



The Gardener, the Farmer, and the Urban Vegetable Grower

The Agro-Art exhibition, curated by Tali Tamir at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art earlier this year, explored local agriculture's representation in contemporary art. This essay expands the discussion on the difference between gardening and agriculture and focuses on the relationships between agriculture, territory, and biography.

Essay / Tali Tamir October 27, 2015

Alongside the large increase in the popularity of organic nutrition, as part of the urban denizen's conscious journey in search of physical and mental health at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, it is impossible not to recognize the development of organic art, whose materials are plants and seeds, soil and worms, as it grows and extends its branches beyond frames and outside spaces. The use of planters, trees, flowers, and seeds as legitimate components in complex installations of art projects has gained a seductive and startling status in contemporary art, almost to the point of excess. As display traditions dictates, not only physical conventions are being violated, but also the long-time discipline of preservation, which regards the introduction of organic matter into the museum space as a hazard, from the professional point of view. Once the barriers have been removed it became possible to plant, water, and nurture ever-changing, growing art within exhibition spaces.

**זוהר גוטסמן, דיזון יתר, פרשסוסיים מעורב בדבק, קרונית הסעה, תבליט בחול
ואדמה. 2014-2015.jpg**





[1]Zohar Gottesman, Over-fertilization

2014-2015, Installation view, Petach Tikva Museum of Art (Photo: Elad Sarig)

Much like nutrition, green art has an air of self-righteousness while also wearing the crown of sustainability. Many urban-farming installations, which advocate the importing of the field from the country into the realm of the city, the neighborhood, or even inside the home, employ the engines of the new utopia, sailing on the wing of the new yearning to save the polluted, tired, and congested planet where we all live from the forces of destruction, which accelerate its demise. The scientist and activist Carlo Petrini - who in 2013 launched the "slow Food" movement's campaign, and has spoken out against fast-food chains such as McDonald's - is responsible for the revolutionary Web site motto of the design firm Bulbo, a producer of special LED lighting for growing edible plants indoors. Against a background of growing crates, placed on the desk in the living room, his words sound like a radical manifest: "We have to start with decolonizing our mind. Urban dwellers should turn themselves into farmers. This is the real adventure, [...] We do not want passive consumers any longer, we want aware co-producers, active people, trained to the change."[1](#)

Industrial agriculture, with its attendant powerful corporations which control seeds, fertilizers, dispersal, and distribution, has become the main target of a head-on offensive by artists (such as the group of artists and activists which has formed around the American artist Claire Pentecost, at the University of Chicago). It is perceived as a designated enemy, who, under the guise of providing basic nutrition and crop-promoting chemicals, engenders economic dependence, determines the fortune of companies, subverts traditional cultures, and accelerates processes of pollution and degeneration of natural, spontaneous farming. Under the claim of a major contribution to solving the hunger problem, which threatens the future of the world's population, a conflict develops between the spontaneous and the controlled, inspiring many artistic projects. On the other side of industrial agriculture the arena of "guerilla farming" is thriving, promoting total, random decentralization of crops and a defiant splitting of that conflictual asset, land, into tiny fragments of temporarily-owned and deserted backyards. The Israeli artist and scholar Efrat Hildesheim, who has studied the phenomenon of urban farming in Berlin, sees it as an alternative practice of the counter-culture and as an expression of the annihilation of the collective agricultural ethos by a decentralized, rhizomatic construction.[2](#)

[\[2\] עודד הירש, טרקטור, סטילס מתוך וידאו, 2014](#)



[3]Oded Hirsch,Tractor
2014, still from video

Considering the many basic components of agriculture – land, seeds, plants, nutrition, economics, science – a huge chasm lies between the stylized, designated realm of the garden and the enclosed territory of the field. The chasm between gardener and farmer is also social, similar to the one between the bourgeois and the proletarian. A whole world lies between horticulture (gardening), and agriculture (farming): while the first is immersed in high, refined culture which seeks super-metaphors of order and organization, the other is in the realm of work and the body, claiming a real status as cultivator and producer. The garden is an enclosed bubble; strollers among its paths see it from above, complete unto itself, disconnected from the world, while the field is continually a wide-spread plot, with the farmer contained within it as one of its organic components. The idea of gardening touches upon excessive values of beauty, rarity, collecting, and passion; “farming” speaks of the necessity of civilization and begins, as noted by Yuval Noah Harari, at the moment when humankind relinquished absolute freedom in favor of enslavement to the land and to growth and production cycles.³

