

LA 2019: CULTS, COLLECTIVES & COCOONING

Despite worldwide financial panic, ecological disasters, and general global malaise, the exhibition LA 2019: CULTS, COLLECTIVES, & COCOONING conjures a surprisingly positive image of what Los Angeles might be in the near future. Presenting an alternative to the doom-ridden scenarios of future dystopias prefigured in speculative fiction's *Blade Runner*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Soylent Green*, the exhibition instead suggests a destiny of collaborative and community based ventures that focus on the group rather than the individual experience. LA 2019: CULTS, COLLECTIVES, & COCOONING pictures a prospective Los Angeles that rejects its anonymous sprawling suburbs in favor of a return to village life with all the allegiances and intimacy that entails. Neighborhoods become self-sustaining and self-governing entities that rely on home production and barter, rotation of back-yard crops, and fertilizing their vegetable gardens with the guano of patio-raised chickens. Business is conducted between hamlets traveled to and from by bio-fueled vehicles, delivery tricycles, donkeys, and rafts.

LA 2019: CULTS, COLLECTIVES, & COCOONING looks at three related themes: real and fictional intentional communities, the power of the collective versus the individual, and sustainable solutions for future living. Inspired by historical and fictional utopias—Thomas Moore's *Utopia*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*—the exhibition explores current attitudes towards intentional communities and the desire to commit to alternative belief systems. The re-emergence of contemporary artist collectives that focus on communal art-making activities, diverse practices and disciplines, and increased audience participation are examined in relation to their predecessors. Artists weary of costly approaches to green living explore alternative sustainable solutions for a future lifestyle that focuses on affordable, practical resolutions that reference the past as much as they do the future.

CULTS

Published in 1948, *Walden Two*, by behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, conjures a vision of a highly functional utopian community that, unlike many of its speculative fiction counterparts, was set in the time it was written and could easily be mistaken for present day. Existing as a self-sufficient, self-governing, and income sharing rural community, the members work a total of four hours a day, and earn extra credits—fewer work hours—if the job is boring or unpleasant. Focused on creativity, wellbeing, and adherence to certain behavioral codes, *Walden Two* has become a model for real-life intentional communities like those represented in Cathy Akers's photographs taken across the United States. Divided loosely into three groups—behavioral, experimental, and guru driven—the cults provoke questions about group versus individual experience, societal control versus unfettered freedom, and the basic need to belong. Surprisingly sober, Akers's photographs depict the various communities in their full mundane glory. They present provisional living quarters, makeshift outdoor cooking facilities, and melancholic and solitary burial mounds—rented out for a fee—without romance or drama. Ironically, people seldom inhabit Akers's sparse tableau, suggesting a less than thriving commune population, but when they do—naked bathers at a nearby natural spring—they are photographed from a respectful distance.

Choosing to live outside conventional society generates fear and fascination from those who do not, who often mistake communes or cults for dangerous enclaves of extreme behavior. Artist Heather Cantrell plays off these simplistic and base assumptions in her series of photographic portraits entitled *Extended Family* (2005). Complete with fake birth certificates stamped with infant footprints, Cantrell presents black and white portraits of Charlie Manson's fictional orphans. Despite their dubious pedigree, Manson's grown-up offspring—eight children in all—exhibit a spectrum of healthy 'normal' behavior for young adults of their age—driving, reading, smoking, and hanging out—thereby refuting the 'sociopath-by-association' notion that immediately springs to mind. The decision to print in black and white creates an immediate temporal distance locating the subjects firmly in the past and linking them to the dark and troubled time of their fabricated history.

Commitment to alternative belief systems suggests disenchantment with traditional faith-based ideas that perhaps can no longer plug the abyss of our impending mortality. As a result, interest in new religions, lifeforms, intelligence, and galactic exploration seems perfectly reasonable. It is not surprising then that groups such as the UFO Unarius cult—dedicated “to exploring the frontiers of science and expanding our awareness and connection with galactic intelligence¹”—have emerged, providing potential solutions to our existential crisis. Fascinated by this phenomenon, New York based artist Bede Murphy has been following Unarius, and making work about them for the past two years. Working collaboratively with the group, Murphy’s installation for LA: 2019 takes the form of a reading/welcome room that traces the development of the cult’s history through spiritual self-help texts, posters of spiritual directives, and portraits of transcendence. Merging fact with fiction, the work includes original promotional videos from the mid-80s, re-mixed by Murphy, found and fabricated curriculum, and a detailed portrait of the organization’s dynamic founder Ruth Norman—a self described cosmic visionary—who above all advocates ‘interdimensional’ understanding. Fictional examples that resonate with our desperate desire to believe in something greater than ourselves include Octavia Butler’s brilliant sci-fi work *Parable of the Sower*, which charts the evolution of the Earthseed community and religion based on the idea of an ever-changing God shaped by its worshippers and whose destiny is to take root among the stars. The backdrop of this experimental religion is a Los Angeles of the near future on the brink of total destruction.

