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Almanac

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Almanac

Katherine Schultz

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My interest in community and socially-minded works of art led me to create a project that might facilitate interaction between Akronites and visitors with their surrounding environment. My fascination with local foods and related issues, such as food waste, resulted in my focus on urban foraging.

This project explores alternatives to conventional food markets with the intent of reducing the amount of waste generated by a food system that is grossly inefficient. Countless people in the urban environment today have lost touch with the origins of their food. Many believe that food originates in the grocery store rather than field or forest. In my current occupation on an urban farm, I regularly encounter children and adults who have little or no concept of the fact that eggs they eat for breakfast come from chickens, and fruits and vegetables grow from the ground. Other people are simply unaware of the amount of [free] food available to them despite living within city limits, if they are willing to put forth a bit of effort at the right times.

I hope to draw attention to the greater cycle of life and food-- where food comes from and how perfectly good and edible food becomes refuse. Furthermore, I hope to engage even those who already share knowledge of these food sources (or for whom edibles are not a primary interest) in new ways. By telling stories, including lyrical quotations, and citing other points of general or historic interest, the city may be approached from a more poetic or holistic perspective.

I have chosen the format of a pocket-sized card to serve as conveniently portable navigation tools. The cards are intended to be reproducible, though only the originals bear the rich tactile qualities of a handmade object. The first cards that I created were

done with greater access to technology and studio spaces. However, as all artists must do at times, I was required to adapt my working processes in accordance with my access to the university's amenities. While this initially seemed like an impediment to the quality and execution of the project, it was perhaps for the best. Finding tools and materials available elsewhere became a foraging adventure of its own and helped to create a more cohesive product in terms of content and execution. Ultimately, it reinforced what I already held to be true: compelling ideas, not exquisite objects, are the basis of good art. I will discuss this issue greater detail later on.

I began my project by compiling my own knowledge of Akron's wild and discarded edibles. This accumulated information is the result of many years of traveling the city on foot and bicycle. It would be impossible to encounter most of these food sources from the confines of a motor vehicle. I visited each site in order to plot its location, find or recall other points of interest, and speak with locals to gather supplemental information and stories. This location data was recorded on a master map which is accessible online. Additionally, this project served as impetus to begin establishing new fruit trees and other perennial edibles, as well as improving access to certain items that I have catalogued on the cards.

Each in this series of cards bears a small drawing of a forageable food and a map of the location where the item can be found locally. The cards also contain references to nearby points of interest, historical sites, and local folklore. The information has been compiled in a non-linear format, creating an opportunity for exploration of the area in an unconventional manner. This approach is intended for

logical and imaginative engagement--in addition to delighting the tastebuds. Thus, the pieces amount to more than a simple field guide.

While much of this process began as a solitary effort, the social component embedded in the mapping process and accumulation of stories is significant. The cards serve as a way to compile a wealth of knowledge. They have been produced with the intention that people will use them to expand upon what they already know about their surrounding city, land, and food sources. Blank cards offer a template for other, future, participants to mark their own points of interest, contributing to the collective knowledge of our city. A numbering system has been implemented to identify individual artists and locate each card on a large scale map. In future iterations, the project may be expanded to other geographic regions or platforms for interactivity.

The urban environment offers us an abundance of fresh and prepared food. Without much looking, one can find pounds upon pounds of discarded edibles. This type of food represents only a fraction of our country's food waste. Nonetheless, on any given night in the city of Akron, one can find a dumpster overflowing with donuts, countless pizzas in-the-box, bags upon bags of bagels, bin after bin of fresh produce, cheese, crackers, or cereal, etc.. When one considers that the majority of businesses lock their dumpsters or use trash compactors precisely to prevent foraging, the amount of food that is discarded daily is truly staggering.

According to a 2003 study conducted at Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, conventionally sourced food frequently travels upwards of 1,500 miles to reach midwestern plates. This number has been steadily increasing for

the past several decades. We have little concept of eating seasonally, which is a major contributing factor to the distances that foods travel.

