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Art and the Greater Good: Ecology and the Leisure Economy

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Masters in Fine Arts  
at Massey University, Wellington,  
New Zealand.

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## Abstract

*Art and the Greater Good: Ecology and the Leisure Economy* is a research project concerned with exploring how one could alternatively address the environmental issues of our day through site-specific art. Central to this investigation has been attending to the ways historical and contemporary accounts of environment politics, site specificity, land and environmental art could resonate within a more modest artistic gesture. The resulting work *Would you go on without me?* reflects the possibility of this by its position in an indeterminate zone; that draws together the demotic, gardening, rainwater harvesting, play and ecology into the manifold of environmental art.



Fig. 1, *Drawing*. October 2009.

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## Introduction

Down in the backblocks of Massey University sits an obscure annexe adjacent to a prefabricated structure used as a life drawing classroom. For quite some time this structure suggested no apparent function, most closely resembling a shed. Remnants of an old swimming pool—now in a state of decline—run along the back wall. Curiously the shed had been built around this former recreational site. Fluctuations in temperature and weather infiltrate the space through the perforations, skylights, rusted holes, gaps, and interstices between the wooden slats of a wall. It straddles in an unusual way two spaces, inside and outside. Weeds also permeate the space, and during its most recent history were in fact its only tenants. At this stage a picnic table, drawing folders and assorted easels were the only remaining evidence of any human presence in this space.

...8 months pass...

The 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 2010, marks a date of departure—now I leave behind traces of my time spent in this obscure space. From the outside there is no indication of any such inhabitation apart from some white pvc piping, diverting any water that falls on the roof of the annexe around the corner and out of sight, to enter into the space somewhere up the back. The traces contained within the space betray the silent presence of a caretaker and a fervent investment in the survival of over 400 potted plants. Although this date is suggestive of an ending, I do not know how exactly how it will all end, it is speculative but ultimately unpredictable...*Would you go on without me?*





Fig. 2-7, Research images of site. July 2009.

The premise of this project can be traced back to its incipient beginnings centred on a desire to collect water. *Would you go on without me?*, was devised as a means to enable an artistic investigation which centres on elevating common but commonly disregarded processes and systems that occur within both the built and natural world. This project sought to distil certain natural phenomenon within a space, to let them unfold over time and to engender a conversation between the aestheticized space of art—scientific methodology—ecology—gardening—and the quotation.

The act of collecting water so easily warrants a concern for a more poignant investigation under the troubling conditions the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents. If so, the aim here is to consider the relevance of this project precisely in the fact that it attains to no greater goal—forgoing any desire to transform, rectify or have some kind of significant impact on public life. This research presents an opportunity to consider the value in employing attributes of ambiguity, frivolousness, modesty, subtlety and amateurism that in turn might appear entirely superfluous in relation to the pressing ecological issues surrounding water.

It seems important to consider how the intentions of this project deviate from the weighty precincts of environmental art, just as there also seems to be a tentative connection. This signals a need to reconsider the discourse of environmental art, for it seems to often be missing the very idiosyncratic qualities that my particular research attempts to embrace. These small moments of discovery or modest gestures can be found in other areas such as the notion of site-specificity, leisure, the everyday and this thesis constitutes in part an attempt to reconsider their how such modalities can be incorporated within environmental art.

## Mediating Site, Non-Site, Off-site

At the beginning of 2009, someone asked the question—and so the proposition was made. “Think of it as if you were being commissioned to produce a work, if you could make a work anywhere in Wellington, where would it be?”

Miwon Kwon’s book *One place after another, Art and locational identity* theoretically drives much of the discussion to the various ways the relationship between site and art comes into contact with this research. It is the aim here to identify the idiosyncratic qualities of this project through her observation that suggests the “phenomenological, social/institutional, and discursive” (2002, p. 30) to be the defining qualities of site-orientated art today. The opening statement insinuates the initial intentions for this work to have a more direct engagement with the people and places of Wellington. Therefore the rationale to locate this work within the university’s parameters is important to consider, through Robert Smithson’s “site/non-site” dialectic. Concurrently the notion of *site* and *non-site* when considered via *Would you go on without me?* argues instead for a different type of artistic positioning by locating and arguing for a space between. It is possible to establish an interstitial site of investigation by drawing together seemingly disparate ideas such as *site* and *non-site* and the indeterminate zone between epic and miniscule and even more significantly between science, art, and play. My concern is ultimately to investigate through a site-based installation how it might be possible to imbricate environmental politics with the artistic languages of the everyday, leisure and the tactical.

