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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

THE TRELIS PROJECT (L'ART DU TREILLAGEUR)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS & NEW MEDIA

by

M. James Becker

June 2021

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2021

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Abstract

The Trellis Project (L'art du Treillageur)

M. James Becker

Trellis has been used as a structure to support plant growth for thousands of years. Drawing from traditions of participatory performance, conceptual art, and social practice, The Trellis Project (L'art du Treillageur) utilizes the trellis form as a historical and aesthetic reference for thinking through support structures relevant to our current moment. The work engages participants in construction and reflection; this iteration of the project saw participants build and document their own miniature trellis, contributing their reflections and documentation to a community archive based online and housed in a sculptural installation. The work may continue to grow as a system of social and economic relations through subsequent works, additional collaborations, and social media presence. The Trellis Project aims to engage with a collective imaginary: What structures support us? What structures do we demand be built? What structures must remain?

Acknowledgments

I want to express the deepest thanks to my family, incredible partner, friends, teachers, and advisors for being my trellis. Thanks to Marianne, Jennifer, Mark and Isaac for their wisdom and guidance throughout the program and for their significant input into this work. Thank you, Sofia, for absolutely everything. A big shout out goes to Nathan Chan and Cooper Hickox for their partnership in design, branding, and production on this project. Thank you to Colleen Jennings for your fearless installation and project support. Thank you to my cohort, especially to Patrick Stefaniak, Rey Cordova, and Forest Reid for your ideas and support. Thank you to Laurie Palmer and Sharon Daniel; our conversations significantly shaped my understanding of this work. Lastly, many thanks to everyone who participated in this project. I hope that we can continue to work and grow together.

Long live the treillageurs!

The Trellis Project (L'art du Treillageur)

Encountering The Trellis

Inside the darkened exhibition space, the viewer approaches a glowing monument. A wooden trellis structure stands atop a platform covered in an array of hanging artifacts. Its posts, marked by multi-colored writing, support glowing monitors which display a multitude of images and videos; people gather around craft tables and hand construct miniature trellises. Electrical cables snake their way up and over the intersecting beams, casting dark shadows below. Underneath them, artificial grass covers the platform and spreads itself out in a rectangle, flooded from above by warm, yellow light. Birds are chirping in the atmosphere. Beyond the limits of the grass, the space drops away into darkness.

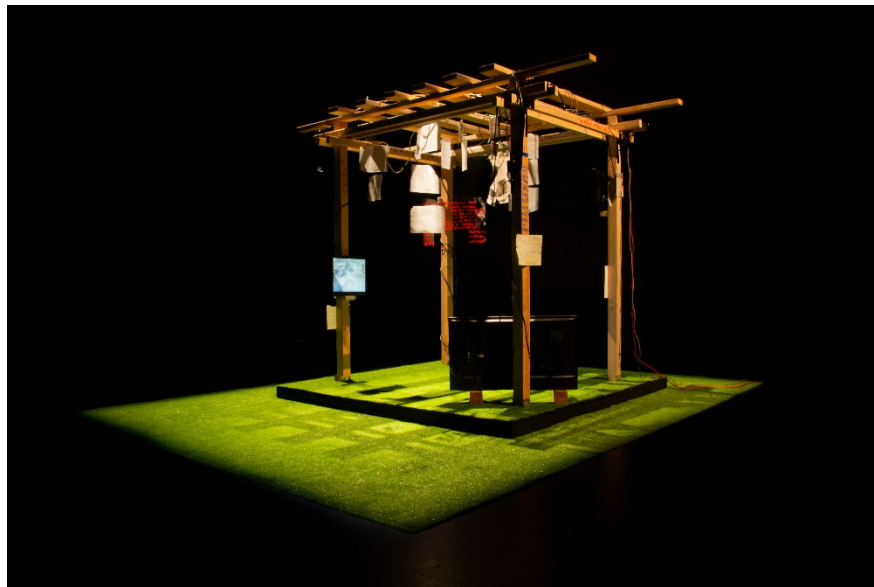


Figure 1: The trellis sculpture installed at the Digital Arts Research Center, UC Santa Cruz, May 2021

