

Who Wants To Be An Impatient Gardener (!?)

A project by Pep Vidal

Curated by Xavier Acarín

Abrons Arts Center, New York
November 25 – December 26, 2017

ADN Gallery, Barcelona
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Opening Reception, 6-9pm, December 2,
2017

Conversation talk with Dr. Diana Reese, Pep
Vidal, and Xavier Acarín, 6.30pm, December
13, 2017

In order to import plants to the United States, one has to be sure to meet a series of requirements, concerning size, variety of species, origin, and in some cases, the type of treatment administered. Plants cannot travel with dirt, as this might contain microorganisms that could be dangerous for the ecosystems in this part of the planet. One must present the pertinent documentation and permits, both from the country of origin as well as from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To this end, each plant has to be adequately identified with a phytosanitary certificate following the appropriate legislation for each country. Additionally, there are restrictions on certain species that make it impossible to import them. Special attention is given to vegetables and fruits, citrus, apples, potatoes, and bamboo, as in a majority of cases these carry insects that could damage local crops. One of the cases mentioned on a U.S. customs information sheet is the introduction of the Mediterranean fruit fly in California during the eighties. What they don't explain is how, in reality, this was part of a bio-terrorist attack perpetuated by an environmental group called *The Breeders* in retaliation against the indiscriminate spraying of crops with a hazardous pesticide. This situation ended up inciting new legislation by the state of California limiting the use of pesticides and typifying the introduction of foreign insects as a criminal act. There are other, better-known and more recent cases, which are perhaps even more appropriate for the current state of globalization, that will lead us to consider biological war as the alteration of ecosystems by the artificial introduction of foreign entities. In any case, we can denote a system of interrelations, compounded by elements that act and influence each other.

At the end of the sixties, an interest in systems theory and cybernetics emerged in the art field. This exercised a distancing of the artistic object as an individual and isolated element, placing it in a present continuum according to the canons of modern aesthetics, and offered an opportunity to research at an artistic level social and technological connectivity, with the intentionality of counter-culture. In this manner, art experimented with modes of transmission and interaction with a certain tenacity to transgress, notable not only at experiential levels, but also at the level of academia and discipline. The combination of science and art mobilized a questioning of the models of knowledge and conduct. New approaches to participation,

feedback, mutability, and behavior were applied to developed systems and processes of shared creativity, with the potential to alter the people participating in these networks, and with them, achieve social change and an opening of minds. The relationality exercised by these types of connectivity incorporated a non-hierarchical fluidity, drawing a new ecology shared by all participating agents. This fact assumed a distinct approach to knowledge, as it places the object of study within an intricate network of factors and variability. The search for measuring and evaluation methods needs to consider this flexibility, something that is relevant for different disciplines, including the humanities and the arts, as well as the sciences.

Although counter-culture optimism regarding human beings and their harmony with the environment is well behind us,¹ it is also true that several crises have positioned humanity as a whole in need of developing new systems of socio-ecological relations. These are needed to improve efficiency and to imagine sustainable forms of management, governance, production, and use of resources, guaranteeing maximum bio-diversity in the age of the Anthropocene. That is to say, the time when geological and environmental alteration of the earth has already crystalized. At the same time that neoliberal globalization determines a type of relationships based on force and exploitation, it also marks a material connectivity that unites elements from different parts of the world. Yet, this connection is restricted to production and consumption, and is, of course, opposed to the intentionality mentioned earlier.

Contemporary art has been defined as a regime that celebrates indeterminacy, an open-system of knowledge that articulates sensibility and sensorial ability. Nevertheless, sometimes these processes are framed as exterior forms that place artists and their work on a thematic plane, assuming the functions of a passive art, even decorative if you will. This is a critique of contemporary art in its structures of meaning, and also in its logistical operation; both dimensions owe a lot to neoliberal marketing, as well as to the capital fluxes typical of the financial system. Although contemporary art aims to critique these structures of power, it actually takes advantage of the same channels it criticizes, as they provide a greater economic benefit. A sincere change of paradigm towards a sustainable production will have to assume forms of production, distribution, and presentation that minimize the aggressive impact and existing inequalities, providing a space for a new human ecology.

This project started in September 2016, when Vidal bought the entire stock of a plant store in Barcelona's Gràcia neighborhood. His goal was to measure the variations and interactions of more than 300 plants, evaluating, among other factors, their surface, volume, color, humidity, and light. Vidal soon realized that each plant required a distinct watering schedule. He developed his research in collaboration with his colleagues at the optics group in the physics department at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. By using lasers to measure the cells'

¹ In a certain way, hippy utopia, which favored the interconnection of groups through sex and other forms of communication, was an application of systems theory. This caused the resurgence of moral dynamics typical of North-American middle classes of the sixties and seventies, frustrating any expectation of cultural regeneration.

composition and the water accumulation in leaves, Vidal and his colleagues are developing a methodology with several potential applications, from the early detection of diseases to sustainable agricultural systems. This research is currently being developed in partnership with other institutions, including the Botanical Institute of Barcelona. The team will soon publish the results in various scientific journals.

Now, a new phase of Vidal's project will be presented simultaneously at ADN Gallery in Barcelona and the Abrons Arts Center in New York. This presentation started off with the idea of importing all the plants in the project to the United States, which prompted a broad effort to process all the required paperwork through the usual bureaucratic procedures required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and their Spanish counterparts. The fate of this process remains uncertain, as there are multiple factors, both biological and legal, that could potentially disrupt the transportation of the plants. This branch of the project points to a system of intricate relations between entities that conform to a globalized network of mobility and transportation. Airplanes, phytosanitary certificates, e-mails, cardboard boxes, government officials, the departments of agriculture of both administrations, courier services, plant species, and the streets of Barcelona and New York are connected in an entanglement that is activated by this project. Vidal's interest in systems and their performance underlines an artistic attention to networks and their fluctuations.

In addition, the exhibition presents a series of drawings made by Pep Vidal during an artist residency in Croatia. These employ scientific graphic principles in artistic configurations and serve as citations for the conceptual interests that resonate in the project, mainly occupying representations of systems and the borders of entities, either biological or atmospheric. In any case, these are landscapes that connects us to a certain visual tradition of depicting signs and magical elements. Amidst these drawings there is a grid piece, entitled *Measuring Corner*, its presence transforms the gallery into a measuring chamber, where walls and floor work as the calculation planes x, y, and z. Here, the overall concern of the project with systems and measurements is not only depicted but also enacted as the gallery becomes a scientific tool. Other elements, such as a homemade perfume using dead flowers from the plants and legal documents that detail all the information relevant to the transportation of plants into the United States, are also included in the exhibition.

Beyond the possible application of the scientific research related to the project, the interest in finding a precise system of measurement also has implications within the art field. This effort suggests a proximity to the object of study that looks for synchronicity, for a lateral – as opposed to vertical hierarchy, – which implies a recognition of relationships within the environment, between the human and the non-human. Its plastic and performative articulation leads us to consider the possibility of finding other types of social and political connection.

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