In her influential book, *One place after another*, Miwon Kwon considers the transformations that arts relationship to site has taken over the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to better consider what the ‘site’ in site-specific art has come to mean in current artistic practice. Kwon traces the origins to the late 1960’s, where the emergent interest in the phenomenological experience of a work, especially land and

environmental art was a marker of resistance to the commodification of art characterised by the works “indivisible relationship” and analysis of site (2002, p.12). Site-specificity was further considered through the emergence of institutional critique which expanded the idea of site not just through its physical attributes but towards “highlighting the idealist hermeticism of the space of presentation” particularly that of the gallery (2002, p.13). If in the past it was defined by its meticulous interpretation of site or locational frame of the institution Kwon states that today site-specificity has come to encompass a wider and more discursive realm.

The distinguishing characteristic of today’s site-orientated art is the way in which the art work’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate (2002, p. 26).

Kwon’s demonstration of the expanding ‘siting’ of site-specific art through Mark Dion’s project *On Tropical Nature*, 1991, creates an interesting juncture to consider how *Would you go on Without me?* figures within the current rhetoric of site-orientated art. Kwon states that *On Tropical Nature* is located through four sites—an “uninhabited spot in the rainforest near the base of the Orinoco River”—the presentation of the collected specimens (from the first site) in the art space of Sala Mendoza—framed by the third site being “the curatorial framework of the thematic group exhibition”. The forth and most important site was Dion’s intention for the work “to become part of the discourse concerning cultural representations of nature and the global environmental crisis” (2002, p.28).



Fig. 8, Mark Dion, *On Tropical Nature*. 1991.



Fig. 9, Mark Dion collecting for *On Tropical Nature*. 1991.

Mark Dion's work operates across a multitude of sites. Similarly in the case of *Would you go on without me?* three sites can be identified but with markedly different functions. Where *On Tropical Nature* employs a displacement between sites particularly between the first two *Would you go on without me?* diffuses the distinctions between sites. There is also an unmitigated difference in the "locational anchor" that Kwon suggests in Dion's fourth site and the intentions of this project.

The final configuration of *Would you go on without me?* sought to signify the location's physical capacity to ensure the survival of the potted plants. This response conveys one 'site' within the research inquiry—the shed. The roof's surface area, local weather conditions, prediction of rain and structural permeations, all determined the spatial layout, number of barrels, watering system, type and number of plants.

The second 'site' that operates in this work is the university, operating as an institution that socially and physically frames the shed. With this in mind, it seems important to recall a question proposed by Jane Rendell in her book *Art and Architecture, A Place Between*: "How far from the physical fabric of a gallery does a work need to be off-site?" Through José Davila's installation *Temporality is a question of survival*, 2001, Rendell (2006, p. 30) considers how the scaffolding platform erected outside the building, accessed through a window operates as "both a site and a non-site (following Smithson's definition where the gallery is the non-site and the work is the site)".

Connecting back to Jane Rendell's question about the boundaries that pertain to *site* and *non-site*, the fact that this work does not operate outside the institution (physically) it is not conclusively a non-site either. This ambivalence is centred upon the inability to discern exact boundaries of the work. Guided by Robert Smithson's *Dialect of Site and Nonsite*, the shed's perforations diffuse the "closed limits" or "inner coordinates" of the non-site whilst still pertaining to the dialectical relationship to the "open limits" or "outer coordinates" of the

site (1972, cited in Flam, 1996 p. 152). As the interior space is breached by the outside the distinction become harder to ascertain, one cannot help but consider the roof which collects the water or the rain that falls on the roof.

Geographically the shed sits on the cusp of the university, segregated from the main campus on one side by a street and within arm's reach of being off-site on the other. Its dishevelled condition and surroundings renounce the conventional aesthetics of university and studio environments, appearing instead to reside more within the urban fabric of Wellington.