This sculptural assemblage is the home of the photo documentation, videos, and writing collected from twenty-one participants in this iteration of The Trellis Project over the last several months. After being contacted by the artist, participants were mailed a package containing a block of acrylic with cut out trellis pieces, a set of instructions, and a small tube of superglue. Upon receiving their package in the mail, a QR code on the instructions sheet led them to a web page with background information on the project as well as links to a step-by-step video (*How to Build a*



Figure 2: A still from the video *How to Build a Trellis*

Trellis), a Dropbox folder to submit documentation, a Google Form with reflection questions, and a link to the project's Instagram page.

Building Precedents

In many ways, artistic precedents for The Trellis Project begin with the Constructivists, a group of eastern European artists in the early 20th century formally engaged in sculpture, painting, and architecture, and politically engaged in various

flavors of leftist projects, chief among them the Russian revolution. Constructivist art attempted to capture political ideas and energy in the sensible; the artist László Moholy-Nagy famously said that “Constructivism is the Socialism of vision.”¹ The Constructivists’ work was concerned with the materiality that they saw as the base necessity of modern life. As critic Robert Hughes notes, this was “art declaring itself to be material-plus-work.”² Perhaps the most famous example of this work comes in



Figure 3: Model of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, 1920

the form of Vladimir Tatlin’s (1885-1953) *Monument to the Third International*, known more colloquially as “Tatlin’s tower.” This monument would have been the tallest building in the world and the architectural embodiment of Marxist-Leninist thought. The Monument, it turns out, was never built; Hughes notes that in fact “There was not enough steel in all Russia to build the tower”³. However, a model of the tower was produced in 1919, and its exposed supports are akin to the

interlocking grids of a trellis. Tatlin’s tower is not only significant to The Trellis

¹ Hughes, Robert. 1980. *The Shock of the New*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 93.

² Hughes, 93.

³ Hughes, 92.

Project for its aesthetic aspects, but because its structure, in its most idealistic interpretation, would have been built by and for workers to symbolize the collective construction of their new society.

Themes of collective construction can also be found in the legendary work of Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) from around the same time. Kaprow was an artist and teacher perhaps best remembered for being one of many artists involved in “Happenings,” events-as-artworks about life and the relations that make it up. Kaprow organized the work *Fluids* in 1967, bringing together a hundred people to help build twenty structures made of ice blocks at sites throughout Los Angeles. Suzanne Lacy notes the sheer complexity and “laborious” nature of the work as well as the serendipitous involvement of participants during the work’s construction, a playfulness that I have strived for since the beginning of The Trellis Project.⁴

The collective construction The Trellis Project aims for also derives from theatrical traditions where the players are often the constructors of the worlds and frameworks within which they play. For example, the Polish experimental theater practitioner Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) directed a rendition of Stanisław Wyspiański’s *Akropolis* in 1962 where the actors constructed the set (a concentration

⁴ Lacy, Suzanne. 1995. *Mapping The Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 248.

camp) on stage.⁵ In The Builder's Association's 1994 interpretation of Ibsen's *Master Builder*, the construction of a rewired house on set became an integral part of the performance itself.⁶ The work *III* by the artist Liz

