

Lois Weinberger

Hans Ulrich Obrist

I first met Lois Weinberger during one of my frequent visits to Vienna in the 1990s while curating the exhibition *Cities on the Move* at the Secession with Hou Hanru. From our initial meeting, I was fascinated by Weinberger's relationship to the environment, his field research, and his interest in the principles of self-organization. Having studied with Hans-Christoph Binswanger in St. Gallen, these ideas resonated strongly with what I had learned regarding the limits of growth and the significance of ecology in contemporary thought. Weinberger's acts of planting and cultivation of gardens—a life's work that he followed with his wife and collaborator, Franziska Weinberger—speak to the social and political dimensions of these spaces and how they can reframe our understanding of the environment and our connection to it (fig. 1). Weinberger was also a prolific walker who would visit different forests and gardens, a practice of what sociologist Lucius Burckhardt would call “the science of strollogy,” a way in which the act of walking can disrupt and reframe our perception of the environment.

Central to Weinberger's understanding of our relationship to nature, forests, and gardens is the notion of self-organization. This is a concept that we are perhaps more familiar with from the realm of science. In my many conversations with the late architect, urban planner, and designer Yona Friedman, he explained our relationship to self-organization as it pertains to regularity and order: “the idea of regularity always leads back to arithmetic, but arithmetic and mathematics are not completely defined, so at every step you find new rules.”¹ This sense of unpredictability relates to Weinberger's understanding of how art, society, and nature can interact, coming together in a kind of spontaneous order that moves, as Weinberger says, “against the aesthetics of the pure and the true, against the ordering forces.”

Another key aspect of Weinberger's thinking is the idea of the artwork being a living organism. This is evident in his series of projects for documenta over the years, which have been incredibly inspiring to my thinking as a curator. One of his most famous works was produced for documenta X in 1997, which involved planting several foreign weeds along a stretch of disused railway track (figs. 2, 3). Projects such as this are characteristic of Weinberger's affinity with the environment, asking

¹ Yona Friedman in *Yona Friedman & Hans Ulrich Obrist: The Conversation Series* (Cologne, 2007), p. 52.

us to find what economist Kate Raworth calls a space between planetary and social boundaries in which multiple life forms can thrive. In her theory titled “Doughnut Economics,” Raworth notes how much of the current crises that we face in our economy and ecology are related to the “linear, degenerative economies” that we have inherited, which are based on principles of individualism—the idea that we are separate, both from each other and from our environment. Weinberger’s work shows how we must consider interspecies communication and rethink our dominant patterns of behavior, something that is powerfully communicated in the following words by the American writer, independent scholar, poet, activist, and educator Alexis Pauline Gumbs: “We have the opportunity now, as a species fully in touch with each other (think social media), to unlearn and relearn our own patterns of thinking and storytelling in a way that allows us to be actually in communion with our environment as opposed to a dominating, colonialist separation from the environment.”²

Weinberger’s work has always made me think of my friend and mentor Édouard Glissant, the writer, poet, philosopher, and literary critic from Martinique, and his thinking through the idea of relationality. As Manthia Diawara writes, “his idea recognizes and enables a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, the air, the water, the fire, the vegetation, animals and humans.”³ Spaces such as gardens and others where vegetation thrives are places where differences come into contact with one another, places where we can build an aesthetics of solidarity with the environment. Weinberger’s work was always rooted, but what is significant is that this sense of rootedness is never hierarchical; it does not exclude certain groups or dominate, but rather extends elsewhere. These roots catch each other; they cover and protect others. As Glissant told Diawara in an interview: “it’s of fundamental importance in today’s world to say that everything is happening in a rhizome world, that is, roots that intertwine, mix, and mutually assist each other.”⁴ The energy of this sentiment is, I think, found throughout Weinberger’s extraordinary practice, which is driven by a continuous and mutually receptive process of engaging with natural forms. Glissant’s metaphor of the archipelago is also relevant here. An archipelago is a place where the

² Ashia Ajani, “The Making of a Love Letter: Poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs Talks Resilience During the Climate Crisis,” *Sierra* (February 13, 2020) <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/making-love-letter-alexis-pauline-gumbs> (accessed on January 21, 2021).

³ Manthia Diawara, “Édouard Glissant’s Worldmentality: An Introduction to One World in Relation,” https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/34_edouard_glissant_s_worldmentality_an_introduction_to_one_world_in_relation (accessed on January 21, 2021).

⁴ Édouard Glissant in Manthia Diawara, “Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009),” https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/csis-2/blackatlantic/research/Diawara_text_defined.pdf (accessed on January 21, 2021).

landscape, vegetation, and sea are characters of the environment and of equal importance to the presence of human beings. Weinberger's work is about entering into this communion, of being one with the environment in a poetics of ecology.

Time, duration, and life all commingle in Weinberger's work. For example, his piece that he created for documenta is still growing as I write this and will do for decades to come, all the while appreciated by new life forms that inhabit or visit this particular site. In this sense, Weinberger's work is against an event-based approach to history and art making; it is about the *longue durée*. Today, with social media and instant technologies, we live in a predominantly "short-term world," so the question is how can we liberate ourselves from the tyranny of short-termism? With Franziska, who coauthored so many of his works, Weinberger has always liberated us from the short term in each work; these projects become written into the great chain of life, the *long durée* of our world. The idea of short-termism is explored by Roman Krznaric in his book *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*, which proposes six ways to think in long rather than short term:

Deep-Time Humility: grasp we are an eyeblink in cosmic term

Legacy Mindset: be remembered well by posterity

Intergenerational Justice: consider the seventh generation ahead

Cathedral Thinking: plan projects beyond a human lifetime

Holistic Forecasting: envision multiple pathways for civilisation

Transcendent Goal: strive for one-planet thriving.

