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Patton, Andy

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On the Destruction of an Artwork

by Andy Patton

1.
Something about an artwork is revealed when it's destroyed — something that perhaps had been hidden when the work existed.

But it broke my heart to hear, in mid-November, that they'd started dismantling Ron Benner's garden, *All That Has Value*, at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. The letter-writing campaign had failed, just as we'd failed to stop the destruction of his beautiful *Trans/Mission: Corn Vectors* at the McIntosh Gallery in London.

All That Has Value began with a suggestion by Janice Gurney that Benner apply to Harbourfront's Artists' Gardens program. Benner's project was approved and enthusiasti-

cally supported by Diane Bos, who was then curator at Harbourfront. Though each garden was meant to last for only one year, Bos renewed its lease on life year after year from 1992 to 1999. This continued under Patrick Macauley until this year. Bos deserves a lot of credit, for coming up with the Artists Gardens project — but also

for recognizing the value of *All That Has Value* and exempting it from expiry. In an email to me, she explained that the garden was kept alive because "it was a great concept ... in a challenging location with lots of traffic and he kept evolving it for many years." It was obviously recognized as something unusual right from its inception.

There were two main elements to the garden: a large billboard that listed a huge number of economically valuable plants native to the Americas, and in front of it, a selection of those plants, beautifully tended, and lush in summer



Ron Benner, *All That Has Value*, 1993-2003, garden installation
 Courtesy: the artist

and fall. Each of the plants was attended by a small metal sign that gave the plant's name. On the billboard, the work's title in English had the Spanish interpolated within it: "TODO LO QUE TIENE VALOR"¹ The Spanish text, itself a translation from the Aztec language Nahuatl, describes the conquest as seen by the conquered: "all that has value was counted as nothing." So the garden was at once beautiful and elegiac, a record of the agricultural bounty that the soils and the peoples of the Americas brought forth, and a suggestion of what had passed away with that conquest. There was something else — hardly noticeable at first, a text scattered throughout the list of plants. It was the name of the book that supplied a core list for Benner's work: "J. C. TH. UPHOF, ECONOMIC BOTANIST TO THE BOARD OF ECONOMIC WARFARE, WASHINGTON, D.C., DICTIONARY OF ECONOMIC PLANTS, LEHRE, WEST GERMANY; J. CRAMER PUBLISHERS, 1968." Just a quiet reminder that this agricultural plenty was also a means of war — which returns us, I suppose, to the conquest.

This isn't the place to examine the work in detail, but I want to indicate a few points of interest. The first is that the very idea of a garden depends on what Craig Clunas describes as "the split between economic and aesthetic

horticulture," by which we see "the discourse of the aesthetic banishing any hint of the economic."² In order to exist as an aesthetic category, the garden has to be distinguished from the farm — since both are places where plants are grown. The garden, as a retreat from the stresses and strains of the world, is a site within the larger culture where plants are tended and cherished for their beauty, rather than economic gain. Benner's garden is such a site. Yet the billboard reminds us that for some, plants have only economic value. The plants growing along Queens Quay, and the plants listed, were recognizable as a jumble of the useful and the purely aesthetic. Benner's garden quietly refused to take part in the dichotomy on which the idea of the garden is based. The second point is one George Grant made; that, in the garden, "the realm of history [is] distinguished from the realm of nature."³ Obviously gardens, like China's famed *Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician* in Suzhou, are retreats from history into nature. But Benner's was not. Anyone reading the billboard or the plaque identifying the garden could find that its title was a reference to the conquest. The garden allowed history to enter its precincts.

And now the garden itself is history. But its destruction raises the question of why it was allowed to continue in the first place. Was it because it turned out to be something genuinely beautiful? Beauty is an experience of emancipation, and I remember, when it first appeared, that many commented that it seemed at odds with the rather scraggly appearance of many Harbourfront gardens. Was it the scale of its ambition? A garden that really was an artwork, that picked its way through the distinctions on which the idea of the garden depends? That too can be a kind of beauty, though of the invisible sort. Certainly this garden taught many of us about the continent that we now inhabit. Certainly it became a catalyst for discussion. Over the years I've often seen Benner, there to tend the plants, talking over various elements of the garden, aspects of agricultural economy, or the history of the Americas, with tourists, visitors to Harbourfront or passers-by. Whatever the reason its lease was

first renewed, with each year the community of people who involved themselves with it grew, and their support made it more likely that the garden's life would be extended.