The USDA estimates that 133 billion pounds (up to 40%) of food in the United States is wasted. Much of this food never makes it beyond the field where it was grown, a phenomenon resulting from our desire for picture perfect produce. By encouraging people to eat locally and in-season, as well as developing a realistic standard for produce aesthetics, this number can be reduced significantly. It is my belief that connection to the food production process fosters more reasonable consumption standards. Furthermore, as interest grows in harvesting one's own food, the city's available food sources can be increased by planting more fruit-bearing plants in public spaces. Indeed, we are already seeing this begin to happen in places like the Glendale Staircase forest garden in the heart of Akron.

Just as aesthetics play a role in our dietary consumption, so do these preferences influence our experience of art. Therefore, the physical and historical context of this project must also be addressed. Art is often viewed in the context of a gallery--with the understanding that it was created to exist within that environment. However, as mentioned previously, this project is intended for interactivity. Yet, a gallery-like presentation is still useful for sharing the works with a larger, or more varied, audience. Regarding the nature of art, the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere says this:

Beyond its destruction of the representative regime, the aesthetic regime of art comes to terms with the ethical regime of images in a two-pronged relationship. It

rejects its partitioning of times and spaces, sites and functions. But it ratifies its basic principle: matters of art are matters of education.

According to his philosophy described in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, art is to be judged based on its ability to “redistribute the sensible”. In this way, art begins to take the form of life. If this is the case, then art ought to be judged by its ability to create a new experience or set of experiences for its audience, not based on its aesthetic qualities. This is not to say that aesthetics are unimportant. Any designer will attest that appearances have a tremendous influence on the engagement of an audience. In current contemporary practice, art embraces more than the aesthetic object.

To give a more broad art historical context, it is useful to discuss the work of other artists and movements. The type of work that I have engaged in has its roots in the middle of the last century. During the 1960s-70s the Fluxus artistic movement came to prominence. This new wave of artistic practice encouraged the blending of artistic mediums and blurring the divisions between life and art. With this development, fetishization of the art object began to wane. Joseph Beuys, a prominent Fluxus member, came to refer to himself as a social sculptor. In turn, this made way for the present-day social practice art. Beginning with the likes of Beuys, artists began to reject the notion of the artist as genius. Instead, the audience was empowered to take on the role of artist and life could be absorbed into art.

Perhaps the most exemplary of Beuys’s “social sculptures” is the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU). The FIU

called for the making of each person into a student as well as a teacher and using creativity as currency. According to his ideology, just about anything might be considered art. While my project relies on an object form for its documentation and display, this is secondary to its function.

So far, I have been the primary producer of cards for this project. I have sought to engage people in various other capacities-- as storytellers, object-makers, and as forager-participants. In the second phase of the project other artists are beginning to play a larger role in the production of cards

Many other contemporary artists have utilized the map, or a mapping process, as the foundation of art works. In her book *The Map As Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography*, Katharine Harmon explains that "Since the 1960s there has been an exponential increase of artists working with maps." Indeed there are countless ways to reimagine the map or apply rules of cartography to a new territory be it physical, emotional, or otherwise.

REPOhistory and the Los Angeles Urban Rangers are two contemporary artistic collectives that have used the map to draw attention to social issues and reimagine present day reality. During the early 1990s, REPOhistory created numerous site-specific street signs detailing an often scandalous history that, for various reasons, we as a society have chosen to ignore. Working covertly, and later with government approval, the signs were placed around the city of New York highlighting events and locations including a former slave trade market. Maps were created to allow participants to conduct a walking tour of each historical marker.

Likewise, the LA Urban Rangers work in ways that appear to be official, but provide an alternative to mainstream narratives and navigation. The rangers don uniforms and conduct unconventional group tours of the city, from back alleys to beaches. Their work is both informative and made with a cynic's humor, employing official-looking documentation to convey subversive information.

The map is an integral part of my project as well. I have utilized it in a traditional manner, in order to navigate the local terrain for unexpected and rewarding discoveries. While not subversive in the same way as these other groups, I consider the project to be countercultural. Like Lewis and Clark - this project is about reimagining the city as uncharted territory.

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