As suggested through the terms of *site* and *non-site*, the shed operates as an interstitial space mediating between inner and outer—but what the shed also introduces is the idea of locating the intentions of the work within an indeterminate zone. Subsequently this leads to the third 'site' in *Would you go on without me?* in relation to what Kwon proposes as the “lasting relationship” or “‘locational’ anchor” (2002, p.28) of a practice engaging with the notion of site. The shed, framed by the university, is subject to the intentions of this artistic pursuit centred on generating an understanding of the environment particularly by enfolding this within everyday pursuits of leisure and amateurism. Thus creating a liminal space of investigation in its position between two seemingly disparate locales—environmental concerns presented in Dion's work but modestly envisioned through the act of gardening.





Fig. 10, A weed growing in the space. December 2009



## The polemic of the Heroic and Grand

When one first hears the word environment, ecology, nature or land coupled with the word art, there seems to be a preordained conception of what it entails which does not reflect the intentions of my own research. This prehistory can be located within the seminal works of the 60's and 70's, expressly those of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Richard Long and Agnes Denes. Ben Tufnell examines this specific legacy in his book, *Land Art*.

Land art betrays the conflicted attitudes of the time towards the earth and the environment. It encompasses the scarring of the landscape, the ecological reclamation of industrially devastated terrain, an impulse towards change and permanence and an attitude of respect, a desire to 'leave no trace' (2006, p.13).

The deserts of Nevada, New Mexico, Utah or Arizona are home to some of the defining works of this period. They represent a position, typically of an indifference to environmental concerns and embodies what Tufnell (2006, p.46) claims an "American attitude".

My idea was to make American art...As long as you are going to make a sculpture, why not make one that competes with a 747, or the Empire State Building, or the Golden Gate Bridge? (Michael Heizer, 1985, cited in Tufnell, 2006, p. 48).



Fig. 11, Michael Heizer. *Double Negative*. 1969.

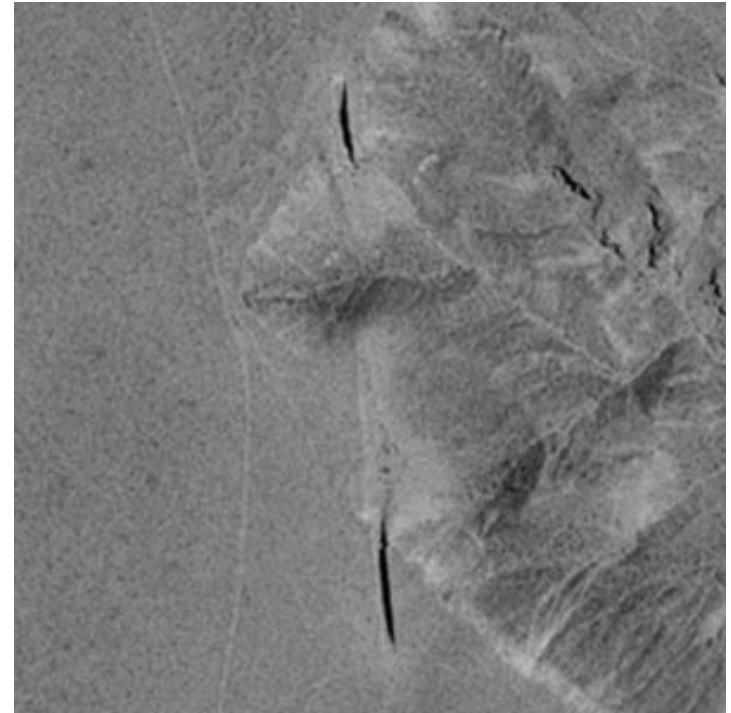


Fig. 12, Michael Heizer. *Double Negative*. 1969.

The works of these artists have been seen to be monumental in scale and statement, permanent, destructive, and distinctly patriarchic. It is possible to say that these works were intensely serious and concerned for their work to appear obviously as art in environments, that perhaps their actions were not entirely conducive to art. Alternatively, as mentioned by Tufnell there was a different strategy within this era (and prevalent still today) which encompasses a more restorative approach to nature, represented in a statement by Agnes Denes.

I find it important to create these works all over the world as examples of what needs to be done – on destroyed, barren land where resource extraction has taken its toll; in the nervous tension of cities; on deforested soil – to stop erosion, purify the air, protect fresh groundwater, provide home for wildlife and afford a chance to stay in touch with nature (1999, cited in Nemitz, 2000, p. 42).