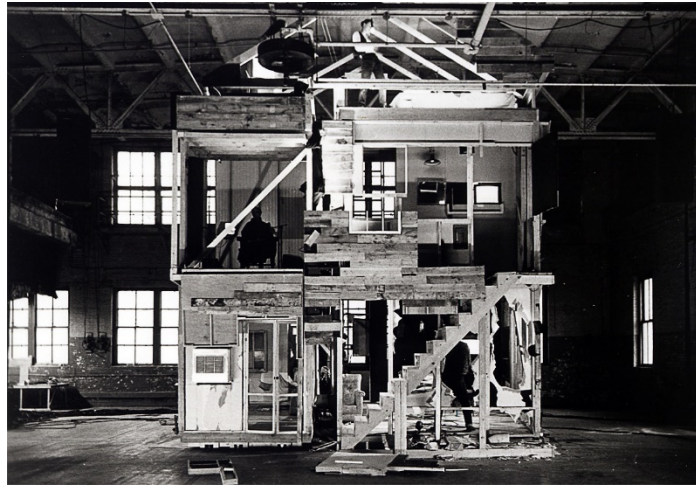


Figure 4: The Builders Association set for their 1994 production of *The Master Builder*

Glynn saw a group of people come together in 2010 to build an enormous structure out of pallets, host a series of performances and rituals inside, sleep there, and then deconstruct it together.⁷ Each of these instances of playing-constructing echo the ideas of German theater practitioner Bertolt Brecht who “exhorted theater makers to critique the political apparatus of society by deploying techniques that exposed the apparatus of theater itself.”⁸ Stripping back the façade of a slick, polished aesthetic

⁵ 2012. *Grotowski.net*. February 29. Accessed June 14, 2021. <https://grotowski.net/en/encyclopedia/akropolis>. Grotowski.net is an archive run by the Grotowski Institute.

⁶ Jackson, Shannon, and Marianne Weems. 2015. *The Builders Association: Performance and Media in Contemporary Theater*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. See the *Master Builder* section.

⁷ Glynn, Liz. 2010. *III*. Accessed June 2021. <http://lizglynn.work/project/iii/#iii-fighting-firing-with-fire-performance-ii-2010>.

⁸ Jackson and Weems, 9.

typical of traditional theater (or installation art) invites audiences to consider the underlying conditions of a production, and he invites actor-participants to have direct involvement with them.

A non-collaborative work in the field of visual art that perhaps best exemplifies the Brechtian approach to exposing the apparatuses of construction is the work *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* by the sculptor Robert Morris. The wooden cube in this work plays the sounds of Morris “hammering, sawing, and sanding” in his studio to create the box itself⁹ This soundscape invites the viewer to consider the necessary underlying processes in the production of a work of art, especially the artist’s labor, that are normally rendered invisible in a work’s presentation.

Collective vs. Collaborative

Due to changing conditions discussed in detail later on, the work in this iteration of The Trellis Project would also shift to become less collective and more collaborative. Participants here were not moving or working together as a group, but rather as distinct entities co-laboring with myself and other participants. They remained separated except for the submissions they could see from others on social media, and their individuated labor would ultimately be reassembled at the site of the sculpture to take on its collective form. This intersection of collaboration and construction has its precedents too. In her work from the 1960s, Brazilian artist Lygia Clark constructed small sculptural forms called *Bichos*, or “critters.” These “critters”

⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection online

came to life with hinged panels; Clark intended for the viewer to shift and change the work in collaboration with herself.¹⁰ This is not entirely unlike participants making creative decisions over the assembly and documentation of their miniature trellises.

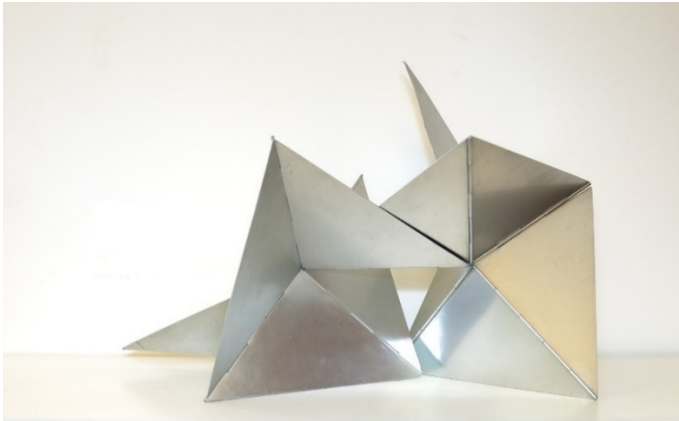


Figure 5: Lygia Clark. *Bicho linear*. 1960

A more recent example which inherits this history is Rafa Esparza's contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennial; Esparza worked with a group to make handmade adobe

