficient capacity to accept 20,000 tons of trash per day for one hundred years. Meanwhile, the closed landfill will still need to be monitored for leachate contamination or methane drift . . . and, of course, there is the landscaping work to transition this canyon turned garbage mountain into its next reincarnation, as a county park.”⁷ In the photographs Puente Hills seems banal: a huge pile of dirt crisscrossed by earthmovers. But in the essay that accompanies these images, this literal mountain of buried trash comes to life and gains depth as an urban infrastructure that is also a geological and ecological place (so large that it has observable microclimates).

Nor are the creators of Venue alone among multimedia environmental collectives in interweaving word and image, or story and installation. As the *Times* article indicates, writers such as Price have been central figures in social practice. In turn, groups like the LA Urban Rangers have expanded the boundaries of art practice to include writing. To close the media section with Venue thus provides a segue between environmental media and environmental literature, showing that central to social practice environmental projects is a capacious aesthetic that does not privilege one medium or mode of imagination over another. Academic research and scholarship also calls upon the imagination, as *Resilience* aims to showcase. We hope that this gallery of images inspires academic readers to come to the table to respond to or participate in kindred kinds of multimedia and community-oriented projects.

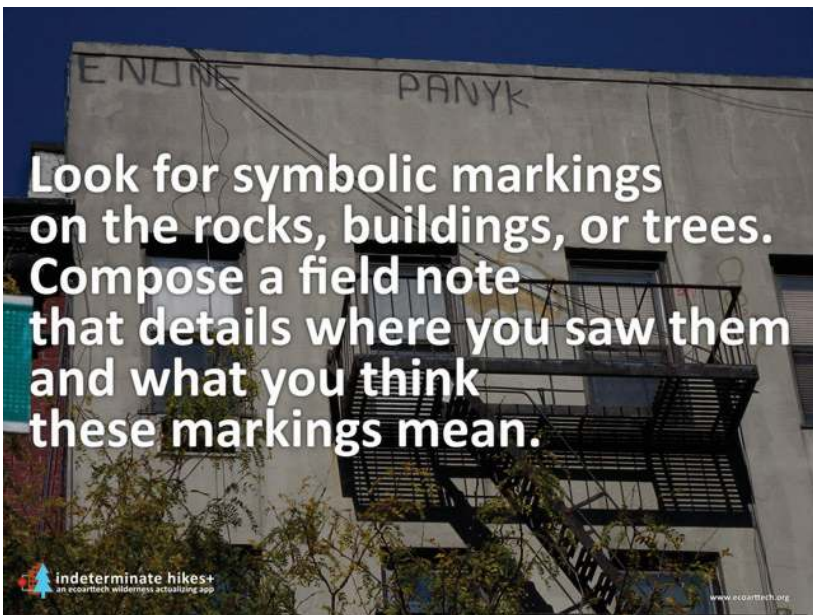


Fig. 1 (top). Screen view of the *Indeterminate Hikes+* mobile app displaying a Scenic Vista directive, created by Leila Nadir and Cary Peppermint of EcoArt-Tech, 2013.

Fig. 2 (bottom). A Scenic Vista directive from the *Indeterminate Hikes+* mobile app created by Leila Nadir and Cary Peppermint of EcoArtTech, 2013.



Fig. 3. Documentary image of an Indeterminate Hike led by EcoArtTech artist Cary Peppermint, displayed here with Scenic Vista directive; Conflux Festival, Tompkins Square Park, East Village, New York City, 2011.

