



Informal Communities:

Celestial, Terrestrial and Subterranean Movements

Essay by Randy Lee Cutler

Foreword

Grow's home base during the summer of 2011 was the Bulkhead Urban Agriculture Lab. This lab took the form of an experimental edible garden that grew from an eclectic collection of above-ground containers arranged among weeds, brambles and other hardy "volunteers" that had taken over a patch of undeveloped land on the edge of the Olympic Village. The bulkhead exists as a 30' wide x 40' long area of landfill that juts into False Creek. Once used as a threshold between truck and barge, the bulkhead itself is a container of sorts, defined on three sides by rusted corrugated steel.

Located at the boundary between developed (designed and dense) and undeveloped (abandoned and open), Schmidt's temporary occupation was permitted by the City. However, access to water was unsupported in this deregulated zone. Stretched hose was not allowed, nor was tapping into the neighbouring automatic sprinkler system. Resourceful and committed, Schmidt would repeatedly travel some 100 yards, back and forth between the nearest water spigot and bulkhead, transporting water in her Lee Valley wheelbarrow outfitted with a plastic bladder to in turn, fill watering cans and buckets. This laborious process routinely performed in the midst of passersby on the busy shoreline path, made public the often hidden but complex regulatory conditions of public space. This action was but a small part of a much broader, multi-disciplinary program of events that through dialogue and the exchange of knowledge, addressed issues of sustainability, food security and the occupation of public spaces.

It is with great pleasure that Other Sights adds "*Informal Communities: Celestial, Terrestrial and Subterranean Movements*" by Randy Lee Cutler to our Commissioned Texts series. Written in response to her conversations with Holly Schmidt and from the perspective of a participant in many of *Grow's* activities, Cutler foregrounds her observations and thoughts about the project's evolution against a backdrop of weather reports, a strategy that positions Holly Schmidt's work at the confluence of art and daily experience.

Barbara Cole
Other Sights Executive Director



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Image: Holly Schmidt

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Winter: Wetter than Normal

Spring equinox - March 20, 2011 at 11:35 pm

A La Niña pattern this year meant stormier weather for the 2010-2011 season bringing cool ocean temperatures to the Pacific Northwest.

The *Grow* Project and the *Bulkhead Urban Agriculture Lab* began germinating long before the first seeds were sown and ended long after the harvesting of carrots, mustards greens, pumpkins, and other crops. A concatenation of performance art, sculpture, social practice and still unnamed forms of emergent creativity, *Grow* was a year-long event that took up sustainability and knowledge exchange as a fluid process of gardening, workshops, walks and other public events. With its primary focus on ideas engendered through sociability and community, it is not surprising that artist Holly Schmidt invited Duane Elverum and myself to discuss her research and plans: we share similar interests in creative pedagogy and considerations of ecological issues through dialogue and practice. Not far from the project site, the last remaining section of undeveloped seawall situated on the periphery of the Olympic Village in South East False Creek, Schmidt's studio was an accommodating environment that set the scene for an expansive, and ongoing conversation. At the time of our meeting, she had already spent a fair amount of time working with the City to secure this parcel of land for a temporary art occupation. Proceeding from her cross-disciplinary practice, Schmidt solicited ideas that would further open up the project to community encounters. Often referred to as the Bulkhead, the fallow patch of land posed some challenges for the artist's vision of an unconventional social space for the sharing of information and practices whether through workshops, walks or volunteer participation in a temporary garden. Still nascent in form we considered the ecology of the site, trying to imagine its exact location and the state of its dereliction. Discussion turned to strategies for gardening in a post-industrial landscape including the challenges of growing food without planting anything directly in the ground and in the absence of immediate access to a



safe, potable water supply.

From its inception it was clear that *Grow* would be an innovative artwork through its blurring of disciplinary boundaries and provocative engagement with community and public space. The simultaneous engagement and suggested critique of contemporary issues around food, urbanization, and everyday life made for a timely encounter. ⁱ To this end, Schmidt talked about strategies for how she would grow food in large industrial bags previously used to ship bulk sugar and the resources she was sourcing for acquiring donated seeds, plants, earth, etc. Drawing on her training as an artist and an educator, it was clear even at this early stage that *Grow* would bear witness to a public display of reciprocity and traditional knowledge exchange. The evening ended with a shared sense of anticipation for this extended art work invested as it is in community engagement, sustainability, gardening, food security and emergent forms of dialogue.

Spring: Below-average Temperatures

Another weekend of below-average temperatures made this the coldest April and May on record for Metro Vancouver.