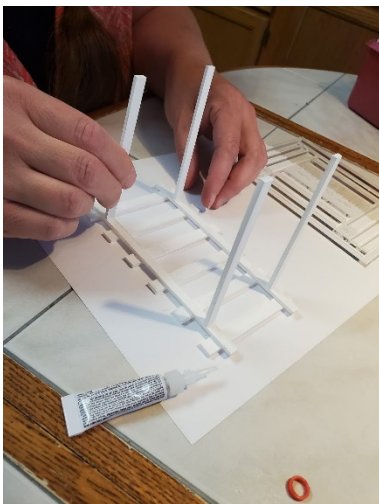


Figure 6: Submitted documentation of participant building their trellis.

bricks with water from the LA River, which were then transported to New York to build a rotunda of adobe as an exhibition space for collaborators.¹¹

Garden & Trellis

The trellis form itself, along with the garden as a central metaphor, also have useful precedents of their own. In 1980-81, the performance artist Leslie

¹⁰ MOMA New York. n.d. *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*. Accessed June 2021. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/181/2403>.

¹¹ Whitney Museum of American Art. 2017. *Whitney Biennial 2017: Rafa Esparza*. Accessed June 2021. <https://whitney.org/media/513>.

Labowitz enacted a work titled *Sprout Time*, a series of performances where viewers encountered racks of sprouting seeds and various recorded sounds and were fed lunch. Suzanne Lacy reports that Labowitz talked about “how sprout growing had become not only my art, a social statement, and a means of making money, but a metaphor for my own self growth.”¹² Labowitz took the metaphors of support and growth that are at play in *The Trellis Project* and integrated them fully into her life, sharing that with her audiences.

The Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay provides a reference point for the use of language as artwork in a garden setting. Finlay worked in a variety of mediums,



Figure 7: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Shady Grove*

often carving poems into wood and stone and placing them in the natural environment.¹³ While

Finlay’s work in his famous garden, *Little Sparta*, is focused more on individual contemplation than collective experience, it offers an inspiring model for the choreography of a viewer through space.

The trellis sculpture holds a lot of writing in and on its structure and does encourage the viewer to move in and around it, but ultimately relies on the viewer to make sense of a mess of information.

¹² Lacy, 251.

¹³ Carlson, Prudence. n.d. *Ian Hamilton Finlay*. Accessed June 2021. http://www.ianhamiltonfinlay.com/ian_hamilton_finlay.html#4.

The Trellis Project could benefit from an iteration that finds collective assemblages built and placed throughout a large public space, allowing viewers to move and leisurely discover the complexities of these structures at their own pace.

Thinking at this larger scale brings us to the work of Bernard Tschumi, who



designed the Parc de la Villette in Paris from 1982-1998.¹⁴ The park features large, open framework structures whose red color and public presence evoke the history of the Russian Constructivists. The

Figure 8: Structure by Bernard Tschumi at Parc de la Villette.

(<https://commons.mtholyoke.edu/architectualblog/2015/12/12/parc-de-la-villette-bernard-tschumi/>)

park is also full of different themed gardens including the Jardin de la

Treille, the trellis garden, designed by Gilles Vexlard and featuring sculptures from the artist Jean-Max Albert.¹⁵ Perhaps not coincidentally, Albert has worked extensively with the trellis form, noting that “The trellis permits a visual contact of external and internal elements. It allows [us] to observe together the inside and the outside of a construction. The semi-transparency of the plans permits a simultaneous

¹⁴ Bernard Tschumi Architects. n.d. *Parc de la Villette*. Accessed June 2021. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/3/>.

