

The Persephone Project

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The Persephone Project is an eco-art project that connects the public to art and the environment by promoting gardening as a contemporary art practice and by recognizing gardeners as artists. My hope is that this connection will bring personal transformative change to the lives of those who can realize that they are involved in a creative practice through their gardening. My hope is to also bring transformative social-political change as the project breaks down the barriers (class, race, education) between artists and non-artists. And finally, my hope is to effect environmental change as the project promotes a respect for nature as collaborator in the work and in the world. The project takes its name from the Greek goddess Persephone whose return each year from the underworld brings the change of a dark barren world to that of light and growth – to spring.

I do the work in several intersecting spheres of methodology: conceptual, administrative, social/community, and art making. I see the entire project as a conceptual art project. I want to change the way people (particularly those not trained as artists) think about their own creativity and their ability to engage creatively. I intentionally employ art-world terminology when speaking about gardens: They are installations. When I ask the public to share the stories of plants in their garden with a component of the project called “Magic Penny Gardens,” I refer to the stories as narrative and memory. I want to honor, and more importantly I want gardeners to honor, their everyday backyard interactions with the environment and understand the internal creative spark that inspires, so that it may shine – not just in the garden – but also in many aspects of human and earth citizenship.

Discourse

Discourse is one means that I employ to have an exchange about the place of the garden in post-modern culture. I give regular presentations to diverse groups where I have the opportunity to preach this gospel as well as listen and learn. I also visit many backyard gardens (studio visits) and talk to gardeners, which allows me to witness their approach (methodology), learn where they got their ideas (what informed their practice), and share thoughts (engage in discourse).

ArtGardens

Early on in the journey that has become the Persephone Project, I imagined a central place — a large outdoor art venue – that would house dozens of diverse art installations, each employing growing plants as the primary medium. I called it the ArtGardens. The idea was conceived from references in a nighttime dream, and it was to be the central narrative that I use when communicating the garden-as-art concept. To be practical (and to meet the request of local funders who were not ready to release millions of dollars for this vision), I began with a phase-one goal of four to five commissioned installations in an under-utilized park along a highly visible and heavily traveled roadway into downtown Pittsburgh. I wanted these works to represent the five categories of artists that I had identified in my research: community gardeners, artists who work sculpturally with plants, backyard gardeners, artists who are passionate backyard gardeners, and eco-artists. In 2002, the first two works were completed. This past summer (2003) the next two got underway.

To address the need for neighborhood connection to the central site and to the concept, I developed the Magic Penny Gardens. I realized that my own thriving backyard perennial bed was comprised of plants that had been given to me, and that in spite (or because) of my love for dividing and sharing them, my garden had burgeoned. A switch turned on: My favorite Malvina Reynolds song. Her song, “Magic Penny,” began playing in my head. The song equates love to a magical penny — the more you give away, the more you receive. I named my garden “Magic Penny Garden” and later, I wondered if the public could be invited to bring plants and share plant stories to create a public Magic Penny Garden. Magic Penny Gardens are now commissioned community art gardens created by artists using plants contributed from the perennial gardens of neighborhood residents. Four Magic Penny Gardens have been, planted and nurtured in low-income Pittsburgh-area neighborhoods to date. The project has also hosted public days where people have brought their plants and stories to share. The stories have been documented both in writing and on videotape.

Artist–Administrator

To implement this vision, I found myself back in a very familiar role of arts administrator. (I was the executive director of a contemporary dance company before I woke up with what I used to call “my crazy idea.”) Peers questioned why, I would I want to take on a project that would largely cast me back to administrative duties, after I had discovered my own artistic practice.

The answer was in the methodology—a methodology guided by intuition. My pre-artist career arc took me from campus radical, to environmental educator, to community activist, and finally to arts administrator. Politics and morality—a sense of justice—led me in my choice of work and how I conducted myself in the work. My artist life includes all this, but there is an additional element. It is a spiritual connection that is letting me trust my nighttime dreams and daytime synchronicities to lead the way.

In a way, following the dream references and synchronicities has become my artist methodology. My radical college training taught me that a spiritual life (as well as the artist life) was too individualistic and self-serving. As an arts administrator, I came to de-bunk the latter notion and served community arts projects with “good politics.” In my artist life, I have found that I must strive to be open not just to my internal voices but also to the world around me—natural and human. I try to treat all with respect and listen. I have found that when I am on the right track, doors open. I have trusted most of the big decisions, such as site and artist selection to this process. The work is slow. Patience is always required; there are sometimes dark periods where I am not sure where I am going or what is next. But so far, there has been just enough encouragement, assurance, and progress to keep me on the path and address the never-ending administrative details the project requires.

Community Engagement/Ritual

Public events and volunteer opportunities are an important part of the project. Hundreds of individuals have come forward in the last two years to participate in some way. What is particularly striking is the level of enthusiasm of those who attend. Many individuals have expressed that the project has struck a personal chord with them, challenging them to reconsider the role of art and creativity in their non-artist lives. Often they have been following the project, have clipped the articles, or have told others about the project. One woman expressed that she walks in her neighborhood with new eyes, with a new way of looking with appreciation at the gardens there, since learning about the project. Several individuals have made spontaneous cash contributions to the project both at events and just stopping at neighborhood sites where volunteers were at work. It is with the utmost sincerity that individuals have expressed their gratitude for the project. I have been capturing these anecdotes as a way to tell the story and assess the impact of the project.