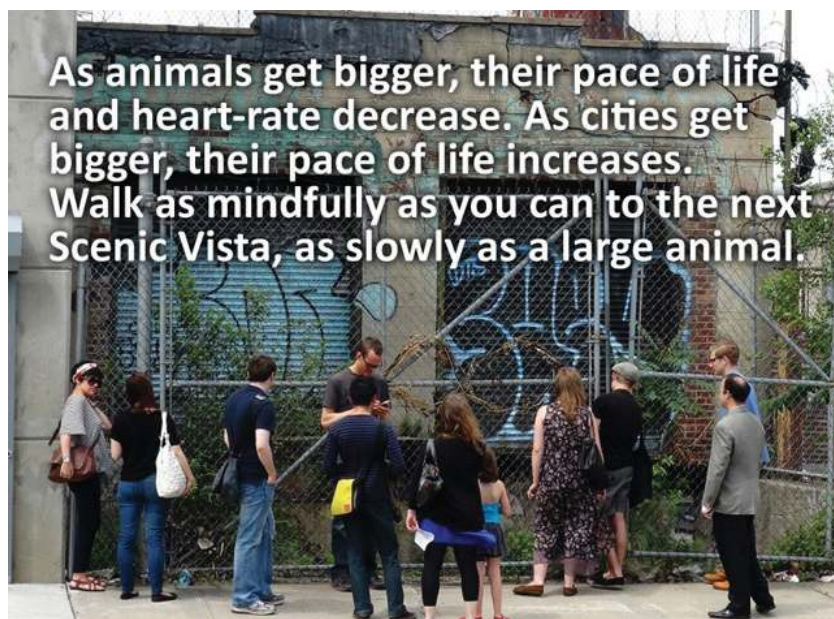


Fig. 4. Documentary image of an Indeterminate Hike led by EcoArtTech artist Cary Peppermint, displayed here with a Scenic Vista directive; Bushwick Open Studios / 319 Scholes, Brooklyn, New York, 2012.