¹⁵ La Villette. n.d. *jardin de la treille*. Accessed June 2021. <https://lavillette.com/plan-du-parc?view=deep&placeId=154%20target=>.

reading of imbricated volumes.”¹⁶ As we examine the forms in the Trellis Project and read imbricated volumes, we can also read the intersecting, or imbricated, crises amidst which the work was made, with many overlapping issues explicitly touched on in participant submissions.

Working Together from A Distance

There are also a number of precedents that engage participants from a distance, as this iteration of the project ultimately did. Interestingly, several of them are also themed around gardens and growth. In the long-term project *Solitary Gardens* led by the artist jackie sumell.¹⁷ sumell and volunteers collaborate with incarcerated individuals to tend to gardens of their design. The artist and volunteers take the messages from the imprisoned gardeners, who are often experiencing solitary confinement, and enact them in the world on their behalf. It is a project which connects participants over distance in a joyful call for prison abolition, and is an outstanding, inspirational example of politically engaged work that moves in the material world.

A second distanced garden work, The Telegarden (1995- 2004) was an installation that allowed online participants to control a robotic arm that tended to a

¹⁶ Albert, Jean-Max. 1993. *Space In Profile / L'espace de Profil*. Paris: Les Éditions de La Villette.

¹⁷ Solitary Gardens. n.d. *About The Project*. Accessed June 2021. <https://solitarygardens.org/about>.

garden of growing plants.¹⁸ Peter Lunenfeld notes that, “In linking their garden to the World Wide Web and creating an intuitive interface for the control of the arm and camera, the artists transformed what most would consider a fit of over-engineering into a subtle rumination on the nature of the Commons.”¹⁹ The Telegarden’s existence depended on a collective; the responsibility for its care and growth was held between individual participants distributed across time and space. Without their input, the garden would have died. The sculptural center of this iteration of The Trellis Project relied on a collective connected by the web, too, but with different stakes. In this case, unlike the Telegarden, the central form of the work could have existed without its participants, a condition worth considering for future iterations of the work. The Trellis Project is also remarkably low tech in comparison, relying on interpersonal relations rather than innovations in robotics. The Trellis Project deals with participation in a more tactile manner.

Similarly, social practice artist Pablo Helguera offers a unique analog model for participation in his used bookstore work, *Librería Donceles*. For this work, Helguera sources used book donations from Mexico to create temporary Spanish language bookstores in various locations. Like this project, participant donors send a contribution from a distance to construct a larger assemblage. While the current form of The Trellis Project is rather homogenous, however, Helguera’s work crosses

¹⁸ Goldberg, Ken. n.d. *The Telegarden*. Accessed June 2021. <https://goldberg.berkeley.edu/garden/Ars/>.

¹⁹ Lunenfeld, Peter. 1996. "XXIX." *Flash Art* 187.

borders, addressing issues of migration and accessibility while offering a model for conducting a rich, large scale work with a simple gesture.²⁰

Both Helguera's work and this version of The Trellis Project rely on mailing and shipping, processes which have a long history with artists over the last seventy-five years. One of the most prolific and notable mail artists was Ray Johnson, who by the early 1960s had amassed a network of artists, friends, and collaborators named the "New York Correspondance [sic] School."²¹ Because mail provides the ability to work and correspond safely from a distance, this legacy was reactivated during the COVID-19 pandemic.²² The Port City Creative Guild, for example, collaborated with arts institutions in Long Beach, California to launch *Couriers of Hope*, which brought together work from over 80 artists. Mail art also maintains a legacy of democratization, bringing artwork outside the confines of museums and galleries. *Couriers of Hope* continued this tradition, allowing works by the exhibiting artists to be traded with works created by local high school students.²³

²⁰ Helguera, Pablo. n.d. *A Vicarious Learning (2017)*. Accessed June 2021. <http://pablohelguera.net/2017/04/a-vicarious-learning-2017/>.