COLLECTIVES

Arguably, the cult of the individual with its emphasis on rampant competition, brazen self-promotion, and flagrant gratification above and beyond all else is waning in favor of a more progressive, collective position. The need for a more egalitarian distribution of wealth is now being discussed—whether this is out of necessity (a response to the current US economic meltdown) or enlightenment is up for debate. Regardless, group effort may prove to be more expedient and rewarding than individual enterprise, and is increasingly visible in artists’ collectives. Early twentieth century predecessors include Bauhaus—

¹ Unarius Academy of Science, website: <http://www.unarius.org>

who replaced the traditional hierarchical art school model with less elitist workshops that placed art, architecture, and design on the same artistic level. Similarly, Joseph Beuys' "Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum" and his theories surrounding "Social Sculpture" sought to provoke social, economic, and ecological change through direct engagement with the public in his performances and actions. More recently, the artists of Atelier van Lieshout founded the AVL Free Ville, a free state in Rotterdam's port area that is home to twenty community members who work on architectural, design, and art projects. These collectives seek to define their practice in a much broader sense; a position epitomized by Los Angeles based contemporary collective Machine Project, a group predicated on collaborative projects with diverse cultural and scientific practitioners. Audience members become co-producers in their highly experimental practices that range from lectures on the "Sex Life of Aliens" and "Cranioklepty: A History of Phrenological Grave-Robbing" to workshops on electronic sewing. Other events are more politically inclined and involve pairing up with obscure socio/ecological organizations like the Black Cloud Citizen Science League to assess air quality in Echo Park. Emphasizing education and participation above all, Machine Project coaxes highly talented individuals with unique skills to donate their time and expertise for the greater good.

Such generosity within the art world is unusual and is shared by another Los Angeles based collective, Fallen Fruit, which conducts socio/politically empowering fruit tours of LA neighborhoods. Combining guerilla tactics, performance, and installation, Fallen Fruit is committed to pursuing and identifying all available free fruit in public places, campaigning for local fruit harvesting and production, and protesting against costly fruit and produce imports. Jam and salsa production, nocturnal and educational tours are a few of their strategies to increase awareness of available resources and combat unnecessary food waste. *Neighborhood Infusions*, included in LA: 2019, maps LA neighborhoods through the production of fruit vodka, where each harvest represents the fruit from a specific neighborhood.

COCOONING

The Los Angeles of the near future calls for radical re-thinking of the current suburban model in favor of self-governing autonomous hamlets that cater for their own social, economic, and environmental needs and survive through home production and inter-village bartering. A re-thinking of realistic, sustainable solutions that are accessible and affordable is also essential and in marked contrast to the current dollar-driven green model, where living an eco-friendly existence is a luxury that most cannot afford. As resources dwindle, more creative solutions are required to abandon exorbitant "eco" gadgets in favor of re-cycling and re-purposing existing materials to multiple ends.

Mindful of these concerns, both Olga Koumoundouros and Jason Middlebrook present alternative views of future dwellings that combine recyclable, low-cost materials that merge ancient and contemporary domicile models. Inspired by contemporary architect Shigeru Ban—the first Japanese architect to build a house almost entirely of paper and renowned for his DIY refugee shelters—Koumoundouros developed a cave-like structure from recycled paper tubing, a large photographic poster, and coal. Reminiscent of early human shelters, Koumoundouros's work reconnects us to times past when our relationship to the earth and its natural resources—as a source of survival and renewal—were much more symbiotic. Similarly, Middlebrook's highly fastidious drawings of village settlements reference the past as a way to talk about the future. Drawn on recycled cardboard, the resulting townships share some structural affinities with medieval hilltop communities while simultaneously presenting an image of future eco-urbanism—structures stacked atop one another, each complete with solar panels, outside stoves for communal cooking, and gutters fashioned to collect rain water. For LA: 2019, Middlebrook's mural-size drawing imagines Los Angeles partially flooded due to global warming and therefore forcibly split into autonomous hamlets traveled to and from by boats and rafts.