On May 7, 2011 *Grow*, the art and urban agriculture project was launched with Exploring Sustainability and Urban Agriculture, a walking dialogue through South East False Creek. Although it began with overcast skies, which then descended into a rainy afternoon, the experience was enlightening. Participants shared their thoughts on city planning, the implications for using particular construction materials and the habitation of the area, what had been destroyed and what was in the process of evolving and re-generating. This discussion was followed by approximately fifteen of us traipsing on the now wet bulkhead site and drawing diagrams on increasingly soggy paper designating on one map the “strong center” or locations that shouldn’t be disturbed and on another an area that needed help, that was in fact, calling out for repair. The event concluded with a passionate and informed exchange on current issues in landscape architecture and design. Scheduled walks continued through the spring, summer and fall nurturing peripatetic dialogue on sustainable design that provided a platform for collaborative learning.

Later in the month of May with the wet soil conditions unabated, the Vancouver Design Nerds and some master gardeners joined Schmidt for a workshop at the local community center that explored strategies for growing food in the urban environment. I was unable to attend but was thrilled to see the pocket gardens that were fabricated during this gathering installed along the chain link fence near the *Grow* project site. Biking along the False Creek south seawall throughout the summer, orange, yellow and red nasturtiums poked their way out of these miniature conical





POTATO HARVEST

Image: Nigel Laing

gardens. As a collective experimentation in urban space, local residents, dog walkers, tourists and cyclists alike would stop and enjoy the flowers, talk with volunteers and artists on the site and inquire as to what exactly was blossoming at this strange intersection. Later in December that year, while reading Wendell Berry's book *Bringing it to the Table: on farming and food*, I was struck by the author's statement that "[...] an agriculture using nature, including human nature, as its measure would approach the world in the manner of a conversationalist"ⁱⁱ and was reminded of the ongoing dialogue that was the very essence of the *Grow* project. Rather than mere consumers, participants witnessed, indeed engaged with growing and eating as contingent agricultural and social experiences that remind us of our fundamental and embodied relationality with the world we inhabit.

Summer: Heavy Rainfall Warning

Summer solstice - June 21, 2011 at 6:15 pm

On the last day of summer Environment Canada issued a heavy rainfall warning for the entire West Coast of B.C., ending what may be one of the worst summer in years.

By the beginning of July with the sun only starting to make a regular appearance *Grow* had fully installed itself on the site. Slipping into the local flora and fauna, and grafting some of its own, a composition of elements lay down its roots and rhythms with living organisms coming together in a sociable conversation. On July 24 I attended the Vancouver Henhouse workshop and learned some of the basics in the proper care and keeping of small urban flocks of hens. The "Vancooper" was installed at the Lab on the previous day so that workshop leader Duncan Martin could demonstrate how easy the prospect of fresh eggs can be. I was delighted to be surrounded by participants who were clearly invested in these innovative initiatives and engaging the challenging relations between living beings. Unfortunately I missed Chloe Bennett's discussion on mason bee habitat and the proper methods of building a mason bee home in the city. The current degraded state of bee colonies (CCD or colony collapse disorder) is such an important issue particularly as bees pollinate more than one third of all food crops. Put another way, every third bite is brought to us by bees. ⁱⁱⁱ Fortunately, my fascination for insects was somewhat appeased when I returned on August 19 for the Ladybug's Lunch with Maria Keating, a biological control consultant who shared her extensive knowledge of backyard ecosystems. *Grow's* concern for establishing informal communities came into focus and here its members included pollinators, native predators and companion planting. I was particularly taken with the carnivorous flora, what Darwin in 1875 called insectivorous plants that trap and consume insects and promote environmental stewardship.



MASON BEES

Image: Holly Schmidt

Throughout the summer *Grow* demonstrated its capacity for encouraging affective experiences. In a combination of durational lab work and field science, the study of human ethos with its integration of evolution, ecology and behavioral processes, took up residence. “ [This ethological] approach is no less valid for us, for human beings, than for animals, because no one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of: it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring lasting prudence.”^{iv} With its extended installation from May 1 to November 30 2011, the *Grow* garden carried its audience of participants through time in the daily experience of its experimental residency. Precisely because there was no clearly elaborated sense of the whole; because engaging with the project was a contingent experience that changed daily and with the seasons, *Grow* offered opportunities for strong embodied connections as well as affective aesthetic pleasure and displeasure. Apparently one fellow complained about what he perceived as the site’s disarray and lack of conventional garden aesthetics. According to philosopher Gilles Deleuze “The important thing is to understand life, each living individuality, not as a form, or a development of form, but as a complex relation between different velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles.”^v This is an important reminder of our multiple relationships with a given site, artwork, people, plants and other living organisms. While I attended workshops, read reviews, checked the blog and regularly biked past *Grow*, the occupation itself was evidence of the proximity between art and life.