²¹ Ray Johnson Estate. n.d. *Ray Johnson Biography*. Accessed June 2021. <http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/biography/>.

²² Reizman, Renée. 2021. *A Glimpse of the Mail Art Made During the Pandemic*. February 1. Accessed June 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/618749/couriers-of-hope-port-city-creative-guild-long-beach/>.

²³ Port City Creative Guild. 2021. *Couriers of Hope*. January. Accessed June 2021. <https://portcitycreativeguild.org/exhibition/couriers-of-hope/>.

Starting With Trellis

Back before sculptures, participants, or submissions, The Trellis Project began with a basic interest in the aesthetic and formal aspects of the trellis. Once noticed in the environment, different forms of trellises appear practically ubiquitous; trellis has, after all, been used as a structure to support plant growth for thousands of years, from the gardens of ancient Rome to the back patio pergolas of Santa Cruz County.²⁴ For me, there is a satisfactory pleasure in seeing the structure itself. The eye follows the intersections of exposed structural supports stacked through the contrast of sunlight and shadow, reveling in their rhythm and organization. This physical and visual interest led to the making of drawings and small models, and with time, a conceptual interest in the trellis followed.

Sheltered in place and witnessing a series of calamities, these structures that support plant growth became a way to think through support structures relevant to our current moment. The global COVID-19 pandemic, for example, continues to foreground the structures that we rely on for support and growth, from the loved ones we connect to on video calls to the networks of essential labor that drive our economy. Countless other structures of support emerged during this time too, notably

²⁴ Walpole, Horace. 1904. *Essay on Modern Gardening*. Canton, PA: Lewis Buddy III: The Kirgate Press. This is a reprinted edition made available online for free; the original was written and published by Walpole himself in 1771. He writes of trellis work found in paintings from Herculaneum.

in the form of community supply networks and mutual aid groups.²⁵ Recent local fires provided yet another example, as the worsening effects of climate change drive people from their homes and force them to locate and rely on new structures of support. This phenomenon is playing out on the world stage, too.²⁶ To address the metaphor at a global scale, one might ask: as human beings spread like vines towards the sunlight, how will our global trellis demand to be refashioned to support their growth?

Digging deeper into the history of the trellis also brought to light several remarkable connections relevant to the current moment of political instability and demands for systemic change. With this research, the trellis form began to accrue new layers of meaning. For example, in the fourth and final volume of his tome on 18th century carpentry, the French master carpenter André Jacob Roubo briefly mentions that trellis carpenters (known as *treillageurs*), who once worked freely under the direction of architects, joined a carpenters' union in 1769.²⁷ This is a small snapshot of the type of worker led politics which would push France towards revolution just 20

²⁵ Two local examples in Santa Cruz include SC Community Fridges, a network of people with refrigerators set up offering free food and essential supplies, and Food Not Bombs Santa Cruz, who continued to feed and supply the homeless population in Santa Cruz throughout the pandemic.

²⁶ Lustgarten, Abrahm. 2020. "The Great Climate Migration Has Begun." *New York Times Magazine*, July 23. In a multimedia collaboration with ProPublica on mapping climate change, Lustgarten writes, "Should the flight away from hot climates reach the scale that current research suggests is likely, it will amount to a vast remapping of the world's populations."

²⁷ Roubo, Andre Jacob. 1769-1777. *L'art du Menuisier*. Paris, 1038.

years later. In his *Tableau de Paris* from the 1780s, Louis Sébastien Mercier writes of this moment: “There has been visible insubordination among the people for several years now, and especially in the trades. Apprentices and lads want to display their independence; they lack respect for the masters, they form corporations [associations]: this contempt for the old rules is contrary to order...”²⁸ Seen in this light, trellis appears as the material trace of collective construction and the self-determination of workers engaged in political revolution. While housed in a university rocked by multiple strikes in the last two years, the trellis sculpture accrues another layer of meaning.²⁹ If it were to be configured with more explicit sounds and imagery pertaining to these local labor struggles, the trellis might stand as an enduring symbol of the “insubordination” of workers.

