Guerrilla Grafters
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Abstract
The Guerrilla Grafters graft fruit bearing branches onto non-fruit bearing, ornamental fruit trees. Over time, delicious, nutritious fruit is made available to urban residents through these grafts. We aim to prove that a culture of care can be cultivated from the ground up. We aim to turn city streets into food forests, and unravel civilization one branch at a time.

This project is, at its heart, a simple rehearsed gesture: a graft. This gesture is so demonstrative that it also generates discursive theater as described by Augusto Boal, and social sculpture as described by Joseph Beuys. We are in the process of developing an online map but in San Francisco, where city agencies denounce such generative acts of resiliency and sweetness, what kinds of information about these branches will ensure that they bear fruit?

Keywords
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Disruptions that lead to flourishing connections across difference
Guerrilla Grafters (guerrillagrafters.org) graft ornamental tree branches with fruiting branches on city streets. Over time, sterile plum, pear and cherry trees grow branches that bear a diversity of delicious fruit varietals well adapted to a city’s microclimates. The small, micro gesture of grafting a fruiting branch onto a sterile tree matches a grand, macro gesture of transforming the city away from being a space of sterility and scarcity. The city, as pinnacle of civilization, with its resource drain and resultant stratification, can be grafted with flourishing ecosystems and diverse relations to become the site of a post-civilized mode of being where nature and culture reconvene: wild, collaborative, and productive. [1]

Guerrilla Grafters disrupt the binary of public and private in the city to usher in new relations — between various human and non-human fruit eaters, between pollinators and flowers, between property owners and fruit eaters. When a city street tree is grafted with viable fruit, a diversity of pollinators, birds and small critters may reveal themselves in and around the trees; to this, we say let’s erect a hawk or an owl pole and bring in a keystone species. Fruit may fall and if we create more permeable surface around the tree we might create richer soil for plants like comfrey, yarrow and clover that can nourish the tree through nitrogen fixation and biomass. Underplanting can also help to sequester urban pollutants and keep them in the soil. And so a simple gesture can be the beginning of the restoration of ecosystems in our midst, enabling the conception of the urban environment itself as a renewable ecosystem. This work disrupts with a proposal for an unconfined urban commons.

Disruptions that lead to disembodied sites of non-care
More controllable urban agriculture projects, which are more easily contained in areas deemed distinctly public or distinctly private can be understood in contrast to the kinds of commons that result from the generative gesture of the...
graft. Also, vulnerabilities across different kinds of commons emerge when information becomes fully public and thus easily accessible. In the gestation period of our project, we had numerous embodied and disembodied challenges from San Francisco city agencies that resulted in a more nuanced approach to documenting the activities of grafters and the condition of the grafted trees. The project has been very popular in the minds of Bay Area residents. We like to attribute the popular press Guerrilla Grafters have received to the simplicity of the idea; through a simple graft, fruit is available to city dwellers. Some city agencies however, have been less approving. Though many reporters have been careful not to disclose the locations of our grafts, some photographs and reportage made it easy to figure out the locations of a selection of the trees we grafted. Because of this, a number of trees we grafted in a downtown location were brutally cut back presumably by the San Francisco Department of Public Works one year. These trees were so severely pruned that some of them contracted diseases due to weakness and have not recovered. In essence, our attachment sites, both disruptive and generative sites of fruitfulness and care, were turned into detachment sites of non-care.

Guerrilla Grafters

Figure 2. Guerrilla Grafters logo.

This event spurred numerous conversations among core grafters; we considered the non-representational means of organizing on the ground and the web based connections that are made online. The non-representational means of organizing on the ground is fluid and not necessarily documented. Local connections establish networks of trust. Care, which Donna Haraway defines as the “... obligation of and capacity for responsive attentiveness,” [2] can be established through neighborly connections because sociality begins to be built around the action and proximity to the tree. But research, as well empowering urban grafters globally, are also critical goals of the Guerrilla Grafters project, and these goals benefit from digital networks that encourage novice grafters and applications that can track the success of varieties in various microclimates.

This tension between local trust networks and digitally distributed ones is not new; it is often drawn out in endeavors where the commons take root and where potentially sensitive information is established. Representation and visibility seem critical to the momentum of projects that seek involvement and that aim to move beyond the sphere of public and private, and yet can also make them vulnerable to agendas of property and ownership. Part of the work of the Guerrilla Grafters is to expose the reach of support for an urban commons.