These varied approaches to the environment and land reveal how these notions of land art sit in contest to advocating for a subtler, individualised and astute approach to environmentalism. What also cannot be ignored is that “land art reflected the socio-cultural conditions of its time” (Tufnell, 2006, p.13) and so it is of paramount importance to acknowledge they exemplify their own generation’s worldview. It is possible to explicate Jean-François Lyotard’s proposition which signals a more current reflection of the political, ecological and social conditions under which more accurately reflect this research.

Within *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, 1979, Jean-François Lyotard conducts a postmodern critique or distrust of *metanarratives*, advocating for a more reflective interest in smaller focused investigations of transformation whether it be queer politics or

race. The breaking down of master narratives has created in some ways a much greater interest in personal transformations across a variety of causes including environmentalism.



Fig. 13, Agnes Denes. *Wheatfield-A Confrontation*. Summer 1982.



Fig. 14, *Developmental photo.* January 2010.

## The everyday through the leisure economy

Crucial to any discussion which seeks to locate notions of the amateur, mundane, demotic or leisure within the manifold of environmental art is to consider the everyday. The everyday provides fertile ground for this investigation to foster a subtle dissent for the grand narrative, didactic, shamanistic or activist position that often characterizes the legacy of this research associated with environmental politics. The disregard of overt gestures seeks to encourage one to engage with, and find potential value in, life at its most mundane and utilitarian levels. Stephen Johnstone suggests such an interest in the unseen or overlooked reflects “a distrust of the heroic and spectacular” (2008, p. 12). Johnstone’s valorisation of the unseen or overlooked becomes “an antidote to a barren, academicized and theoretically overloaded art” and artistic language (2008, p. 17). Although the leisable act of gardening within this investigation is conscious of the artists’ retreat, *Would you go on without me?* also becomes immersed in a place where “ordinary people creatively use and transform the everyday” (2008, p. 13). Opportunities for ‘ordinary’ people to become a “common hero” are offered in Michael de Certeau’s studies into everyday life. Certeau provides “tactics” used to “manipulate, and divert” or “make do” within the “strategies” of the dominant order (De Certeau, 1984, p. 30).

The collection of water and act of gardening in *Would you go on without me?* explicates the very nature of Certeau’s common hero with reference to the oxymoronic concept of *serious leisure*. The sociologist Robert A. Stebbins coined the idea *serious leisure* as part of his study into the social science of two seemingly isolated fields—work and leisure. *Serious leisure* is described as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant”. In the typical case it becomes an avocation and through this is centred on the “acquisition and expression” of one’s “special skills and knowledge” (1992, p. 3).





Fig.15-20, *Developmental photos.* 2009.

*Serious leisure* can be seen to hold both personal and social motivational factors with several “distinctive qualities”; a sustained personal effort in order to acquire the knowledge and skills, durable benefits of accomplishment, the formation of a strong identification towards the pursuit and lastly the formation of a “unique ethos” or “special social world” around the particular field of inquiry. It is highly important that this “special social world” is not defined by any formal or spatial boundaries or authoritative structure and allows the “freedom to enter into and depart from” these interests if one should so want to (Stebbins, 2004, p. 53).

While one of the goals for collecting rainwater within this research lies in the survival of an ornamental plant, the Roof Water Research Centre located on Massey University ascertains a very different objective of “providing leadership in identifying and resolving rainwater harvesting issues to meet community, local authority, government and industry needs” (Massey University, 2009). As an institution of higher education, work and research and considering the qualities of *Would you go on without me?*, presents a slight resistance to the academic and research imperative of the university. It is a way of *making do* within my own means and capabilities inside the *strategies* of the university.