With this history of collective action and symbolism of support structures in mind, the next step in the project seemed clear: to gather a group of *treillageurs* and construct a trellis together.

What does it mean to construct something together?

The impetus of The Trellis Project is *constructing together*, and the idea of construction is intimately tied to the idea of fiction. To unpack this, one can start with

²⁸ Walters, Jonah. 2015. "A Guide to the French Revolution." *Jacobin*, July 14. Walters quotes Mercier out of Éric Hazan's 2012 book, *A People's History of the French Revolution*.

²⁹ These strikes include the 2020 graduate student UAW wildcat strike as well as the AFSCME 3299 K7 unit strike that preceded it.

philosopher Alain Badiou's conclusion from a recent book, where he issues a call towards "finding the new great fiction."³⁰ The Latin root of the word fiction, *Fictiō*, denotes shaping, forming, and fashioning. Other roots and historical fragments of the word relate to feigning, simulation, and ruse. In other words, one could say that the call to find a new fiction is a call to shape, fashion, and form a set of parameters, to construct modes of being and doing.³¹ Another philosopher, Jacques Rancière, helps to bring this concept into the physical, material world. In a conversation on questions of history and fiction, he writes, "Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done."³² To build something like a trellis together, then, is not only to cut the lumber, assemble the boards, and raise it from the ground, i.e., material rearrangement, but it is also to engage in new ways of doing life with other people. That is to say, building a structure together is as much about the screws breaking the surface of the wood as it is about a cursory exchange with the cashier at Home Depot or a direct message over Instagram with an old friend. As this project unfolded, it would also be about the serendipitous events that emerged from its parameters: strangers writing with moving vulnerability, family members unearthing photographs of my grandmother in a

³⁰ Badiou, Alain. 2012. *Philosophy For Militants*. London: Verso, 77.

³¹ Thanks to UC Santa Cruz theater professor and dramaturge Michael Chemers for bringing this etymology to my attention.

³² Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Continuum, 39.

garden with a trellis from a hundred years ago, or participants creating entirely new artworks using the trellis in unexpected ways.

Furthermore, the work of constructing a trellis together is quite literally the process of collectively building a support structure. In the last decade, this has been a relevant topic in broader political conversations. In the wake of the Occupy movement, for example, Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri observed “an emerging desire to work together in constructing the commons.”³³ For Hardt and Negri, this construction “involves the egalitarian cultivation of the means of collective survival.”³⁴ While building a trellis to support plant growth in a community garden, for example, would be a literal exercise in constructing the commons, building a trellis as a sculpture is a symbolic one.

Adjustments

By the spring of 2020, it became clear that the novel coronavirus was a force to be reckoned with, and that restrictions on public gatherings, shelter in place orders, and mask mandates would be here to stay. It would simply no longer be safe to gather a group of participants in person to build a trellis over any prolonged period of time. The nature of our construction, along with the site of participation, would have to change.

³³ McKee, Yates. 2017. *Strike Art*. London: Verso, 19.

³⁴ McKee, 20.

With this reality setting in, I still proceeded, ironically, to build the sculptural trellis largely on my own, fumbling along with a solid understanding of woodworking and zero experience with garden architecture. In many ways, this building process was an extension of the drawing practice I had been engaged with, focusing on the effort, strain, and struggle of the laboring body. And while the structure came together largely as planned, it was built incorrectly from the top down and stabilized later. With help, the trellis was able to be moved into the central exhibition space and bolted into platforms that had previously been constructed by musicians in the space years before. To the surprise of no one, this process proved an earlier hypothesis: support structures are more easily built with help from others.