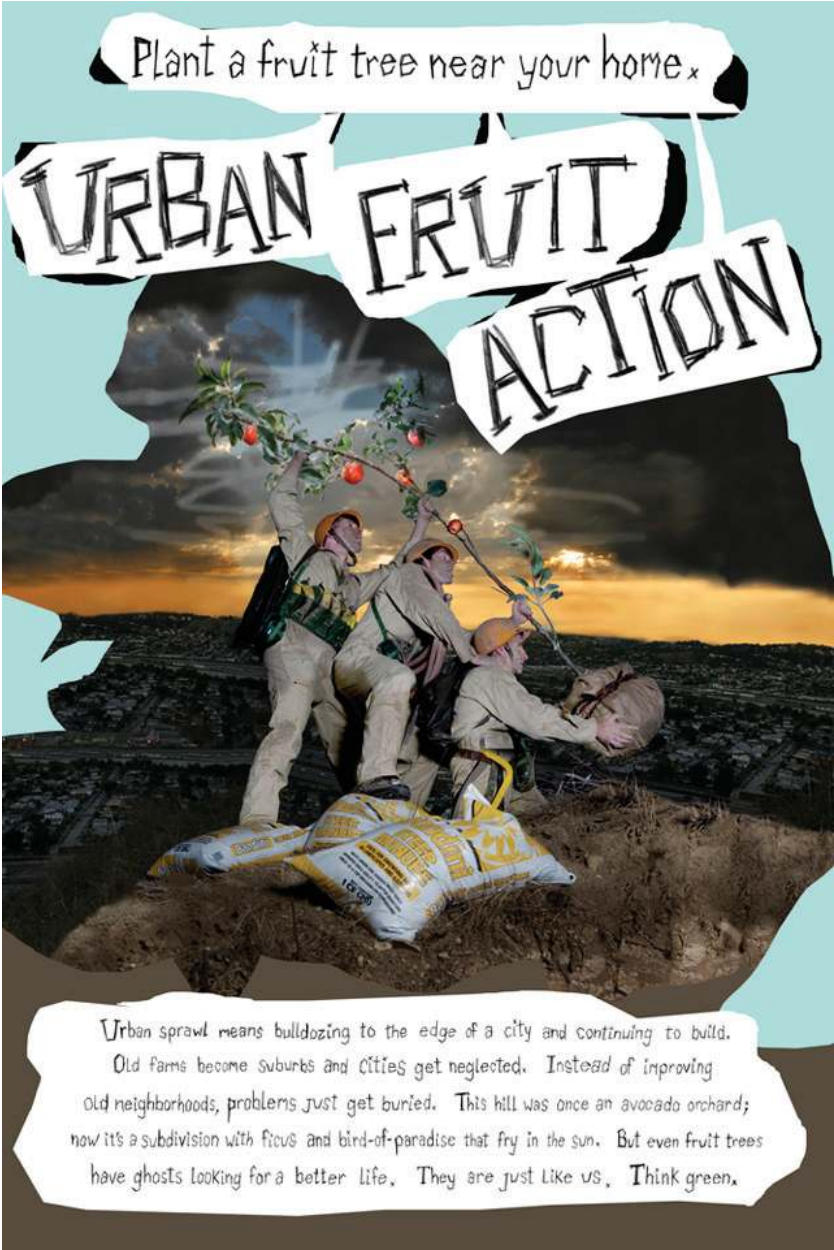


Fig. 5. *Urban Fruit Action*, giclée print, 40 x 60 in., Fallen Fruit | David Burns, Matias Viegner, and Austin Young, 2005.