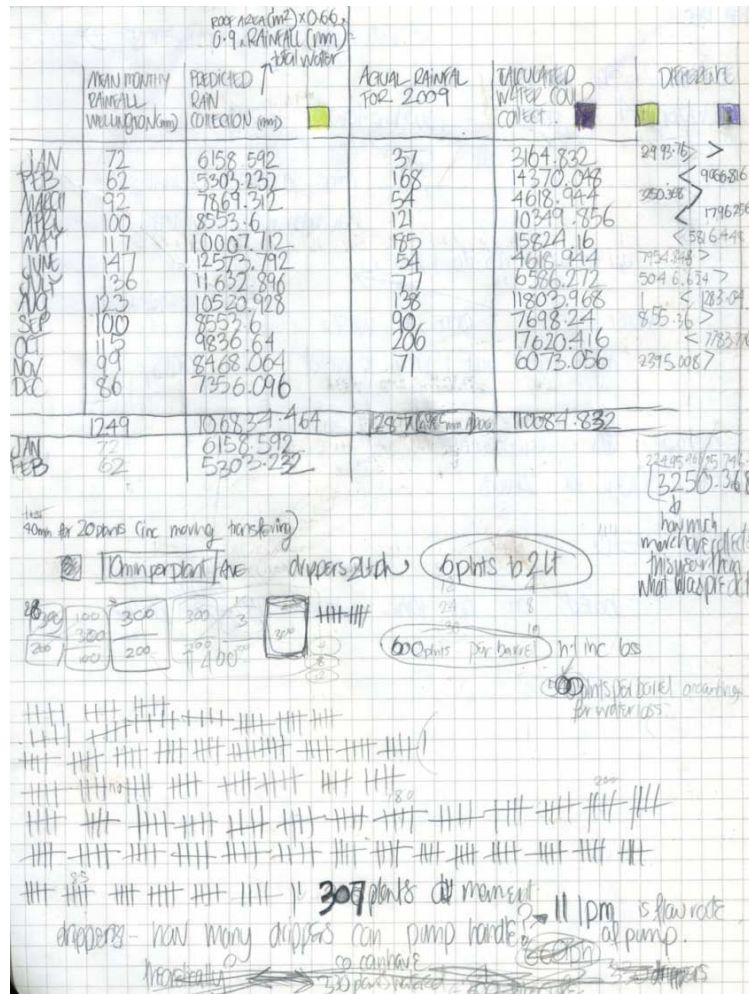


Fig. 21, Workbook entry. December 2009.

## Science, Ecology and the Tactical

The emergence of artistic practices which make scientific research subservient to the ruse of the artist have a direct connection to the science wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Laura Heon (cited in Ackerman & Heon, 2000, pp. 12-13) the term *little science* emerged after World War Two and was given to scientific explorations characterized by “multiplicity, individuality, and decentralization”. This can be seen in stark contrast to the ideals of *big science* which were generally immense in scale, theory, funded and guided by the government and as such, could partially account for its often elitist and military driven agenda. Consequently with the appearance of *little science* the artist found “room for idiosyncratic points of view, for irony, poetry, fantasy and playful physics” (Heon, cited in Ackerman & Heon, 2000, p.15).

By inserting forms of play into the machine of the university or scientific research its forms part of this inquiry by inaugurating a shift from the macro to the possibilities of the micro made apparent through the everyday. The tactical approach to science could also extend to employing alternative strategies to the gravity of environmental concerns that water currently presents. Through two divergent works, one by Carsten Holler and another by Hans Haacke, the difference between the tactical and austere become clear to further consider how the intentions of *Would you go on without me?* abdicate any desire to have a significant impact for the greater good of the environment or society.

With this in mind the insights of Henri Lefebvre provide another entry point to consider the “transfunctional” facets of *Would you go on without me?* Johnstone (2008, p. 14) suggests that despite criticism, Henri Lefebvre considered art as a valid way that everyday life could be made visible but on many levels doubts its usefulness. The term transfunctional” was Lefebvre’s way of linking art to play and like play “has many uses and at the same time it is not useful at all”.

