

PLANTASIA OIL Co.: Gardens in the Age of Petrocapitalism

Garden and landscape design have had an essential aesthetic role in the history of art and architecture. The role of personal gardens has, however, taken new significance in these last two years. Facing the escalating environmental crisis and confined to an ongoing lockdown, gardens have become heterotopias for living amid a broken world. Divested from modernist aesthetics, gardens in contemporary art iterate today between utopia and dystopia, countering the illusion of progress, future, and newness by providing the possibility of another, different place. This possibility does not lie in gardens being idealized sites, but alternative spaces that stand in for the potentiality of nature. That is not a defined idea of the natural as supreme, but as a space for mirroring an embodied return to nature.

In underscoring the unnaturalness of modern and urban gardens, Ecuadorian artist Adrián Balseca's new project *PLANTASIA OIL Co.* provides us with the idea of the garden as a heterotopia that grows within the waste produced by the very oil economy that erected cities as monuments of Modernity. As a heterotopian space, Balseca's garden presents both a dystopian view of modern destruction while also hinting at nature's replenishing capacity in a way that underscores the many contradictions of our modern relationship to nature. Since the modern ethos is now evidently in decline, its long-standing crisis calls for new forms of relationality and engagement with the natural, one that ultimately can start in the personal garden as it helps redefine the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Accounting for the complexities of modern life, heterotopias, explains Foucault, are sites that contest the normative spaces of urban

development. (Foucault 1986, p. 22-7) These places, however, are not simply sites of resistance but places of incommensurability and contradiction. While one can read many places as being heterotopic, the precariousness of the city today has transformed personal gardens into sites of relief within the equally encroaching domestic realm.

Erected from the oil booms of the twentieth century, Latin American urban sprawls were, moreover, the result of a modern ideology, which not only sought social distribution and management but also wanted to suppress man's nature and nature itself. Introduced within the public sphere of the modern city, gardens and landscapes in the urban space have responded to a picturesque notion of nature as untamable, where they have been preserved and arranged in exoticized motifs for uplifting the modern city with its hotels, malls, university campuses, and other emblems of enlightenment thinking and progress. Since cities represent today's suffocating realities of precarity, environmental violence, and inequality, Balseca's garden brings to bear how not the tropics but their representation has historically played a role in the notion of modern development that has proven today to be unsustainable.

The collection of native plant species from the Amazon that make up the installation does not, however, emulate the botanical interest that renowned modern landscape architects and designers developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precisely to fuel the modernist ethos. Rather, the artist has brought them to rewild the metal scraps, tins, and waste that petromodernism has left behind. Planted on cans of motor oil and industrial lubricant, pesticides, and cleaning solvent from transnational corporations like Texaco Inc., Shell, Chevron Co., Gulf Oil, Mobil, or local Petroecuador, among others, this garden grows as a form of accountability against the deforestation,

contamination, and extractivism that has been destroying the Amazon. Furthermore, the planting of Caucho, Balsa, Cacao, Chuchuhuasi, Guayacán, Guayusa, Quina, and other exploited resources from the Amazon, calls into question the idea of tropical nature as a mere trope of modernism in the global south. Challenging the idea of tropical nature as a resource, as an image, or as a stereotype, *PLANTASIA OIL Co.* poses the possibility of plant resilience and multi-species thriving as we envision and embody petromodernist ruins.

Beside *PLANTASIA OIL Co.*, the exhibition project can be approached and examined as a research initiative that focuses on gardens and plants while exploring archives and visual stories about changing land, deforestation, fires, destruction, and executions. To give a fuller context and to visually show the history of oil extraction in Ecuador alongside Balseca's works, the exhibition presents eighty photographic slides from the organization Clínica Ambiental that in collaboration with *Archivo Visual Amazónico*, which narrates the destructive effects of transnational corporations on Ecuadorian territory between 1987 and 1992. When discussing oil extraction and deforestation there are multiple relations and complex histories that position the extractivist activity *vis-á-vis* the local context. Oil extraction in Ecuador has not only had an impact on the environment, health, and disruption of native communities, but also played a major role in entangling power relations between the state, corporations, and indigenous groups amid a complex system of interests.

In that sense, the installation addresses environmental destruction by challenging what historian David Arnold termed *Tropicality*, referring to the very representation of the "tropical landscape" as the exoticising view of nature as untamed wilderness

awaiting to be discovered. (Arnold 2000, p. 6-18; Stepan 2001, p. 13) The end result of “tropicality” is now evident in the way in which *Archivo Visual Amazónico*, presented alongside Balseca’s installation, demonstrates the damaging consequences of representing the natural as a rare and yet interminable resource or landscape. Thus, the installation is made to represent an interior garden that consists of endemic vegetation planted in modified tins. In this view, the artist’s new take on the garden’s unnaturalness invites in new forms of being among plants, among life intelligence, and away from over “naturalist” representation of nature and the exoticization of the tropics.

While Ecuador has been extracting oil since the late nineteenth century in various parts of the country, including the Pacific Ocean, it was not until 1960 that they found its largest oil reserve in the Amazon. This discovery marked an important year, for it would signify the start of the nation's first “oil boom” that lasted from 1972 until 1982. The massive extraction of oil —some would say— catapulted the country into decades of economic prosperity and modernization. While the “oil boom” technically only lasted into the 1990s, the petroleum era determined much of the construction of the nation's modern identity. Since the beginning of oil exploitation, oil companies have extracted more than two billion barrels of crude oil from the Ecuadorian Amazon and have created billions of gallons of untreated wastes, gas, and crude oil that has been released into the environment. According to a study conducted by the Government of Ecuador in 1989, spills from the flow-lines that connect the wells to the stations were dumping an estimated 20,000 gallons of oil every two weeks. (San Sebastián, M. and Hurtig, A.K, 2004, p. 205-211)

That is why in thinking against the grain of the nation state and of modernity, personal gardens like Balseca's *PLANTASIA OIL Co.*, while bringing to bear the close relationship between Amazonian biodiversity and the oil industry, nevertheless provides another way of relating to diminishing landscapes everywhere. By offering a form of gardening that also contests the very narrative of destruction, the installation's heterotopian character enables an alternative to the natural that does not idealize it nor casts it as an expression of an "savage wilderness." As a garden that needs to be planted and cared for during the length of the show, this heterotopia, amid urban sprawls and modern ruins, invites us to kneel, to work, to care, to appreciate the fleeting nature of the environment around us. In that sense *Archivo Visual Amazónico* serves as testament and memory to the devastating consequences of human-made utopias, but altogether, the juxtaposition weighs the destructive capacity of man against the equally powerful capacity of nature to adapt and thrive, even though these processes may not match human scale or temporalities.

Collective Rewilding

Collective Rewilding is a curatorial laboratory for constructing assemblages of views, temporalities, and peoples so that the "exhibition site" can become a new materialist space for becoming with others - that is of repositioning the human among other non-human actants. To situate ourselves *vis-à-vis* each other, other-than-human beings, and our multiple yet disparate emergent social concerns, however, requires not only a reconfiguration of our geopolitical position but more urgently a becoming with that accounts for a multi-species, feminist and decolonial ontology. Convened to think about

platforms for unlearning, we suggest critical new examinations and optical perspectives that can help us unpack histories of resistance, knowledge exchange, and networks of artistic solidarity against colonial and Anthropocenic structures of power. In that sense, our methods always ask where and with whom are we doing the looking? From what position and perspective are we orienting our thinking, and how can art and artistic spaces help us enter into assemblages with a fragmented environment and a precarious world?

The collective is made up by Sara Garzón, Ameli Klein, and Sabina Oroshi.

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