Media coverage, which can be a barometer of public interest, has been practically overwhelming at the local level. The project has been prominently covered in all of the local daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. There have been numerous radio interviews, and a feature report was produced and aired on Pittsburgh’s public television evening news magazine.

I also felt it was important to honor the site of the ArtGardens before planting actually took place. I uncharacteristically asked for help from a variety of people who I had met through the project—a woman who does earth celebrations, another who blesses gardens, an artist who practices water alchemy, a landscape architect with psychic abilities, a federal parks service employee who loves to chant—as well as a friend who is interested in the sunrise and a woman at my synagogue who leads a healing service there. They each expressed that they were honored to be asked. I hosted a dinner at my home where we planned a sunrise ritual for February 2, the day associated with the Quickening of the Seed, the day that holds the promise of spring (and Persephone’s return). I invited friends of the project and colleagues to reach across our comfort zone—spiritually and physically (we met in the dark in freezing temperatures)—to dance and chant, to witness the sunrise, to bless and pray on behalf of the project and the world. Ritual has continued to be an important part of the project at both public and more intimate events.

Art Making

I came to the project with the realization that my backyard garden is my artistic practice and therefore I am an artist. The project grew out of my wanting to share this awareness with other backyard gardeners in the hopes that it would have the same transformative impact on them that I experienced. Yet the doubts created by a lifetime of I’m-not-an-artist conditioning were pervasive.

At the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry I was considered an artist because of my conceptual inquiry. And it felt right that the project itself – the inquiry into the notions of hobbies, creativity, gardens, community, environment – is my artist pursuit. And yet I was continually asked if I would make a garden. This seemed fair, that I should practice what I preached, but at the same time it terrified me. I was relieved when someone on my advisory committee suggested that we ask Lily Yeh of the Village for Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia to make the first Magic Penny Garden. Her inspiring work in a distressed neighborhood over the last 20 years made her the perfect artist to represent the community gardener category, and I was off the hook.

Strangely, I did begin a practice of mark making in my morning journal. One morning after writing about a particularly poignant dream, I felt the pen move on the page as if my hand was guided. Because of the striking similarity of the drawings to the work of Matisse, I later experimented with paper and scissors. The scissors took on their own direction more surely than the pen. What started as a private practice went public when I connected one cut shape to the silhouette of the stream insects I studied in college ecology. Days later it was front-page news that swarms of mayflies had returned to Pittsburgh for the first time in 105 years – bringing the good news of cleaner rivers.

Overhearing of plans for an exhibit of work by Pittsburgh-area women artists responding to local environmental issues, I approached the curators Steffi Domike and Ann Rosenthal about making a piece about the mayflies “return utilizing the cutout shapes. Although I was told that the plans for the show were complete, I sent off a proposal, and got a call that the work would be included. The lyrical expression of the cutout as well as the hopeful story of the appearance of an indicator species has resonated and I have been invited to make several more site-specific cut out works in art venues around the area. This has allowed me to explore and introduced the possible association of mayflies to the mythic Rusalki, river fairies once held in great esteem by traditional cultures. The connection to the Persephone Project has begun to unfold. The cutout shapes have been incorporated into the project logo and website, and the mayfly cutouts are offered for sale to support the project.

AESTHETICS, THEORY, PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS

At the base of my inquiry is the egalitarian belief that all people should have the opportunity and encouragement to tap into their imaginations and into their personal creative practice. And that the most respectful and effective way to do that is to honor the existing practices, not impose new ones. Examining the practice of gardening also raises issues of environmental ethics and a mutually beneficial relationship with the earth. While the aesthetic relationship to the garden is important to most gardeners, it is the gardener’s relationship to the garden, not the aesthetics that is of interest to me.

Suzi Gablick’s work has great resonance and has been very important in my inquiry. It has given me the encouragement (and courage) to honestly synthesize wonder, imagination, mythology, and spirituality into my inquiry. Jungian theory is very much a cornerstone of my work as I endeavor to open and listen to the synchronistic signs that guide me. My eclectic spiritual practice of yoga, meditation, and contemplative Judaism inform my inquiry as well.

METHODS AND MEANS: SHARED OWNERSHIP

I think the most significant methodology is developing shared ownership for the project. Because the work is social, it has to be done in a social context. My role as artist is to be medium, catalyst, and facilitator. It has many similarities to the community organizing I did working for a community development group. The artist can share a vision (be the medium) and if there is resonance, others will get excited (catalyst). The next step is to invite those with the most enthusiasm into the inner circle of the process. This can take the form of a working group or committee. Now the idea or the project no longer belongs to the artist but to the community. Continuing to reach out to larger and larger concentric circles of community, the artist role switches to facilitator—facilitating the community will to make the project happen.