

Three Ecologies

Tom Trevor

There is a photograph by Lois Weinberger of a typical run-down area of urban space - an abandoned parking lot perhaps - in which the rectangular concrete slabs that were once employed to flatten and 'subdue' the earth have been split apart and bisected by a long line of wild plants, vigorous and healthy-looking, in full flower. The urgency of growth, of reaching up to the sun, has driven these humble botanic insurgents up through the rock-solid surface of the city, tilting and cracking the concrete cap imposed upon them like some inconsequential crust. We know these vegetable subversives all too well. They are the ever-present underclass of the plant world, the 'multitude' constantly threatening to rise up and disrupt the orderly regime of the city. If the persistence of their insurgency represents the irrepressible life force that drives the growth of plants, often in direct confrontation with the fantasy of order and stability imposed by human society, then this is the same radical, de-stabilizing energy that flows through the work of Lois Weinberger.

Weinberger has described his practice as being "against the aesthetics of the Pure and the True, against the ordering forces."¹ He is a champion of "PLACE / WHERE THE LIVING REVEALS ITSELF ABOVE THE ORDERLY."² The 'living' is in a permanent state of transition, it is a dynamic principle of flux, and Weinberger's interventions, sometimes referred to as 'gardens', simply take the form of a "perfectly provisional area"³ where *greenness* is left to enact its inexorable cycle of growth and decay, heedless of human society. The artist has declared, "The best gardeners are those / who abandon the garden."⁴ With "precise indifference"⁵, Weinberger creates a framework in which it is the plants themselves that perform the work of art, as a kind of living theatre, and we as viewers find ourselves implicated in this time-based process, "IN THE COMPLEXITY OF THE UNDETERMINED."⁶

In front of the newly built Social Science centre at the University of Innsbruck, in 1998, Weinberger constructed a 37-metre long enclosure for 'ruderals' (the wild plants, or 'weeds', that grow on wasteland and rubbish tips), entitled *Garden – a poetic fieldwork*. Inside this inverted cage made from tightly spaced steel bars, excluding human entry, the concrete of the university forecourt was torn up and replaced with a thin layer of earth (the depth of which was dictated by the underground car park below). The resulting enclave, described by the artist as "a gap within urban space"⁷, was then abandoned and its "re-forestation left to the wind / the birds / the seeds already existing in the earth"⁸, combining with the "waste of civilisation" which would accumulate as "an integrated component of time."⁹

In an earlier work, *Burning and Walking* (1993) (subsequently re-enacted in various cities around the world), the tarmac of a public thoroughfare in Salzburg was roughly broken up so as to reveal the earth below, but here the enclosure took the form of a taped-off area to keep pedestrians out. Into this temporary interruption of the smooth surface of the city, Weinberger introduced ruderal plants, describing the project as "an energy field ... symptomatic of an area of spontaneous chaos which gives way to a precise botanical system."¹⁰

It is important to emphasize that this is not an idealised or romanticised vision of 'primary nature'. There is no sense of retrieving a 'lost paradise' from the ravages of human culture. Weinberger's ruderal plants grow as relentlessly on the post-industrial wastelands and on the margins of urban existence as they do in the imaginary wilderness that lies beyond the city. Indeed the contexts he chooses to privilege are thoroughly 'cultured' – man-made places in which the untamed weed struggles to survive, in marginal spaces on the edge of the city, thriving on the waste products of human society. Referring to Weinberger's radical aesthetic as a kind of 'politics/poetics', the curator Catherine David has written, "nature in the post-industrial era is a secondary nature, a second-hand nature, a post-cultural nature – and a post-history nature, the 'dopo storia' that Pasolini evokes in his texts in the 1970s – 'ruins' (vacant lots, post-industrial wasteland, waste dumps, etc)."¹¹

When invited to devise a project as part of the 'reclamation' of the mountainous Hiriya Dump in Israel, an 8000-acre rubbish tip outside Tel Aviv, Lois Weinberger simply proposed a transparent walkway penetrating down into the sedimented layers of history, and to otherwise leave the site untouched. His approach made no distinction between the artificial and the natural, describing the project as: "A parallel / a counter-picture to visible nature / in which a flower is not only as brilliant as a plastic ketchup bottle but can even be a ketchup bottle / and the blue colour of an oil can is equivalent to the blue of the chicory blossom (*Cichorium intibus*) / which is not intended to be an example of an artistic practice / but of abandoning the ostensibly unassailable middle position / with its firm rules of centre / periphery and the entirely different."¹² There is no longer any clear distinction between nature and culture.