Harbourfront was perfectly within its legal rights to destroy the garden simply by not renewing it — which is what happened. The obvious question is, why now? I wrote twice to Harbourfront curator Patrick Macauley and never received a reply. In the absence of any stated reason, all I can do is speculate. Benner was told that *All That Has Value* would be coming down because a marquee had to be put up. When he enquired further, a board member denied this, saying he knew nothing about any sign. Did someone complain that it was anti-American? No one from Harbourfront has even suggested that, though it would have made a useful cover story. Was the garden destroyed as part of Harbourfront's improvement program? If so, you'd have to ask how Harbourfront is improved by the loss of such a beautiful work, and why a new site for the garden couldn't be found. Obviously this has nothing to do with the renewal of Harbourfront. Any guessing also has to be tested against the backdrop of the destruction of the *Trans/mission: Corn Vectors*

garden in London. Why did it disappear as well — when its site was not being improved, and when the grounds of the McIntosh are still populated by other artworks, most of no particular note? Only one of Benner's gardens now exists, *Trans/mission: African Vectors*, on the grounds of the Gairloch Gallery in Oakville, where it will remain for two more years.

Corn Vectors stood from 1997–2001.⁴ Again, the gallery never intended to permanently maintain it. (The question needs to be asked: if a work turns out to be more successful than you'd expected, why not deepen your commitment?) A few pieces of sculpture still populate the McIntosh's grounds, but Benner's garden has been replaced by two wooden benches. Benches! On this model of commitment to art, the Prado would be getting rid of *Las Meninas* to make room for sofas! It can be argued that the McIntosh Gallery's dismantling of *Corn Vectors* was worse than the destruction of the Harbourfront garden, since the McIntosh has an explicit educational mandate. The gallery knew, for instance (because I wrote to tell them), that *Corn Vectors* was being taught to art students at Western as an example of a different relationship of artwork to its site, of artist to artwork, of artwork to the inhabitation of time. Why was it taken down too, a year earlier than the garden at Harbourfront?

Perhaps the answer is merely practical: the gardens require ongoing maintenance. Unlike Cecily Moon's *Susannah Moodie* garden at Harbourfront, which still continues, Benner's are not self-maintaining. They require that plants be tended, pruned and replanted. The billboard at Harbourfront or photos in *Corn Vectors* have to be periodically remade. But none of this is particularly onerous. In the case of Harbourfront, the Artists' Gardens project, which sustained Benner's garden all this time, still continues. In the absence of any obvious compelling reason, the answer must be ideological: these works were at odds with the categories by which we understand the value of artworks.

Ron Benner, *Trans/mission: Corn Vectors* 1997-2001, garden installation. Courtesy: the artist.



tion. But these are expected *not* to endure, and so the demand on the institution is fortunately brief. The works are scheduled, then simply go away, part of a speedy economy of spectacles, consumption and the discarding of the past. Artworks are *either* timeless or temporary. But Benner's gardens are neither.

This isn't the Western way. We insist on the conquest of time through art — or failing that, easy disposability. In his book on the preservation of historical cities, Anthony Tung wrote:

exact replication has long been held important, were an exception. First constructed in the third century, they have been torn down and renewed every twenty years, or about sixty times. The continuity of the social and general physical presence of landmarks — the perpetuation of their spirit — was the primary objective, rather than exact duplication of the historic object.⁶

This social and physical continuity is the crux of the matter. If you think of a conventional painting or sculpture, or even a videotape, it's easy to see how well they suit our institutions, by demanding little in the way of upkeep. A painting is stored perhaps in the vault of the AGO, then taken out for an exhibition, then stored again. It doesn't require much ongoing attention, since it maintains itself. To be more accurate, it maintains itself, barring accidents, for periods that are often longer than a long human lifetime. Eventually, it will need cleaning at least. One day, a few centuries on, it may require restoration. But Benner's gardens do not, and therefore they *oblige* us.

Tung's examples are a glimpse of a non-freedom, an obligation extending across generations. "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one," wrote Walter Benjamin, trying to restore the value of the past to a revolutionary Marxism that like capitalism, had rejected the past at an enormous human cost. Harbourfront and the McIntosh also rejected that sense of obligation. I'm still amazed that neither institution made even the slightest attempt to work with those who loved the gardens in trying to save them.⁸ But this is part of the refusal of obligation. To involve themselves with a community outside the institution would limit the autonomy of the institution.

Let me put it a slightly different way. Thinking of the two gardens, why should the two institutions be blamed because a work, which was planned to be temporary, turned out to be something exceptional, or that a small self-assembled community sprang up around it? In a familiar critique, Jonathon Cray points out



Ron Benner, *Trans/mission: Corn Vectors* 1997-2001, garden installation. Courtesy: the artist.

2. Joseph C. Choates put it baldly when, in 1890, at the opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's building in Central Park, he called upon the wealthy "to convert ... the rude ores of commerce into sculptured marble, and railroad shares and mining stocks — things which perish without the using, and which in the next financial panic shall surely shrivel like parched scrolls — into the glorified canvas of the world's masters."⁵ Here sculpture and painting are valued explicitly because they are timeless and durable, and thus preserve both financial and cultural value. Today most art institutions are more hip, and are used to temporal art forms such as video, performance or installa-

"Almost every concept in the Western vocabulary of preservation — permanence; ease of maintenance, replication, and replacement; authenticity — had a fundamentally different philosophical meaning to the Japanese. A primary difference was that continuation of major wooden monuments in Japan was ensured through periodic maintenance. As in China, important buildings were disassembled and rebuilt several times during a century. ... During reconstruction, stylistic changes were sometimes introduced into historic structures. The Shrines of the Ise Prefecture, whose

that, “What is important to institutional power, since the late nineteenth century, is simply that perception function in a way that insures a subject is productive, manageable, and predictable, and is able to be socially integrated and adaptive.”⁹ In this case, it’s not perception but an artwork that is the issue, yet the point is the same. The longer the gardens endured, the *less* manageable they became — since more and more they were felt to belong to a loose community existing outside institutional control.