Koumoundouros and Middlebrook examine overall village architecture, while William Ransom's meticulously crafted utilitarian objects focus on the details within. Fashioned entirely from recycled and found wood, Ransom's work explores the relationship

between the natural and the man-made and plays with agriculturally inspired anachronistic forms—field ploughs, rowing boats, pitchforks, and spits—that hark back to pre-industrial modes of transportation and labor. The use of recycled materials combined with Ransom’s subject matter imbues the work with a by-gone age, suggesting a return to community-based production methods as a necessity. Joel Tauber also employs wood, in its live form. He spent the past two years rescuing a sycamore tree—dying of thirst, suffocating from encroaching tarmac and scarred from careless cars—from Parking Lot K, at the Rose Bowl, in Pasadena. Then, as shrines to urban trees, he propagated the Southern Californian landscape with its healthy offspring. *Sick-Amour* (2006 – present), the project’s title, is reminiscent of Joseph Beuys’ formative *7000 Oaks* (1982) inaugurated during Documenta 7, which involved the heroic planting of 7000 trees over a five-year period in and around public sites in Kassel Germany. Both projects seek to raise ecological consciousness and activate public space in a radical way.

Low maintenance, affordable, and environmentally responsible contemporary communal living minus eccentric gurus and outlandish beliefs is at the heart of architect Stephanie Smith’s “Wanna Start a Commune (WASC).” Encompassing rural, suburban, semi-urban, and urban models, WSAC, otherwise known as the Cul de Sac Commune Project, challenges people, in apartments, townhouses, or detached homes, to share everything with their neighbors, from wellness education and elder care to landscaping and energy systems. Bartering for services is especially encouraged and epitomizes the resource-sharing, low budget, anti-consumerist green approach of their practice. Smith’s architectural design firm, Ecoshack, has inspired three self-sustaining Cul de Sac Communes in the Los Angeles area—Topanga Canyon, Santa Monica, and Los Feliz. They encapsulate Smith’s desire to combine 70s commune idealism with a 21st century pragmatism that is fiscally responsible and truly sustainable. Hers is a radical project that encourages significant modification of collective behavior, which she plans to export globally.

CONCLUSION

Is it possible, as Al Gore stated in a recent article ², that 100% of electricity in the U.S. could be zero-carbon by 2019? Or that the Slow Food Movement's goal of "changing the world socially, economically, and politically through people's stomachs"³—could replace distrusted global agribusiness and industrialized food production? If we accept this as true, then it is equally possible that Los Angeles could be profoundly altered in several radical ways—structurally, culturally, and philosophically—as suggested by this exhibition. Perhaps it is not frivolous to imagine LA as a series of tight-knit, commune-driven, self-sustaining hamlets—or to envisage a thorough blurring of artistic practices where artists assume the role of small scale manufacturers, designing and producing functional goods from recycled materials that no longer need to be trucked in from distant lands. Given the increasing lack of faith in mainstream religions, it is also likely that confidence in alternative faith-based groups will abound to include more radical interpretations of spirituality such as the Unarius cult's belief in interdimensionality. As Earth becomes increasingly uninhabitable, due to the inescapable effects of global warming, it is unsurprising that we are starting to look at alternative galaxies. Colonization of space, although in its infancy, is a bona-fide consideration and has spurred groups like the Space Cowboys—founded in 1998 by the Mars Society—to acclimate potential space tourists to life on Mars by conducting training missions, in full astronaut gear and for weeks at a stretch, in the Utah desert where they rehearse rituals of a glorious future. Although ten years is a relatively short period of time, great changes can happen—consider the days before iPods, cell phones and ATM cards. Los Angeles in the next decade promises changes just as dramatic but incremental enough that we will scarcely remember how we lived before.

Ciara Ennis, February 2009

² Gore, Al. "Can We Save the Planet and rescue the Economy at the Same Time?" *Mother Jones*, November + December, 2008

³ Slow Food Movement website: www.slowfood.com