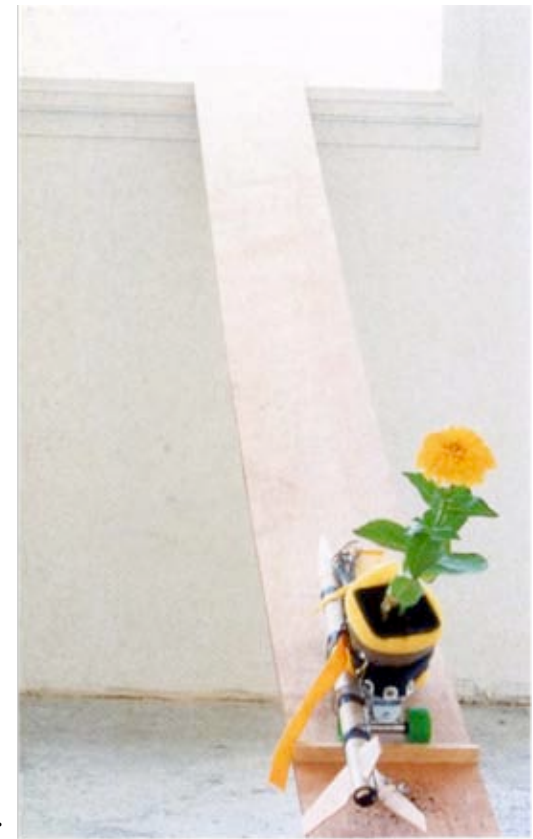


Fig. 22, Carsten Holler. *Akné's Friend*. 1994.



Fig.23, Carsten Holler. *Installation view of Summer Garden exhibition. 1994*

At the other side of this *Summer Garden* another member of the family is sent to the devil as soon as its strapping size is adequate to trigger the firework motor of a small, hellish machine resembling a roller skate and thus fling the flower and its planting pot into the air (Gohlke, 1998, cited in Nemitz, 2000, p. 74).

This account, by Gerrit Gohlke describes the destiny of one potted plant amongst the collection of flowers like *Akné's Friend*, presented in the installation *Summer Garden* by the artist Carsten Holler. This mischievous experiment calls into question certain “moral criteria” and therefore the intentions of the artist. The “waste of resources, a lightly-taken unconditionalising of ones own play instinct, the perfidious setting of traps for defenceless vegetation and finally the inconsiderate demonstration of a hierarchy of the species”. But really as Gohlke goes onto say “what harm is there in a ruined ornamental plant?” (ibid).

Comparatively Hans Haacke's *Rhinewater Purification Plant* is driven by a very different intention. It does not speak to the “transfunctional” or quasi-scientific nature inherent in both Hollers' *Summer Garden* and the intentions of this research—but is an ecovention<sup>1</sup>. The work was an attempt to educate and bring “public attention to the sewage plant's role in degrading the [Rhine] river” by “transforming the Krefeld Sewage plant's murky effluent to clean water that supported fish”(Holmes, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ecovention is described as “an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology” (Spaid, 2002).

The intentions within Hollers work provide insight into the very nature of an effective work that really changes nothing and acknowledges the “transfunctional” nature that this research also tries to engage with. In comparison the austerity within Hans Haacke’s work clearly presents an attempt to affect change for the greater good of the local ecology of the Rhine River. Just as Haacke would have used methodologies within grey water reclamation the premise for *Would you go on without me?* relies on the tools of roof-water research and horticulture, but within the logic of the work they are subjected to an experiment for tactical and wily purposes as opposed to pure scientific rationale or environmental propaganda.



Fig. 24, Hans Haacke. *Rhinewater Purification Plant*. 1972.





Fig. 25, *Developmental photo.* January 2010

## Create potential in gestures of modesty

The concern here to investigate the possibility of enfolding environmental politics within the artistic languages of the everyday, tactical, science and leisure—this research argues for this by utilizing a liminal space. So far this has been identified through the marginal ‘siting’ of the work physically and drawing together disparities between the epic and miniscule and even more significantly between science, art, and play.

Jan Verwoert (personal communication, March 29, 2009) suggests that this mode of practice—not seeking to have a significant impact but not deemed pointless either—could be seen as “mini concepts for maxi ideas”. Verwoert states that we should not “give up the claim to still have something to say about what society may be” but operate as “small almost powerless gestures, a mini grammar of very small gestures that still invoke the universal or possibility of difference, a gesture of defiance, but deliberately staged in the key of the minor”.

Well-known for poetic shifts of the status quo and subtle interventions into the everyday, Roman Ondak’s artistic oeuvre speaks readily to the notion of *mini concepts for maxi ideas*. For example in *Loop*, Ondak replicated the surrounding trees, shrubs and pathways within the Czech and Slovak Pavilion, as part of the Venice Biennale in 2009. By blurring the boundaries between inside and outside to such a point that people were not even sure you were in a pavilion, it questioned whether a real experience can transfer into art (Artforum, n.d.).