Yet there is still a belief, held amongst city dwellers, that the disorderly forces of nature can be kept at bay; as if the continual, relentless process of growth and decay can somehow be halted or contained by the imposition of human order and stability. Foreign invaders must be expelled from the garden; nettles cut back, thistles up-rooted, dandelions stamped out. In contrast, Weinberger's engagement with 'secondary nature' simply works to reveal the limits of human agency, subverting our illusions of mastery. Precise territorial demarcations, such as ruderal enclosures, gardens or rubbish dumps, are irrelevant to wild plants. There is no division between inside and outside, between 'good' and 'bad'. There is simply a process of being, a dynamic principle of flux, made manifest through uncontrolled patterns of growth.

Of course this dynamic principle of flux applies as much to the 'social' as it does to nature. Weinberger's photographs of Marzahn, for example, taken in 1994, show a district situated on the outskirts of Berlin, in the former East Germany, where the city gives way to a barren wasteland of scrub and detritus. Yet it is the densely packed estates and high-rise blocks of the city, viewed from a distance across the hinterland, which evoke the most powerful sense of uncontrolled growth and decay. These images portray an 'urban jungle' described by Dieter Roelestrate as "way more untamed and therefore way more 'natural' than the tightly controlled hyperspaces of contemporary 'wilderness' could ever aspire to be."¹³

As within the garden, so within social space there is a plurality of conflicting forces at play. Within this cultural geography, overlapping histories and traditions, or 'maps of meaning', relate, in very different ways, to the dominant attitudes of everyday life, and thus to the distribution of power in society. This terrain is constantly contested according to particular (ultimately economic) interests within the social hierarchy. Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' theorizes the ways in which one set of moral, political and cultural values is seemingly 'naturalized' as everyday common sense so as to support the interests of a

dominant social group. However this cultural hegemony, this artificially constructed 'natural order', is constantly under threat from that which it subordinates - the 'masses', the uncontrollable 'weeds' of society. Within such a "socially-produced space", as Henri Lefebvre describes it, "state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable."¹⁴

In a project in the small city of Exeter, in the rural county of Devon, UK (2000), working in collaboration with the residents of a hostel for homeless young men, a large mural was created, mapping *The Edge of the City*. Erected on the side of the hostel, this six-metre plaque incorporated names of plants that Weinberger had found growing on the derelict gap-site next to the building – 'Dandelion', 'Sticky Groundsel', 'Bindweed', 'Beautiful St John's Wort', etc - as well as words suggested by the participants – 'Fear', 'Shelter', 'Help', 'Blue Moon' and 'Black Oak' (brands of cider), 'Fucking Garden of Eden', 'Beware of the Flowers' (song lyrics), etc. The project also involved the creation of a garden on the neighbouring waste ground, with the transfer of a piece of land from the overgrown "royal garden" of Poltimore House, a derelict country estate on the outskirts of the city. Weinberger often employs lists of words, such as names of plants, communal phrases or linguistic systems of classification, which seem to grow exponentially, superimposing their meanings over diagrams of human habitation or street maps of the city, until they reach a point where their taxonomies begin to break down, along with these rationalised structures of social space, dissolving into a poetics of 'drift', mirroring the organic drift patterns of seeds and wild plants.

In *Cartography* (2004), a twenty-seven metre long map, incorporating a collage of previous projects and texts, Weinberger quoted Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as saying: "We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, wild growths and the rhizome."¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari chose to privilege the decentralised model of the 'rhizome', or weed, in opposition to the regime of the tree, saying that "in contrast to centred (even polyphonic) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an a-centred, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system, without a General in command."¹⁶

In the Western narrative of globalisation critiqued by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, weeds would translate as the "multitude"¹⁷, the rootless migrant hordes waiting to invade the imagined Hortus Conclusus that is Fortress Europe. As one of the defining projects of documenta X in 1997, entitled *What is Beyond the Plants / Is at One with Them*, Lois Weinberger planted a garden amongst the railway tracks of Kassel's central station. The plants were cultivated from seeds of ruderal plants collected throughout South and South Eastern Europe, during and after the collapse of communism. These nomadic survivors, 'foreign immigrants' to German soil, flourished amongst the transit lines of 'Old Europe', subverting any human projection of territorial sovereignty, or fixed borders, and still do so today.