Krznaric speaks of these six points not as "a simplistic blueprint for a new economic or political system, but rather [...as...] a cognitive toolkit for challenging our obsession with the here and now."⁵ It is this question of our perception of time that resonates with Weinberger's thinking, an outlook that extends beyond the span of a single human life and through generations to come.

I regret that I never had the opportunity to interview Weinberger, but I am delighted to be able to write for this publication and celebrate his extraordinary artistic career. I also feel lucky to have worked with Weinberger at the very beginning of my trajectory as a curator and then again toward the very end of his life. Weinberger's focus on what is left behind, considered peripheral or remains invisible connects to my early collaboration with Weinberger, which was part of *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects*, a book project that I edited with Guy Tortosa, which considered the significance of the unrealized projects, comprising partial expressions, incomplete ideas, or projections of mere intentions by different artists. My interest in

⁵ Roman Krznaric, "Six Ways to Think Long-Term," *Medium*, July 20, 2020, <https://medium.com/the-long-now-foundation/six-ways-to-think-long-term-da373b3377a4> (accessed on February 3, 2021).

the unrealized projects of artists extends back to my early years after studying, when I was traveling by night train to meet with artists. It was Alighiero Boetti who told me to invert the relationship between curator and artist, to really *listen* to what the artist wants to do. He also said that we know a lot about architects' unrealized projects because they regularly publish them, and very often get them built later on by publishing them. This early influence has stayed with my thinking as a curator, which is why I always ask artists about their unrealized projects, which then led to the project *Unbuilt Roads*.

For *Unbuilt Roads*, Weinberger contributed a project, the documentation of which I include here (fig. 4):

*Lois Weinberger
Ruderaltisch, 1994–95 Kunst am Bau–Project*

The work consists of a concrete table outdoors on which stand earth-filled omnipresent containers, such as empty oil cans, empty paint buckets, “indestructible plastic bags.”

There is no planting, because the soil removed from the field contains seeds; the birds and the wind transfer them into the soil of the vessels.

Due to their location on the concrete slab, the plants are exposed to large fluctuations in temperature and humidity—similar to an extreme ruderal area. The composition of the earth corresponds to the nutritional value of a rubble site, with clay, lime and levels of sandy humus.

The shape of the table is a replica of one that was left in a Russian barracks yard in former East Berlin.

*Length: 2.50 meters
Width: 1.30 meters
Height: 0.745 meters
Reinforced concrete*

Subject: Contest/Competition

Experimental Station Gleisdorf of the Federal Office and Research Centre for Agriculture

At the meeting of the technical committee, the decision was made in favour of the ruderal table project, despite vehement objections from the head of our experimental station. As users of the experimental station, we strongly oppose the realisation of this project for the following reasons: the experimental station works with seeds of different types of crops. Plants from the ruderal society are undesirable in the working area of our station. Weed seeds could affect the results of variety tests. An influence on exact evaluations, which are also carried out for technical reasons in the vicinity of the ruderal table, cannot be ruled out. We are happy to agree to planting with appropriately cultivated or ornamental plants. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

Director of the Institute

The notion of unrealized projects led to a second collaboration with Weinberger. Since 1995, I have been a board member of the evn Kunstrat and in 1996 we commissioned Weinberger's work *O. T. (Garten Berlin 1995)* (fig. 5).⁶ In a text published to accompany this collaboration, Wolfgang Kos wrote that "the formal appearance of Weinberger's work has gone through many metamorphoses. One has seen carefully laid stone walls with concrete-filled plastic bags; photos with simulated snowstorms and meticulous drawings of thistles. Running through the whole is a processual way of working which does not appear to pay any attention to formal hierarchies but gives, instead, all the more attention to what is endangered and ignored on the edges of economic usability."⁷

As with all of Weinberger's projects, there are many different metamorphoses and connections. Toward the end of his life, Weinberger developed with evn collection a commissioned work to be situated in the garden, which unfortunately due to the pandemic had to be postponed. Some weeks later the artist passed away. In conversation with Franziska Weinberger, this work will hopefully be finalized this year, a sign that this, like so many of the artist's works, will continue to grow and grow and grow.

⁶ The board of the evn collection comprises Brigitte Huck, Georg Kargl (board member, 1995–2013), Paul Katzberger (board member, 1995–2013), Wolfgang Kos (board member, 1995–2013), Heike Maier-Rieper, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Markus Schinwald, and Thomas D. Trummer.

⁷ Wolfgang Kos, "Lois Weinberger," *evn collection*, <http://www.evn-collection.at/asp/asp/frameset.asp?http%3A//www.evn-collection.at/asp/asp/showwerk2.asp%3Flang%3Den%26werkid%3D92%26persid%3D49> (accessed on January 21, 2021)

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jeudi à dimanche | 14h - 19h
et sur rendez-vous

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