Benner’s *Corn Vectors* garden was the site for an annual feast, using food to catalyze social bonds between both strangers and friends. The corn, tended carefully all spring and summer, was harvested in the fall and roasted. Free roast corn and smut (a delicacy for many First Nations) were served to any and all: passers-by, friends, students, art-lovers, university workers, and faculty. Both of these activities were, as any fan of the Situationists or any anarchist will recognize, de-alienating events in which normal strictures that limit public behaviour were temporarily dissolved and a right to the city celebrated. On the grounds of the McIntosh Gallery, food was suddenly freed of both the fast-food chains that dominate the campus and the profit motive.

I think it became clear at this moment that the *Corn Vectors* really was meant as public art, just as all of Benner’s various interactions with people passing by the Harbourfront site showed that work to be public. Henri Lefebvre speaks of a right to the city which is a, “a superior right” that includes “the right to inhabit,” and, he continues, “the right to the *œuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property) are implied in the right to the city.”¹⁰ Without this appropriation, or participation, or some other assertion of a right to the work, then so-called public art is not truly public. The work must be open, somehow, to those who receive it. Otherwise, like Jenny Holzer’s LED displays in Times Square, they remain autonomous works placed in public view, a pseudo-public art, just as the infamous “internal street” in the Toronto Eaton Centre was never truly (or legally) a public space.

Perhaps it’s necessary to distinguish different types of work, all of which are called “public art” in order to make the point more clearly. A work like Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (and likely Matta-Clark’s architectural cuts) could be thought of, perhaps, as “private public art.” Though situated in a public space, it is addressed to the individual, since the work is perceptual and must be experienced individually. In this sense Holzer’s public LED spectacles might be called “public art” since they broadcast to the same mass passive public as politicians and advertisers, and often utilize the same media. So would the poetry in the TTC, which is an ad for the poet and the sponsoring organizations. A work like Benner’s garden could be called “communitarian art” or “civic art” since it seems addressed to the formation of a community (which is not the same thing as a public). Sadly, only the second kind of art, “public art” like Holzer’s, seems to be acceptable. Perhaps because it reiterates the realm of the mass, passive, public it feels legitimate to us.

The Situationist top dog Guy Debord has written that we’ve become a “society without community.”¹¹ The destruction of the two gardens are sad episodes, two small ways in which a society without community is accomplished. *Is the job of our institutions to ensure that communities don’t form?* Maybe it’s worthwhile having our eyes opened, to see that there’s little art-institution commitment to a genuinely public art. That is, unless you understand “public” as meaning just the passive reception of messages: political speeches, television, advertising; unless you think we should be grateful just to have art plopped into the great outdoors.

I’ll cheer myself up by ending with something Benjamin wrote. I’m not sure he was right, but his view is full of hope. After all, though I never had the chance to see any of Matta-Clark’s cut pieces, they still acted as ideals for me. Now *Corn Vectors* and *All That Has Value* are gone. Perhaps they can still serve someone else, someone who never saw them at all ...

“Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”¹²

Notes:

1 Benner’s title is taken from the manuscript, Anonimo de Tlatelolco, in Mengin, ed. *Native Chronicles of the Conquest, Corpus Codicum Americanorum Medii Aevi*, 1, fol#33.

2 Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke University Press), 1996, 80, 89.

3 George Grant, *Time as History*, Massey Lectures, 9th series (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), 6.

4 For more about *Corn Vectors* garden and what it implies for the role of the artist, see my article, “Ron Benner and the Ecology of Limitation,” in *Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1999), 129-137.

5 Quoted in Paul Mattick Jr., “The Old Age of Art and Money,” in *Capital Culture: A Reader on Modernist Legacies, State Institutions, and the Value(s) of Art*, eds. Jody Berland and Shelly Hornstein (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 66.

6 Anthony M. Tung, *Preserving the World’s Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis* (New York: Clarkson & Potter, 2001), 373-374.

7 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.

8 Among those I’m personally aware of who wrote Harbourfront to plead for the garden were AGO director Matthew Teitelbaum, curator Barbara Fischer, collector Salah Bashir, independent curator/archivist Fern Bayer, collectors and philanthropists Alan and Phyllis Cohen, PhD candidate in art history Ryan Whyte, artists Luis Jacobs, Amelia Jimenez, Janice Gurney and myself.

9 Jonathon Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 4.

10 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 173-7.

11 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 121, 137.

12 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254.