The plants for documenta X were transplanted from Weinberger's 'garden archive', which he referred to as the *Area*, cultivated on a plot of land at the periphery of Vienna near the Old Danube from 1988-99. Alongside the thousands of different ruderal plants that he nurtured, Weinberger kept written records, photographs and drawings, listing their individual provenance in different regions of Eastern Europe. The *Area* provided a reservoir of endangered plants for his many projects worldwide (including an 'inter-continental' transplantation to the Watari Museum in Tokyo, in 1998); hardy migrants, able to flourish in

poor soil, that would form a 'botanical diaspora' over time. The publication *Notes from the Hortus* represents Weinberger's literary response to this unique archive, whilst the photographic slide-work, *Garden Archive*, documents the great diversity of the plants, although there is never any attempt to label or classify them into a rational taxonomy.

Since 1994 Weinberger has also realised a series of *Portable Gardens*, in the form of shopping bags, plastic sacks and containers filled with earth and ruderal plants. The use of such cheap, everyday means of transportation has connotations of poverty and class politics, but also of migration and the current conditions of social mobility brought about by global economics. The project is tailored differently for each location, often using local carrier bags and local plants, but also local knowledge, in contrast to the homogenizing discourse of globalisation.

In Liverpool, for example, in 2004, in the setting of the National Wildflower Centre, cheap checked polyester sacks were employed to make a *Portable Garden* using plants that came from the ill-fated 1984 National Garden Festival site. Following the inner city riots in the early 1980s, the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, proposed a series of garden festivals to celebrate 'multi-culturalism', with the idea that plants would be brought from all around the world, and that the festival sites would subsequently become pleasure parks for the people. However local residents in Liverpool were not impressed by what they saw as a diversion away from the economic and social causes of unrest. After the festival finished the site remained closed. Twenty years later, the exotic 'plants of the world' had run riot, growing over the pagodas and obscuring the public art, making themselves very much at home in this enclosed wilderness.

Local knowledge, and indeed folklore more specifically, represents another level of significance in Lois Weinberger's multi-layered aesthetic. Just as the personal connotations of place are specific to one's own direct experience, so local knowledge and traditions are non-transferable in the wider economy of equivalence and exchange. Weinberger grew up in a rural part of the alpine Tyrol, working on land leased for generations by his family from the local Catholic monastery in Stams, where he served at altar each Sunday. When asked about the role of nature in his upbringing in the Tyrol, Weinberger has said, "Nature was never a topic of discussion on my parents' farm, even though everything revolved around it. We lived off it and from it – there were fields, meadows, cattle, the cold, the heat, the high pressures and the low pressures, the baling press and the blood poisoning – litanies, melodies and enumerations – in a word: repetitions."¹⁸ The customs and rituals of a rural way of life are driven through with the immanent presence of nature, and the primary relationship to this living urgency is the daily repetition of labour.

Similarly the customs and rituals of folklore, as with religion, depend upon repetition to produce the necessary conditions for apprehending the immaterial. Folklore can contain religious or mythic elements and at the same time concern itself with the most mundane traditions of everyday life. In the recent *Home Voodoo* series, Lois Weinberger enacts a succession of local folkloric rituals in relation to specific plants, using whatever materials that come to hand, incorporating personal family myths and mixing up a diverse range of superstitious customs, from voodoo to Christian to pagan rites. A snowman is anointed with holy water, brought back from Lourdes by the artist's mother; medicinal plants are gathered in the mountains and ritually burnt, as an inhalant, along with Cuban cigars; a spirited house cat, or 'familiar', plays violently with a 'broom-stick' bush, next to mandrake and peyote plants; a puff-ball erupts brown spores, as the artist mimics the actions of a hare, beating the ground next to it until the fungus explodes. The result of this

home made, DIY magic is a kind of ironic shamanism that, despite its intentional humour, still conjures up a sense of numinous connection to the forces of nature. Weinberger says of the work that it is “a process that is chthonic – i.e. born of the earth – which demonstrates the overlapping of reality and unreality. Its significance lies, on the one hand, in the intersections and, on the other hand, in the subversion of customary structures and opinions. A tool recalled to memory which links socio-cultural aspects to individual needs with gusto. Home Voodoo.”¹⁹

