GREEN ACRES:
ARTISTS FARMING FIELDS, GREENHOUSES AND ABANDONED LOTS
CINCINNATI

Green Acres, curated by Sue Spaid for the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati [September 22, 2012–January 20, 2013], is a smart and thoughtful exhibition that includes works by Kim Abeles, Agnes Denes, Dan Devine, Field Faring, Futurefarmers, Anya Gallaccio, Avital Geva, Lonnie Graham, Harrison Studio, Mei Ling Hsing, Homeadow Song, Patricia Johnson, Sakarin Krue-On, J.J. McCracken, Matthew Moore, N55, Permacanic Eco Garden, Mara Adanitiz Scrupe, Bonnie Ora Sherk, Asa Sonjasdottir, Susan Leibowitz Steinman, Tatffoo Tan, and Shannon Young. Green Acres follows two other related exhibitions at the CAC. In 2002, Spaid and Amy Lipton curated Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies for the CAC; and in 2007, the CAC mounted Stephanie Smith’s Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art. Whereas Ecovention and Beyond Green focused on ecological concerns and smart, eco-friendly design, Green Acres is concerned specifically with farming as art/activism.

An important component of this exhibition was the Satellite Projects: urban farms situated throughout the greater Cincinnati area were directed and organized by artists, often in cooperation with local community organizations. These interventions, many of them situated in abandoned lots, transformed what was otherwise a bleak urban landscape. Local artists Vickie Mansoor, Peter Huttinger, and Karen Egan/Homeadow Song produced A Bundle of Sticks, which documented the holistic remediation of Homeadow Song’s orchard and included the building of a bioswale, a shallow landscaped ditch created to manage rainwater runoff in the orchard. Permacanic Co. planted a flourishing garden in an abandoned lot, Red Bank PawPaw Circle, by Susanne Cockrell and Ted Purves, included a “sculpture” made from pawpaw trees and edible plants. The traffic island, situated at the intersection of Red Bank Road, Erie Avenue, and Brocherton Court, was already the site of the Madisonville Foraging Project, hence the importance of an edible “sculpture” from which food could be foraged. At Findlay Market on Sundays, the Danish Collective N55’s customized XYZ Cincinnati Community Vehicles were made available to move plants, tools, and supplies between the different CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) microplots in the city’s downtown. At Fountain Square, Shannon Young planted a mobile farm in repurposed grocery carts. Produce from the mobile farm and the Permacanic Co. garden was then sold at the CAC.

With its emphasis on sustainable farming and community building, Green Acres seems to hark back to the utopian, anti-commercial work of the late 60s and early 70s. Spaid makes that connection in the catalog, arguing that the earth/land art movement of the 60s made possible the idea of farming as art. The exhibition sited at the CAC included documentation—or, in some cases, re-creations—of pioneering art farm work. New installations of two farm model prototypes created by Harrison Studios/Newton and Helen Harrisons’ Survival Series (1970–1973, 1974/2012) were showcased in Green Acres. Flat Pastures (Survival Piece #6, Part 1) and Upright Pastures (Survival Piece #6, Part 2), a section of the Harrisons’ exhibition Full Farm (1974), originally commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston for 10, the inaugural exhibition for the museum’s Gunnar Birkerts-designed building. According to a description (posted by the Harrisons on their website), when Full Farm was first shown in 10, the potato patch was attacked by blight, marijuana was guerilla-planted in the upright pastures, and peyote grew in the flat pastures. For the CAC, only lettuce and beans grew in the Harrisons’ planters. During 1982, Agnes Denes planted a field of wheat in a vacant lot in New York City and went on to sell her Lower Manhattan harvest.

Wheatfield—A Confrontation, along with other works by Denes—Rice/Tree/Burial (1968/2012) and The Book of Dust (1985)—is represented by images that foreground the artificial valuation of land in an urban environment. Still images and videos also represent Bonnie Ora Sherks’s The Farm (1985–1980), a farm performance piece that transformed a barren freeway overpass into a working farm. One of the first prototypes for an urban farm that was both ethnically and bio-diverse, Sherks farm, which included a farmhouse, theater, library, darkroom, and a future café, was eventually absorbed by the city as a park. Patricia Johnson’s never-realized plans for urban gardens, suggesting the simultaneously practical and utopian potential of making artist farms, provide the centerpiece of this exhibition. The Harrisons’ models for self-contained farming, Sherks’ community farm prototypes, and Johnson’s designs for a garbage garden and a cornfield anticipate projects included in Green Acres such as Susan Leibowitz Steinman’s OE (Equal Opportunity Eating) POP-UPS (2012), a DIY model that included farming equipment and photographic documentation that demonstrated how to make a sustainable and edible art installation. Sherks subsequent creation of a living library has affinities with Mara Adanitiz Scrupes beautifully produced artists’ books based on plant science, and photographer Lonnie Graham’s documentation of the African American Garden Project, two public garden plots in Pittsburg’s Homewood area that have sister gardens in Kenya.

The work in Green Acres also speaks to a desire to subvert global capitalism with local community initiatives while actively—and artistically—”performing” farming interventions and ritualistic actions. Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lortschaiprasser’s the land (1998–) is a working farm that doubles as an experimental laboratory and building site for installation art. Located in Thailand, the land is constantly in need of maintenance, a testament to the willingness of its residents to maintain it. Tatffoo Tan, who creates mobile gardens that he transports while wearing a paratrooper jumpsuit, is represented by his jumpsuit, as well as his S.O.S. (Sustainable Organic Steward) soil samples. In J.J. McCracken’s geophagic performance, clay-drenched women ate clay cast into the shape of vegetables. The performance, part of McCrackanis’s Hunger: Philadelphia (2010) project, is a visually compelling reminder that even in a wealthy American city where there is an abundance of food, there is also a continuing scarcity of resources.

Green Acres will travel to the Arlington Arts Center and American University’s Museum at the Katzen Arts Center. It will include Douglas Retzlis’s Gould Palace, an outdoor sculpture park/meeting place of structures supporting gourd vines.

—Jennie Klein