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COMMON GROUND: PROJECTS FOR THE LAGOON

**Projects by di Marjetica Potrč, Marguerite Kahrl
and the students of the Degree in Visual Arts / IUAV University of Venice**

Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation
Palazzetto Tito, Dorsoduro 2826, Venice
11 April 2010 – 16 May 2010

***Water Water Everywhere?* Lucy R. Lippard**

With sea levels rising and drinking water decreasing, Samuel Coleridge's warning, "Water water everywhere, nor any drop to drink," is becoming a reality in Venice. The rainwater catchment system that is explored for *Common Ground: Projects for the Lagoon* addresses this situation, which is, of course, linked to endless other aspects of Venetian (and global) existence. With the hot breath of climate chaos breathing down our necks, the project Marjetica Potrč and Marguerite Kahrl have designed for the Azienda Agricola Finotello on Sant'Erasmo Island offers artists an opportunity to engage with water – the bottom line of life on this planet. Among Vandana Shiva's list of nine things everyone should know about water are: water is nature's gift, essential to life, and all life is interconnected through water; and water is a common good and must be free and conserved. The key is always local. Without a sense of experience in a place, environmental art and activism are just generalizations. They float, they can't take root.

Potrč and Kahrl are among the pioneers of a new kind of useful, even utilitarian, art. They are not decorating our living rooms; they are not weaving rugs; they are not designing furniture or gardens. They look deeply into the lives and needs of people and places and use their art to model, teach and invent new solutions for age-old problems. They are committed to sustainability – a word that means survival and that has become a mantra for a world in trouble. By taking on issues as basic as water, energy, urban infrastructure and farming, Potrč and Kahrl bring art closer to life. As Fluxus artist Robert Filliou once quipped, "Art is what makes life more interesting than art." It has become a truism to say that art frames the way we see, but it is one that is always worth repeating, because this is precisely artists' most significant social contribution. If we learn to see, we can act.

Potrč, who has degrees in architecture and fine arts, has for many years been exploring "participatory design", concentrating on place-specific projects and installations that she calls "case studies". In a series of collaborations, she has created a community kitchen and garden in Amsterdam (*The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife, and Their Neighbour*), a solar-powered desalination project for a school's drinking water in the United Arab Emirates, rainwater collection for field irrigation in Spain and a dry toilet for a waterless barrio in Caracas. Kahrl, whose degrees include fine arts and permaculture design, has made similar choices, merging her sculpture practice with such environmentally driven projects as a methane-run vehicle in a New York City landfill and extensive research on industrial hemp, including artificial hemp plants with a "subliminal" audio component that informs the public on the thousands of uses for hemp that could replace petroleum products. As part of the class at IUAV, Kahrl led a workshop in permaculture design that concentrated on water use as well as urban and rural solutions for small communities. Kahrl and Potrč bring to their students in Venice a new framework for what we call art, along with a subtle subversion of the conventional, commercialized notion of art that predominates in what we call the global art "world".



It is no coincidence that Potrč and Kahrl are women. “Eco-art” is an offshoot of 1960s land art, or earthworks, which was dominated by men. Eco-art, on the other hand, has been dominated by women. Frankly, I don’t care if it is nature or nurture that makes us better caretakers than earth movers. We should run with it. Mother Earth needs mothering. As Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been pointing out in her art for the last forty years, maintenance is crucial to sustainability. Waste management is a key component of farming and water provision, and artists are schooling themselves in urban infrastructures – a field not yet taught in art schools. One of Kahrl’s and Potrč’s most important tools is collaboration, which defines so much of their individual and collective work. (The architect Dino Verlato and artist Gaston Ramirez Feltrin were collaborators in the Venice rainwater project.) I see collaboration as an extension of the collage aesthetic, juxtaposing different ideas, images, and positions to form a new whole. Potrč often incorporates tools that are not her own inventions, collaborating with their makers at one remove – finding new uses for existing work rather than “appropriating” it as an artistic game.

For instance, all over the world artists and activists have been creating community gardens in urban and rural settings, looking back to systems that were once taken for granted. What is emerging is a new kind of eco-art that is less focused on huge commissions (such as Patricia Johanson’s impressive \$150 million park and water-recycling facility in Petaluma, California) in favour of ideas that are accessible to anyone with a knack for bricolage. The do-it-yourself (DIY) movement and many non-governmental organizations are spreading the word. Grass-roots action is a particularly appropriate term for this kind of post-colonial art, which addresses the roots of both human lives and ecosystems across disciplines and national boundaries. Such artists operate somewhere between the questions asked by the public and the answers offered by the scientists.

At the Palazzetto Tito, Kahrl’s *Tender Dominion* pairs drawings based on patent applications with an “altar” to water harvesting, using an existing chimney to channel rainwater from the roof. Potrč exhibits drawings: *The Great New Republic of Venice* and *Venice Case Study*. “Relational objects” by students, which were produced with Lucia Babina, are the result of personal discussions between students and local residents and will later be presented as gifts to the residents, emphasizing the fact that people are one of Venice’s sustainable assets. In fact, when these artists look at place, they see the people who live there and the ways their lives must be negotiated with the powers that be – both political and natural. Of particular interest in the way Potrč and Kahrl address real-life issues through art is their concentration on small-scale solutions that can serve as models for larger problems. They often look to more traditional and simpler times for ideas that can now be reinvented and amplified with currently available technology. Kahrl, for instance, makes her busts and puppets from cloth woven of hemp (*canapa* in Italian) many years ago by neighbours in Chiaverano – which ties in to her work on the uses and potential re-legalization of hemp in the United States.

Working with farmers is another key element. Land-based people are rarely consulted as modern agricultural technology barges ahead. As Potrč has said, sustainable solutions that can be implemented and disseminated by communities serve to empower these communities and help create a democracy built from below. At the core of work like Kahrl’s and Potrč’s is the increasingly popular notion of open sourcing – the radical opposite (and opposition) to the appalling global corporate practice of patenting traditional plants and knowledge so that the people whose ancestors developed them over millennia are forbidden to employ them or profit from them. If new information and techniques are shared and available to everyone, they will be far more productive than if they are guarded by the few. Generosity, reciprocity, and long-term thinking are in short supply in conventional twenty-first-century society. Despite a history that might suggest otherwise, art was never meant to be confined behind the doors of the rich. Potrč and Kahrl are literally opening the sources to the rest of us.