This interest in folklore and local knowledge dates back to Weinberger's earliest works. For *Bestandsaufnahme* (stock taking), of 1978, Weinberger made an inventory of objects within the village which had been adapted for alternative usage – ‘tractor tyres cut up to make containers’, ‘hollowed out tree trunks functioning as flower-boxes’, ‘a car seat employed as a bench’, ‘a woody tree fungus used as a shelf for shaving equipment’, ‘a yoke used as a lamp’ – adding written comments, alongside drawings and photographs. For example, a flower bucket is accompanied by the observation: “probable prototypes: feeding trough for pigs, African dug-out, Oberammergau flower-box.”²⁰ This open-ended inventory of everyday objects and their provenance records a local tradition of what Claude Levi-Strauss has referred to as ‘bricolage’ – adapting functional objects from whatever comes to hand. Levi-Strauss also wrote, “mythical thought is a kind of intellectual 'bricolage'.”²¹

The plant featured in the black-and-white video-work, *Datura Stramonium* (1996) is commonly referred to as the ‘thorn apple’ but is also known as the ‘Judgement Trumpet’, and has numerous magico-religious associations with the devil in Central Europe, as well as connections to gypsy mythologies. At first the video appears to simply record a dried-up, dead thistle in close-up, but it soon becomes apparent that the camera wielded by the artist has itself become an instrument of violence, penetrating into the gnarled stems of the plant and actively destroying it through the process of its documentation.

The folkloric figure of the Green Man is also a recurring presence within Weinberger's practice. One appearance of the Green Man took the form of a two-sided, grass-green Head of Janus, cast from a Belgian chocolate, showing the twin faces of a laughing Asian boy. Presented on a table, halfway up the stairs in the Freud Museum, in London, the last home of the Austrian psychoanalyst, the fist-sized Janus lay on a white tablecloth, onto which Weinberger had drawn a spiral motif, reminiscent of a snake, or Ouroboros, eating its own tail. On closer inspection, however, the drawing appeared to derive from an enlargement of the cross-section of a plant stem, seen under the microscope, made of cells rather than scales. Elsewhere in the Museum, written over the floor plans of the two storey building, Weinberger presented a *Sex Garden* of words and phrases, incorporating names of mountains and rivers taken from Levi-Strauss' text, *Myth and Meaning*, as well as references relating to Sigmund Freud's own interest in plants, seemingly correlating to psychoanalysis but in fact taken from a lexicon of botanical phraseology, with terms such as “cone addiction”, “incest depression”, “erectile tissue”, “labiate”, “naked seeds”, “stimulus threshold”, “quiescenz.”²² The structures of the family home, the foundation of an orderly society, upheld by the discipline and divisions of language, seemingly dissolve into a free association of meaning and desire.

The urgency of growth in wild plants and the urgency of desire are inextricably linked. Both can be identified as a driving ‘urge’ but these equivalent forces cannot be isolated for scrutiny as they are essentially performative, existing ‘in process’, immanent to their respective fields of nature and of culture.

Rather, such a fluid condition, or urgency, can only be revealed in action, in a particular place and a particular time, facilitated by the artist through a subtle “non-intervention” or “voluntary renouncement” of human interference: “Fallow grounds are places where boundaries show themselves as something in motion / something uncertain – places which have reached a point where one can speak neither of a beginning nor of an end nor of a standstill.”²³

The artist collaborated with his wife Franziska for some special projects in public space between 2003 and 2009. Next to the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, they made a second makeshift pavilion to house a large, cube-shaped compost heap. This massive block of vegetation, entitled *Laubreise*, was made up of successive layers of plant and grass cuttings from the Giardini in a continual process of decay, gradually rotting down to return to the earth. As the stack diminished, new layers of plant matter were added to it, so that the maintenance of its form was an on-going performative action, and the viewers who squeezed into this para-pavilion, the bodily witnesses of a time-based process of entropy. Writing about the piece, Weinberger says “I thought of a living heap? IN THE COMPLEXITY OF THE UNDETERMINED – that steams, smells and smokes. Indeed, there is something of an alchemistic process at work / on the transitory state of being there when ‘making good earth’.”²⁴

For a materialist society based upon the central belief that ever-increasing production, consumption and profit are the only proper yardsticks for measuring the quality of human life, the particularity of subjective experience, of ‘mythical thinking’ and the value of local knowledge are inevitably undermined. Whole bodies of knowledge belonging to particular place and time; folklore, the mythical and the marginalia of the local; are being destroyed. In *Deschooling Society* (1970), Ivan Illich wrote about the increasing homogenisation of society, where the pupil’s “imagination is ‘schooled’ to accept service in place of value”, where subjective imagination is suppressed and where “the institutionalisation of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery.”²⁵ The question is how to de-school society of a consumerist culture which is eroding the very quality of our subjective experience, as well as destroying the planet.

