

# Reviews

## Gardens of a Colonial Present

Ron Benner. *Gardens of a Colonial Present*.  
London: Museum London, 2008, 184 pp.

THE HYBRIDITY of *Gardens of a Colonial Present* perfectly suits the themes and practices of its subject, artist/activist Ron Benner. At once a catalogue, monograph and anthology, it gives an overview of the extensive and impassioned career of an artist who himself crosses media, disciplines and cultures. In-depth, interpretive essays by curators and critics, as well as by an anthropologist, geographer and geneticist, centre on a series of the artist's major garden projects from 1984 to the present, while at the same time extending the discussion to environmental politics, neo-colonialist science, and predatory agribusiness. The hybrid strategy works impressively well in this publication, for Benner's practice engages composite narratives and a diversity of aesthetic and activist concerns. Legitimation from the artworld is only a partial motivation. Equally important is the artist's interest in consolidating information about food, plants and their cultural context, and articulating provocations in the public sphere. For Benner, the garden is not only a medium for his work, it also serves, in Scott Toguri McFarlane's words, as an "historical document and ethical injunction" (133).

Now that ecological art has become an established genre, it is important to reconsider the work of its pioneers. Even though he is a generation younger, Benner deserves to be grouped with other initiators of environmentally-informed activist art, such as Helen and Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist and Mierle Ladermen Ukeles. His work exemplifies the role of the artist-researcher long before it became a fashionable moniker. It is also important to note Benner's position as a pioneer in installation, intervention and site-specific practices. In terms of the lyricism and romanticism of recent eco-art, Benner upholds a distinctly refreshing rigour. If conceptual and activist strategies bear the tendency to become didactic, Benner astutely avoids this by (literally) grounding his work in organisms embedded in the soil. Through the juxtaposition of photography, text and plants, Benner's work persuasively addresses the issue of industrialized agriculture on several registers: representation, ideology and matter itself. The natural exuberance of plants that he carefully selects, arranges and often cultivates over several years intensifies the works' effectiveness—providing a tangible, living argument about the fragility of the world's botanical heritage.

In interrogating the assumptions of bioengineering, the commercialization of plants and the

continuation of imperialism through food distribution, Benner's gardens offer a corrective to the misinformation and hype propagated by the food industry. For instance, Joe Cummins' case study in this volume, responding to the artists' *Trans/mission: Papaya Vectors* (1998), usefully details the real costs and escalating consequences of introducing genetically-modified papaya. While the fruit may be more resistant to virus, genetic modification also nullifies its medicinal properties (making the population more susceptible to intestinal parasites), contaminates surrounding, non-GM papaya trees (subjecting farmers to lawsuits and economic sanctions), and threatens the long-term viability of the ecosystem (increasing the presence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and fungi). Critiques such as this are a forte of Benner's works, yet there is an affirmative dimension that is equally significant, as Matthew Teitelbaum notes (35). Parallel to the admonishment the artworks render against multinationals, there exists an acknowledgment of indigenous peoples' contribution to the world's nutritional well-being, as well as a championing for their right to share in the economic benefits that thousands of years of farming has produced. *Gardens of a Colonial Present* elucidates the full complexity of Benner's practice and, in particular, its notable balance between generosity and criticality.

Jim Drobnick

## Public Art: The Kitsch and the Subtle

Cher Krause Knight. *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*.  
Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 208 pp.

*Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Annie G erin and James S. McLean.  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 336 pp.

ASSESSING PUBLIC art is a laborious task, inasmuch as it presupposes working definitions of "public" and "art" in an era witnessing the erosion of public communicability and responsibility, on the one hand, and the explosion of hyper-mediated art and design cultures, on the other. It is thus that Cher Krause Knight, in *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, proffers several, at times conflicting, definitions of public art, as that which is physically and intellectually accessible, immersive and experiential, controversial, and/or simply "fun." Knight admonishes governments for taking a path of least resistance in commissioning assuredly non-offensive, "bland" works of art, suggesting that they should instead "welcome discord," which, in the words of Erika Doss, is both "healthy and hopeful" (20). But if this seems to invite a controversy-courting definition of public art, her final, prescriptive example is Chicago's touristy *Cloud Gate*: "People take pictures, laugh at their distorted reflections, 'enter' under its 12-foot arch and lie on the ground to marvel at the view..." (154). On the whole, Knight's response to the problems inherent to (the definition of) public art tends towards the celebration of whatever is enjoyed by diverse audiences.

While it would be easy to dismiss this as a too easy populism, it seems no less problematic to merely reverse one's priorities in celebrating works that self-reflexively politicize themselves and the spaces each inhabits, as, for instance, did Richard Serra's infamous and oft-discussed *Tilted Arc* (1981). An interventionist work like this might garner a lot of press and fierce debate, but not all communication is commendable—particularly when it polarizes and leaves interlocutors at