Fig. 26, Roman Ondak. *Loop*. 2009.



This logic of Verwoert begins to engage with the creative potential this research aims to locate in an interstitial space between the grand and modest gesture. It is also suggestive that the more ineffectual the gesture appears, the more powerful the smaller gesture could potentially become.

Water is one of the most pressing issues of this century and it is likely that water shortage will be the oil crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Choosing to use such a precious and increasingly scarce material to water an ornamental plant may not have been a radical gesture in days gone by but with the clear and calamitous onset of global warming such an act or series of acts calls into question the efficacy of previously benign leisure activities. And perhaps its relevance lies in an attempt to preserve a leisure activity in the face of its impending demise at the hands of climate change. Due mainly to an inherent suspicion of sweeping statements or generalisations; one being, nature: good, people: bad, it is questionable to induce environmental change through dictating what we need to do or can and cannot do. Leisure forgoes this position, rather speaking to and about the individual. It encounters recognition of ecological surroundings implementing change on a scale of micro possibilities. It does not *demand* the individual to recognise or reprimand their deleterious actions onto the earth through inducing collective guilt.

## Conclusion

Through the many ways one can address the environmental issues of our day through site-specific art, this research advocates for the possibility of employing attributes of the demotic, gardening, rainwater harvesting, play and ecology within the manifold of environmental art. The specific legacy that pertains to environmental and land art generally sits in contest to the intentions of this research. In acknowledging that this legacy pertains to its own generation's worldview warrants a more current reflection of the political, ecological and social conditions this project exists within. The artistic languages within the everyday, leisure and tactical use of scientific methodology inaugurate the creative potential in employing attributes of ambiguity, frivolousness, modesty, subtlety and amateurism. Although this research at first glance may seem superfluous to environmental issues it is not. By locating such a project as this on the threshold between the pressing issues of water and the leisable act of gardening exists the potential, as Jan Verwoert states, to still having something to say even if it is through the most modest of means.

Photos of final installation, *Would you go on without me?*, 2010.



Fig. 27.



Fig. 28.



Fig. 29.



Fig. 30.





Fig. 31.



Fig. 32.

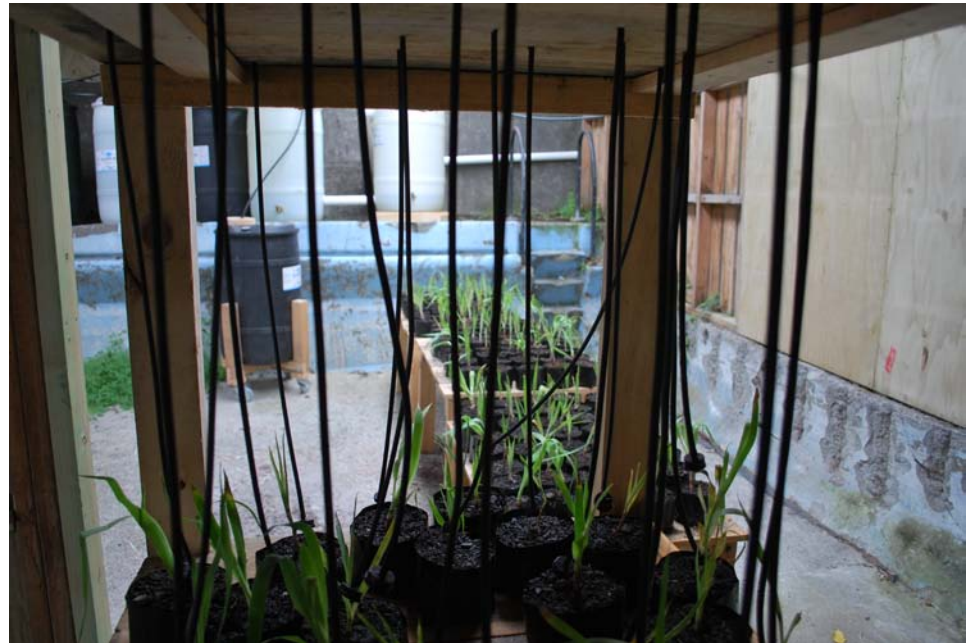


Fig. 33.



Fig. 34.





Fig. 35.



Fig. 36.





Fig. 37.



Fig. 38.

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