In his late essay, *The Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari argues that, as well as social and environmental conditions, our own subjective, mental health is threatened by the forces of consumerism and globalization. ‘Integrated World Capitalism’ produces a combination of mental dulling, social homogenisation and conformity, as well as ecological destruction and crisis. It is not only destroying the natural environment and eroding our social bonds, but is also engaged in a far more insidious and invisible “penetration of people’s attitudes, sensibility and minds.”²⁶ Human subjectivity, in all its uniqueness – what Guattari calls its ‘singularity’ – is as endangered by globalisation as the rare species that are disappearing from the planet every day. If we are to resist being “mentally manipulated through the production of a collective, mass-media subjectivity”²⁷ then we need to recover “intensities”, to re-claim “existential Territories”²⁸, in the manner of the artist, through the particularity of the subjective, and so develop new forms of heterogeneity and dissensus. “Life”, Guattari says, “is like a performance, one must construct it, work at it, singularize it.”²⁹ Thus, in order to resist the mass-media homogenization of society and the destruction of the environment we need to continually re-invent our lives, and to re-connect the relationship of “environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology.”³⁰

For Lois Weinberger, the uncontrolled growth of ruderal plants, heedless of human society, the drift patterns of grasses and the relentless urgency of 'greenness', is an artistic metaphor for resistance to the prevailing order of consumerism and a counter-culture to the reductive taxonomies and categorizations of 'the orderly'. Within this 'singularity', he foregrounds the 'living', the ungovernable spirit of wildness, untamed by the ordering forces of the Pure and the True - what Levi-Strauss describes as "wild thinking"³¹ - and so gives form to a new politics/poetics of heterogeneity and dissensus.

¹ Lois Weinberger: *ENCLOSURE OF RUDERALS 1992*, Lois Weinberger, catalogue Krinzinger Gallery, Vienna 1993, p. 6

² Lois Weinberger: *Notizen aus dem Hortus / Notes from the hortus*, Reihe Cantz, Ostfildern 1997, p. 45

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁴ Lois Weinberger: *Present Time Space – Hiriya Dump 1998*, *Verlauf / Drift*, Ausst.-Kat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig 20er Haus Wien, 2000, p. 244 f.

⁵ Lois Weinberger, *Notizen aus dem Hortus / Notes from the Hortus*, Reihe Cantz, Ostfildern 1997, p. 9

⁶ Lois Weinberger: text on a photographic work, *Verlauf / Drift*, Ausst.-Kat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig 20er Haus Wien, 2000, p. 102

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124

¹⁰ Pual Sztulman, *Short Guide documenta X*, 1997, p. 244

¹¹ Catherine David, *Abandoned Gardens*, from *Drift* publication, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig 20er Haus Wien, 2000, p. 242 f.

¹² Lois Weinberger, *Present Time Space – Hiriya Dump 1998*, *Verlauf / Drift*, Ausst.-Kat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig 20er Haus Wien, 2000, p. 244 f.

¹³ Dieter Roelstraete, »Some Notes on Plant-like Thought«, in: *Lois Weinberger*, Ausst.-Kat. S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst ,Ghent 2005, S. 116.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974, p. 23

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1992, p. 15

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁷ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 2005 (title)

¹⁸ Dieter Buchhart: Interview mit Lois Weinberger, catalogue Austrian Pavillon 53. Venice Biennial 2009, p. 153

¹⁹ Lois Weinberger: *Home Voodoo*, catalogue Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, Odense, S. 61

²⁰ Lois Weinberger, *Stock-taking 1978*, text on drawings

²¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 1962, p. 17

²² Lois Weinberger, Bonner Kunstverein, Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin, Galerie im Taxispalais Innsbruck, 2002, p. 89

²³ Lois Weinberger, Statement, 1990

²⁴ Lois Weinberger, concept text for Laubreise, catalogue Venice Biennial 2009, p. 142

²⁵ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 1971, p. 1

²⁶ Felix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us*, 1990, p. 53

²⁷ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 1989, p. 28

²⁸ Ibid., p. 154

²⁹ Felix Guattari, *A Molecular Revolution*, in *La Revue Autrement*, 1989, p. 20

³⁰ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 1989, p. 28

³¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 1962, p. 266

salle principale
28 rue de Thionville
75019 Paris
+ 33 09 72 30 98 70
gallery@salleprincipale.com

mercredi à vendredi | 14h - 19h
samedi | 11h - 19h
et sur rendez-vous

www.salleprincipale.com