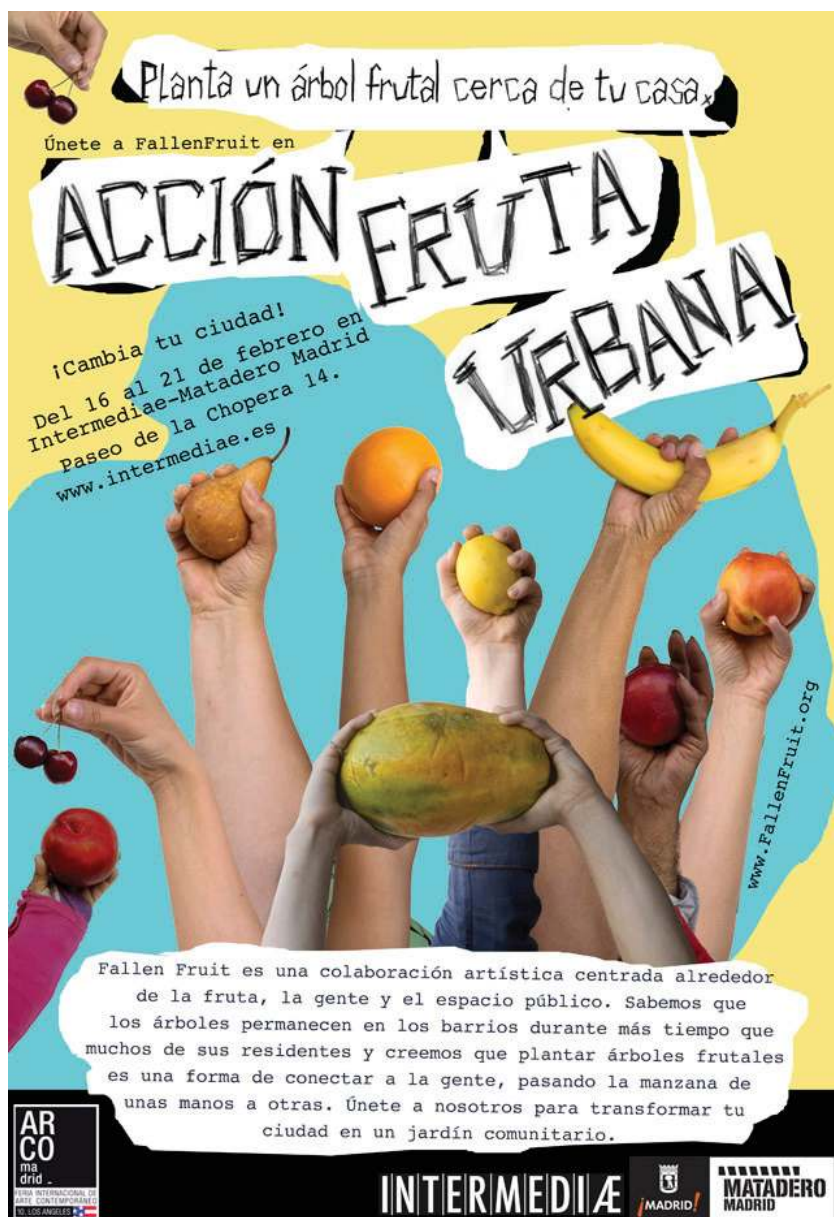


Fig. 6. *Acción Fruta Urbana* / *Urban Fruit Action Madrid*, outdoor public installation, Fallen Fruit | David Burns, Matias Viegenger, and Austin Young, 2010.



Fig. 7 (top). *City Hall / Fruit Protest*, giclée print on wood panel, 96 × 120 in., *Fallen Fruit* | David Burns, Matias Viegner and Austin Young, 2005.

Fig. 8 (bottom). *Elysian Park*, giclée print, 40 × 60 in., *Fallen Fruit* | David Burns, Matias Viegner and Austin Young, 2005.



Fig. 9. *Street Bananas*, giclée print, 16 x 20 in., Fallen Fruit | David Burns, Matias Viegner, and Austin Young, 2005.



Fig. 10. *Soil Kitchen*, 2012. Temporary Public Art Project: Soil Sampling, free workshops, soup kitchen in collaboration with city of Philly and epa Brownfields Conference. Credit: Futurefarmers.



Fig. 11. *Victory Gardens*, 2008. Temporary Public Art Project: Demonstration garden in front of City Hall, San Francisco. Credit: Futurefarmers.



Fig. 12. *Soil Kitchen*, 2012 (interior shot). Temporary Public Art Project: Soil Sampling, free workshops, soup kitchen in collaboration with city of Philly and epa Brownfields conference. Credit: Futurefarmers.

Fig. 13. *Victory Gardens* posters, 2008. Silkscreened posters announcing planting parties for 15 pilot gardens given away in 2008. Credit: Futurefarmers.



Fig. 14. *Victory Gardens Bikebarrow*, 2008. Sculpture by Amy Franceschini. Credit: Futurefarmers.



Fig. 15. *Los Angeles from Above*, Nicola Twilley and Geoff Manaugh, Venue | v-e-n-u-e.com, 2013.

One of the recurring themes to emerge from Venue's site visits and interviews, which have included a hands-on introduction to the nation's first undergraduate program in unmanned aviation and a conversation with landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky, is a critical interest in the aerial view. This photograph was taken during a helicopter tour of Los Angeles with Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne, as part of a larger conversation about the logic of the city's legendary sprawl and Hawthorne's own recent exploration of the evolving identity of the city's boulevards.



Fig. 16. *Seismic Ruins*, Nicola Twilley and Geoff Manaugh, Venue | v-e-n-u-e.com, 2013.

Over the course of its sixteen months on the road, Venue has visited many sites of simulation, both scientific and cultural. One of the project's earliest interviews was with seismologists at the University of Nevada at Reno. In their internationally renowned shake-table facility—so large it was in the process of moving to a larger, purpose-built laboratory next door—the faculty perform real-time, structurally devastating simulations of notable earthquakes from the past. The ruins from these experiments—mostly cracked pillars and broken concrete—stand outside, forming an Acropolis-like gathering of broken architecture in the desert sun.

NOTES

1. Kennedy, "Outside the Citadel."
2. EcoArtTech, "Indeterminate Hikes+."
3. EcoArtTech, "Indeterminate Hikes+."
4. "Interview with Fallen Fruit."
5. Buckley, "Fallen Fruit."
6. Futurefarmers, "About."
7. Manaugh and Twilley, "Mount Angeles."

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