The “Agro-Art Exhibition”, which I have curated at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art in February 2015, took form following a study of the tangents between agriculture and art in the last 20 years (see the catalog essay⁴ for more details). One conclusion became immediately clear - not every work of art



which includes components of vegetation or planters is necessarily a natural candidate for an exhibition on agriculture, an observation which has placed a good number of projects outside the scope of the research for the show. A leading thought vector was the insight that the Israeli-Zionist context, which places agriculture in a highly sensitive spot, would require different handling from the universal interest in sustainability and the future of Earth. As the first exhibition ever, in Israel, to center on agriculture at the museum level, and to deal with the critical state of Israel's agriculture, evident to any newspaper reader and news follower in the last five years, I have felt that the political-cultural-social aspect of the subject is right for this show, rather than the universal-utopian or the urban one.

Indeed, the Agricultural Exhibition at the Petach Tikva Museum has put on view neither plants nor ecological habitats, but rather farmers, farming consciousness, farmers' language and memory, and farmers' work. The works on display explore the local relationships with land and vegetation and their symbolic, ethical, and mythic meaning in Israeli culture today. The Agricultural Exhibition strived, on the one hand, to extract the agricultural motif from its romantic-nostalgic position as an ideal element, coloring the pioneering era of pre-statehood, and on the other hand, to expose the political aspect of the manipulative use Israel makes of agriculture. The archival portion of the show, succinct and meticulous, sought to anchor the subject as a central and current theme in Israeli art throughout its history. The late novels of the writer S. Yizhar - *Mikdamot* (Preliminaries) and *Tsalhavam* (Illumination) - which came out in the early 1990s, are documents of first-hand testimony which extraordinarily eradicate the idealization of the farmer plowing the fields of the homeland, illuminating the doubt, the dread, the danger, and the dualistic interpretation of reality which has accompanied the saga of Zionist agriculture since its early days.

[4] [תומר ספיר, "אם החיטה", 2015. צילום: אלעד שריג](#)



[5]Tomer Sapir, Detail from Mother of all Wheat



2014-15, (Photo by Elad Sarig)

The Agro-Art Exhibition showed agriculture and the field not as a liberating escape to nature, to some pre-industrial age, but rather as a mechanism for policing nature and exploiting it for human needs, often exploiting other people along the way. The agricultural discourse, as I have tried to shape it at the Petach Tikva Museum, cannot be disconnected from the terms and criteria of labor and economics, and must include – beyond soil and vegetation, the people on either side of the divide – farmers and laborers on one side, consumers on the other; those who hold a claim on the land, and those who are deprived of it or are bonded to it. The discussion of agriculture in the show is not limited to the familiar mechanism of photosynthesis, which requires light, air, and an abundance of water, but rather it takes in the political system, the economic machinery, the interests and the power play between country and city, economics and trade, sales and marketing, labor and laborers, abundance and hunger, action and language.

The discourse on agriculture, as outlined in the Agricultural Exhibition, begins at the survival level, in a genetic-archetypical repository of the Mother of Wheat, as the quintessential expression of the potential for disaster embedded in seeds: in controlling them, in programming them, or in threatening to destroy them (Tomer Sapir, Mother of all Wheat, 2015). But mostly the main metaphor of the exhibition is the farmer– his longing for rain, his fear of drought, the intrinsic connection between “psychological personality” and “rainfall region” (Dov Heller and Yaakov Hefetz, Rainfall Region, 1980). An intimate relationship between farmer, land, and vegetation is articulated in Noam Rabinowich’s lyric work (Map No. 3, Map No. 10, 2010); he uses the scroll format to weave the daily ritual of the personal, non-territorial cultivating of the land, which experiences the botanical growing cycles through individual growth processes.