Sites of contestation and exchange

These direct and indirect relations become a kind of participatory theater around this graft, this proposal for free and accessible fruit. The guerrilla graft is the kind of art practice that upsets preconceived balances and purposefully toys with a frame in order to intensify the focus on each aspect of the project including the responses to the gesture of the graft and the resultant proposal for free fruit. So if city agencies declare this work an act of vandalism, this declaration becomes a part of the performance, and subject for analysis. Rather than our position only being brought into a set of legal and capitalistic narratives, we bring them into our story, our play. Indeed, the gesture of the graft invokes a celebration and a fight. There is a collective “yes” that emerges from the idea of ingesting one’s city and engaging it in ways that do not involve having to make a purchase, and a resounding “no” that emerges from departments in the city revealing themselves to be in service to the mechanisms of ownership and profit.

We can thus understand the gesture of the graft as generating what Augusto Boal called discursive theater. Boal proposes a kind of theater for the people that collapses the prosenium and uses sites of daily life as the stage. Boal sees that this kind of theater never ends and is a kind of continual rehearsal. In this kind of theater we ask how we can rehearse a different world. “Contrary to bourgeois code of manners,” says Boal, “the people’s code allows and encourages the spectator to ask questions, to dialog, to participate.” [3] In this kind of theater, we see tension and fights as being class commentary. The better the fights, the more passionate the positions, the better we have done our jobs. It makes all involved an artist and a performer.

Importantly, much of this theater happens in the imagination. We imagine the graft bearing fruit when we attach green wood…. Disembodied bureaucrats in the mediascape imagine a civilized member of society slipping on cherries that have fallen on the sidewalk amidst homeless getting munched on by rats and dying of the plague. Guerrilla Grafters argue that these specters are meant to turn us away from an engagement with the landscape of our city and each other. We celebrate these unrealized utopias and dystopias as part of our theater, but it is unfortunate when these imaginings result material disconnections, and detachments. We imagine an encounter with difference that could be an encounter of repair....

The practice of guerrilla grafting is a performance of abundance that in effect reveals the legally sanctioned performance of scarcity that we participate in daily in the US, and forms a background for the contestation about what the city should be, and who may or may not benefit. The material graft, the connection between fruit bearing branch and sterile tree can also be seen as what Joseph Beuys calls “Social Sculpture.” In this way, the graft is a material art object that results in resource and information exchanges; we understand these exchanges to fold nature and culture.

Distributed relationships, resiliency and the politics of visibility

Distributed relationships have the potential to facilitate commons management in ways that can usher us from scarcity to abundance, from the bare sidewalk to the informative graffiti tag, from non-art to art and create platforms...
for challenging what urban art, urban health, and urban foodscape can look like. Distributed relationships can be understood both on local and global levels. The coordination of events and scion trades, easily disseminated grafting kits, education and documentation encourages commons management on the local level. Digital networks can facilitate a call to action in terms of tree identification, grafting, oversight and gleaning for local groups worldwide. But as we have outlined, these same networks make the sites of our grafts vulnerable to damage. We would like to think that through information design and networks of care, trees will be looked after, fruit will be distributed properly, and people will have the guidance to not only watch their step, but to identify the tasty varietal that is hanging overhead.

How can non-representational means of organizing on the ground be combined with the web based connections that are made online so that sensitive information stays safe? How can online maps and documentation systems be juxtaposed against analog, or less trackable and more distributed forms of connection? Just as urban commons practices elude the divide between public and private, information about these new ecosystems — information about grafts and fruit especially — cannot be understood as either wholly public or wholly private. A politic of radical openness and transparency, which is so often advocated for in spheres that value commoning and horizontality, can be detrimental when powerful vertical forces are at work to thwart these efforts and maintain the status quo. [4]

We collaborate with Falling Fruit (fallingfruit.org) to provide a map that shares the location of graftable trees, but not the location of grafts, to anyone on the internet. Encrypting data about the grafts themselves with a private key allows us to deepen networks of trust and care through coordination and research collection. In 2015 we are also researching and developing a process of embedding hidden RFID in our grafts so that neighbors and researchers alike can access information about grafted varietals in their midst. We invite messy, rebellious solutions to the ways information can be shared for the purposes of expanding the urban commons in ways that simultaneously collapse binaries between public and private, nature and culture.

**References**


**Author Biographies**

Margaretha Haughwout is currently a Senior Lecturer at California College of the Arts. Her new media art practice and pedagogy explore the implications of cybernetic worldview.

Tara Hui spends her time chipping away at hardened dogma, creating cracks for solutions to emerge. Her work is featured in many books about sustainability and urban permaculture.

Ian Pollock is an Assistant Professor of Art at California State University, East Bay. His work with communications technologies is featured in several anthologies of digital media art.