

Feature

# Artists and Gardens: A Growing Concern

VARIOUS LOCATIONS, VANCOUVER FALL 2011  
 by ROBIN LAURENCE



Grow contributor Chloe Bennett holds mason bee cocoons as part of her workshop at the project's garden/lab / photo Holly Schmidt

A cold wind blows off the grey waters of Vancouver's False Creek. On a grassy promontory, just west of the Olympic Village and north of the former city works yard, a garden is being dismantled. Large planters, fashioned out of repurposed shipping bags and perched on second-hand wooden pallets, have yielded up their summer bounty of herbs, berries, grains, vegetables and edible flowers. Workshops have been given, walks have been conducted and seeds have been exchanged. More importantly, the garden has sown a large crop of community interest and environmental involvement.

*Grow: An Art + Urban Agriculture Project*, which officially ends November 30, has been a seven-month undertaking of artist [Holly Schmidt](#), a recent graduate of Emily Carr University's master's program with a significant background in public programming. An experiment in growing food in a "post-industrial" landscape, *Grow* was organized by [Other Sights for Artists' Projects](#), a non-profit society that presents and supports temporary public art works in shared spaces real and virtual, urban and electronic. As Schmidt writes in her project statement, *Grow* has functioned as "a public forum, teaching tool and creative laboratory for ecological and social sustainability practices." In conversation, she adds, "I'm interested in how our urban environments are shifting and changing as a result of pressures around the ecological crisis." Climate change, overpopulation and food security are some of the highly fraught subtexts here.



Corn growing at the *Grow* project site in Vancouver this August / photo Holly Schmidt

Schmidt is an articulate member of a new tribe of socially engaged artists who are committed to cultivating community gardens and urban agricultural plots as works of public art. Their creative roots extend into a number of postmodern movements, from Fluxus and earth art to relational aesthetics and new genre public art, and their role is often to co-ordinate and facilitate rather than manufacture and lecture. As demonstrated by the *Grow* project, such artists are happy to consult the experts—biologists, agronomists, horticulturists, landscape architects, community workers—for public lessons in the keeping of mason bees, the creation of vertical strawberry planters, or the building of backyard chicken coops. Demonstrations and workshops are an integral part of the process.

Artist and public art consultant Barbara Cole, who is also the founder and executive director of Other Sights, admires Schmidt and others of her generation for their willingness to make themselves "vulnerable" to these knowledge-gathering situations. "Holly will choose a subject that she has a little bit of information about and then, in a really public way, she will put herself out there to learn more," Cole observes. The intention is public problem solving rather than individual self-expression—generating conversations, inspiring participation and actively (rather than theoretically) addressing a range of contemporary issues.



Overview of the *Grow* project site in Vancouver during the late summer / photo Holly Schmidt

Across town, in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, [Sharon Kallis](#) is putting another socially responsible garden to sleep for the winter. Known as the [Means of Production Community Garden](#), it was created as a living public art piece in 2002 by [Oliver Kellhammer](#) in partnership with the city's Environmental Youth Alliance. Their project was to cultivate what had been a small parcel of urban wasteland as a source of artists' materials, such as fibres and dyes. (Later, the EYA also worked with the community to sow and grow indigenous plants and a terraced fruit orchard.) After Kellhammer completed his phase of the project's implementation, the "means of production" part of the garden declined, then was revived in 2007 when Kallis and others came together to form the [Means of Production Artists' Raw Resource Collective](#). As with *Grow*, MOPARRC artists cultivate the garden, undertake experimental plantings and installations, conduct workshops and organize talks and social events.

"Oliver's intention was that other artists would come in, work with the materials that were planted and reinterpret the garden," Kallis says, "and the garden would change and shift with different creative ideas." Her own creative ideas are directed towards invasive plants, such as morning glory, Scotch broom and English ivy. "I weed these beds and I use the weeds for my work," she says simply. "I really am more of a gleaner than a gardener." Kallis methodically strips and dries the undesirable plants and delivers community workshops in "invasive basketry," weaving useful objects such as shade structures out of the "gleaned" stems and strands.



Means of Production Community Garden participant weaving garden waste into coil basketry forms for community shade structure / photo Sharon Kallis

One of Kallis' most ambitious and successful undertakings to date is [The Ivy Project](#) in Vancouver's beloved Stanley Park. Kallis and a group of volunteers culled masses of English ivy from the park, dried it, then crocheted it into an enormous net to secure an eroding slope and make it suitable for growing indigenous plants such as spirea, dogwood and native willow. "My big thing is going from green waste management to resource management," she explains, "looking at these materials in abundance as a resource to capitalize on."

Much as Vancouverites see themselves on the cutting edge of green, the many gardens and urban agricultural projects cultivated by artists in this city are merely part of a much larger trend. Cole cites [Robert Irwin's Central Garden](#) at the Getty Center in Los Angeles; projects by the [Public Works Group](#) in London; [Sarah Sze's installation on the High Line](#) in New York; the [International Garden Festival](#) at Jardins de Métis in Grand-Métis; and [Marjetica Potrč's](#) numerous agricultural infrastructure projects in Europe, the United States and South America.



Coil basketry forms made by various Means of Production Community Garden participants from willow, bamboo and Scotch-broom garden waste, bound with morning glory / photo Sharon Kallis

What all these undertakings appear to have in common is the willingness of artists to bury their egos in order to grow meaningful and productive gardens and foster a sense of community. "I think of my role as an artist as partly that of a bridge-builder," says Kallis. "I see opportunities and I draw lines between things and make connections."



*Robin Laurence is a freelance writer, critic and curator, and a long-time contributing editor of Canadian Art. Based in Vancouver, she has written hundreds of articles, reviews and essays for regional, national and international publications.*

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artist/DJ/promoter/activist Will Munro succumbed to brain cancer. Here, David Balzer reviews the first big survey of Munro's work, which makes apparent how talented, prolific and perceptive this creator was.

**Painting Canada: Artistry in the UK** The Dulwich Picture Gallery's recent Group of Seven show was one of the UK museum's biggest hits ever, drawing 41,000 visitors. The attention was deserved, writes Sarah Milroy, as the exhibition offered new insights even to seasoned Canadian-art observers.

**David Altmejd: In the Belly of the Beast!** The Occupy movement has galvanized the way we think about haves and have-nots. But where do artists fit in? As Joseph R. Wolin observes in this review of David Altmejd's show at the Brant Foundation, context can be as powerful as content in determining the split.

**A Stake in the Ground: When Language Wounds** What happens to identity when our relationship to land and language is disrupted? This is a key question raised in "A Stake in the Ground," an exhibition of works by 25 First Nations artists, curated by Nadia Myre, that's currently at Montreal gallery Art Mûr.

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