[שרון גלזברג, החקלאות מחזה בחמש מערכות, הקרנת 8 ערוצי וידיאו בתוך
\[6\] ארכיטקטורת חממות, 2014-2015 \(פרט מן המערכה הראשונה\)](#)



[7] Sharon Glazberg, *Agriculture: A Play in Five Acts* (Prologue, Leek filed, Procession, Potatoes, Scarecrows, Hide-and-seek)

2013-2015 Installation view: Petach Tikva Museum of Art (photo: Elad Sarig)

The strength of the exhibition, for me, lies in the inner tensions and contrasts it offers: Noam Rabinowich's intimate work right next to Ayelet Zohar's video in which she marches along Route 40, between Ramla and Lod, documenting what's left of the citrus groves which were prevalent in the area before 1948 (Ayelet Zohar, *Walking Video: Ramla-Lod Road*, 2000), and, further on, Dana Yoeli's aerial photographs wall installation, showing the process of gaining control over Palestinian lands in Judea and Samaria by agricultural means (Dana Yoeli, *Key*, 2014-15). The planting of vineyards, which for Rabinovich is a part of an inner conversation, becomes a political tool in the hands of the new settlers, applied in order to define territory and fix ownership. Where Noam moves sinuously among the contour lines of the anonymous wadi, the political plantings are seigniorial and aim to stake a claim going back directly to biblical texts. These works acquire further interpretation in Noah Raz-Melamed's installation, which explores the agricultural ethos during the early-20th-century waves of immigration, comparing the religious-biblical aspect of farming in Palestine (the observant farmers of Petach Tikva) with the return to farming in its socialist-revolutionary facet (the pioneers of Jezreel Valley). Two narratives emerge from the various projects – the old farmer who's come down in the world, now separated from his field and excluded from his orchard – and the foreign laborer, who lives and works within the bubble of greenhouse and field, indentured servant to crops and wholesalers (Sharon Glazberg, *Agriculture: A Play in Five Acts* 2014-15; Zohar Gottesman, *Over Fertilization*, 2014-15; Relli de Vries, *The Book of Hours*, 2014-15). The scientific dimension, and clearly the communal one too, is evident in Avital Geva's video piece, broadcast live from a hive of pollinating bees used for research purposes in a greenhouse in Ein Shemer (where he lives), while Gal Weinstein combines iconic images of Israeli farming – in line with his earlier work – with physical traits and textures created by growing fungi and molds, both as a type of private farming within the studio and as a metaphor for degeneration and decline.



[שיפר אסתר וגלריית ווירט האוזר גלריית, גודמן מריאן גלריית, האמן באדיבות Untitled ברלין. 2011-12 \[8\]](#)



[9]Pierre Huyghe, Untitled
2011-12, courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Had I been able to cast a wider net and include in the show non-Israeli works which also touch upon the questions of agriculture, territory, and human biography, I would have added Pierre Huyghe's fascinating project installed at dOCUMENTA 13: the open territory, part farm, part nature, where a dog roams, and every morning a gardener comes to tend it and direct its growth. This work is all about sensitivity to place, to growth, to plants, to soil, with no designated master. In his solo show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (2015) Huyghe's has built the Rainmaker and the smog cloud, which welcomed the visitors to the museum with a blast of rain, washing clean the museum plaza. To me, Huyghe's work echoes Heller and Hefetz's Rainfall Region and its preoccupation with water and aridity. In the comprehensive exhibition, Vegetation as a Political Agent, at PAV in Turin, during 2014, cotton and coffee represented not only plant-based raw materials for the production of global commodities, but also the history of slavery and subjugation. Exhibitions such as these attest to the unmasking of the agricultural ideal, or, in the words of S. Yizhar in the last pages of Tsalhabim: "There's no more field. The field is gone [...] this solitary plain stretching from horizon to horizon,



where the sun rises and sets, the way it always has been since the world began [...] its magic is gone, done."

[.Score Weather\) Untitled :1 Acte ,Scintillante Expedition'L\) פייר וויג. \[10\]](#)
[באדיבות האמן וגלריית מריאן גודמן. 2002](#)



[11]Pierre Huyghe, L'Expedition Scintillante, Acte 1: Untitled (Weather Score)
2002. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

- [1.](#) Bulbo: Light for Food Web site
- [2.](#) Efrat Hildesheim, Guerilla Gardening and the Multitude, History and Theory: the Protocols ,Bezalel, Issue # 26 ,2012.
- [3.](#) Yuval Noah Harari, Sapience, first published in Hebrew in Israel by Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, Tel Aviv, 2011, chapter 6
- [4.](#) See catalog essay, Agro-Art: Contemporary Agriculture in Israeli Art. Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2015. Curator: Tali Tamir. Museum curator: Drorit Gur-Arie.
- [5.](#) S. Yizhar, Tsalhabim, Zmora Bitan publishers, 1993, pp. 163.

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