By Sept 8 the summer was in full swing with the garden producing an abundance of corn, zucchini, pumpkins, cucumbers, radishes, kale, beets, mustard greens, green beans, carrots, tomatoes, rosemary, mint, fennel, dill, sage, lemon verbena, oregano, basil, chives and of course the delicious and colourful nasturtiums. On Oct 5 as part of the annual autumnal art event called Swarm, the *Grow* project offered 1 metre to 100 mile organic tastings prepared by urban farmer and wild forager Alexander McNaughton. In the middle of the site, at one of the strong centers left as an open space for congregating, we feasted on heirloom tomatoes, tomatillos wrapped in papery husks, maroon coloured carrots and handmade artisan cheese. What remains are memories of a crepuscular sky, intensive encounters and admittedly anonymous vegetables making acquaintance with my taste buds. How could one not be affected by the local harvest and sociable twilight?



EDIBLE FENCE GARDEN

Image: Nigel Laing

Fall: Balmy Warm Weather

Autumn equinox – Sept 23, 2011 at 9:04 am

September brought balmy warm weather to Vancouver. The long range forecast showed sunshine lasting well into the month with temperatures into the 20's.

By Oct 22 the celestial, terrestrial and subterranean movements of the seasons were wending their way through harvest to the fallow sleepiness of winter with the final *Grow* event. Bringing seeds gleaned from my own backyard garden and neatly packaged in homemade envelopes, I attended the Grow Seed Exchange at the local community centre where some rather robust arugula seeds were swapped for mint, kale, mustard, cilantro, dill and lupin seeds. In addition to sowing them in my garden, I was instructed to plant these seeds around Vancouver to ensure that *Grow* keeps germinating. Now, as spring returns once again and the quiescent life in these seeds begins to emerge, *Grow* returns as a porous physical and philosophical ecosystem. The project, an encounter with informal communities, challenges our thinking about aesthetics, gardening, learning, local ecology and conversation. Not unlike a master gardener, Schmidt sows the possibility of emergence by opening a space for its expressive potential without knowing in advance what will be elicited and how the project itself might evolve. And that, in a way, is what *Grow* realized in its yearlong habitation experienced through the material agency of weather, hours of daylight and local ecology.



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Image: Holly Schmidt

- i Urban farming has many characteristics and is practiced for a variety of reasons from recreation and relaxation to income earning and food-production. An added benefit is the use of vacant urban spaces for agriculture production providing fresh locale fruit and vegetables to urban consumers.
- ii Wendell Berry, 'The Pleasures of Eating' in *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009, p. 7.
- iii Here is a list of what bees pollinate: Alfalfa hay and seeds, Almonds, Apples, Apricots, Asparagus, Avocadoes, Beets, Blueberries, Boysenberries, Broccoli, Carrots, Cantaloupe, Cauliflower, celery, Cherries, Citrus, Cotton seed, Cranberries, Cucumbers, Grapes, Honeydew, Kiwifruit, Loganberries, Macadamia nuts, Nectarines, Olives, Onions, Peaches, Peanuts, Pears, Plums/Prunes, Pumpkins, Raspberries, Soybeans and other legumes, Squash, Straw berries, Sunflowers and Watermelons
- iv Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001, p. 125. I have drawn on this reference both for the creative potential of its ideas and as a text that has informed Schmidt's own thinking about her art practice.
- v Ibid. p. 123.

Holly Schmidt is a Vancouver artist with a research-based practice that engages processes of collaborative research and informal pedagogy. Moving across disciplinary boundaries, she explores the relationships between practices of making, knowledge creation and the formation of temporary communities. Schmidt is a recent graduate of the Master's program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and a Governor General's Gold Medal recipient. Her recent exhibitions and projects include *The Moveable Feast* (Burnaby Art Gallery), *Grow* (Other Sights for Artists' Projects), *Laboratory for Living*, *Moveable City* (Cineworks), *Bio Circuit* (TEI: Tangible, Embedded Computing Conference, MIT, Boston). She teaches sessionally at Emily Carr University and maintains a studio in Vancouver.

Randy Lee Cutler is an associate professor at Emily Carr University in the Faculty of Visual Art + Material Practice and a Vancouver based writer, artist and educator. She has PhD from the Royal College of art where she wrote on the surrealist enterprise. Randy continues to investigate the emergence of new cultural forms through an exploration of the intersections of gender, art, science and technology. She contributes writing to catalogues and art magazines as well as maintains an experimental relationship to pedagogy, gardening and embodiment. She has authored numerous essays on visual art and cultural studies published in *Vancouver Art & Economies* (Artspeak Gallery and Arsenal Press), *Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture* (Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Press). She has written for *C* magazine, *FUSE* magazine, *West Coast LINE*, *The Phillip Review*, *n.paradoxa*, *Blackflash Magazine*, *Canadian Art* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* on topics as diverse as reading, orientalism, new media art, feminism, photography and social change.

Other Sights provides support to artists, writers and curators interested in creating temporary, critically rigorous work for highly visible locations. We collaborate and share resources with organizations and individuals in order to present projects that consider the aesthetic, economic and regulatory conditions of public places and public life.