While the symbolic support structure was taking up space, the collective aspect of the project still needed to be configured around the limitations of the ongoing pandemic. On advice from my advisor, I decided that I would engage participants through a method many other artists were also using at the time in response to the condition of separation: the postal system.³⁵ Through the post, participants would be invited into a mixed sphere of physical and digital labor.

(Im)material

Rather than gathering to work together at a single site, the participants would now work individually, their labor connected across a diffused network of analog and

³⁵ See note 22

digital processes. This atomization of labor in the project immediately mirrored the surrounding environment; moving from “in person” to a “work from home” status was a change in labor conditions that many in the pandemic have become quite familiar with. Although these processes were adaptations to the circumstance, they nevertheless offered another support structure to address. As participants began to work, they were engaging with a matrix of digitally networked structures, utilizing smartphones, Dropbox uploads, and Google Forms survey submissions. David M. Berry describes these systems using an apt simile: “Compactants may also be layered across a technology stack forming complex networks of sensors, data processors and interface structures, rather like fishing nets or *trellis*.”³⁶ As participants built their physical trellises, their photographs, videos, and words were simultaneously winding like vines through this digital trellis too. In the reflection questions, participants would be asked to reflect on the nature of online support structures and their ownership.

Even though they were making material interventions in the world, participants, like workers in most jobs, were digitizing the results of their work, taking their material labor from desks and tables and transforming it into the seemingly immaterial world of clouds and hard drives. Writing on the concept of “immaterial labor” from Hardt and Negri, Shannon Jackson explains, “the digitally networked world of immaterial work presents itself as a kind of frictionless

³⁶ Berry, David M. 2014. *Critical Theory and the Digital*. New York: Bloomsbury, 68. Emphasis placed here is mine.

space...labor seems no longer to leave any material trace of its enactment.”³⁷ At first glance, this would appear to erase a major part of the premise and intent of the project. After all, the goal was to put a structure together in space and time, not to disperse one across the internet ether. However, Jackson continues to complicate the matter, citing voices that would argue no matter how abstracted or immaterial the product of labor might be, the work still takes place in buildings, bodies, and places. Images of trellises and text about support systems skitter somewhere between electrical pulses, but people still got dirty and glued their fingers together. The immaterial and material are complexly interconnected, and this idea would guide many of the formal decisions in assembling the final trellis sculpture.

When the time came to dive into this assembly, a real struggle and hesitancy

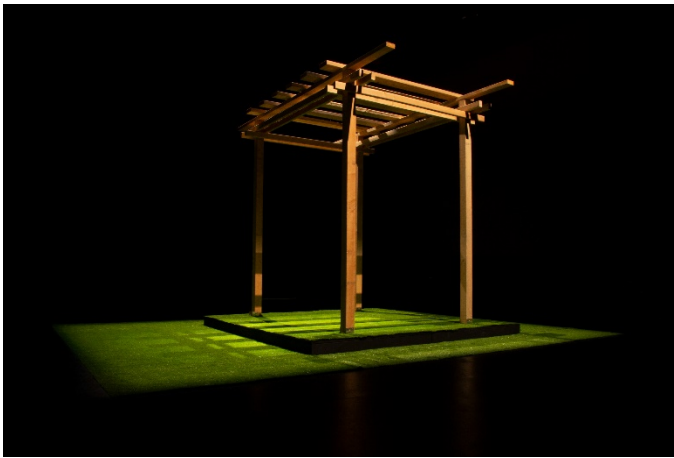


Figure 9: The trellis sculpture before the addition of participant submissions.

emerged in the process. A bare, perfectly artificial symbol stood before me, and a swirling mass of messy images and text were collecting themselves online. The way that these would come together did not appear at all obvious. I

did not want to simulate the community involvement at the sculptural site that I had originally conceived of long before, and now it was increasingly confusing who the

³⁷ Jackson and Weems, 216.

audience was and who the project was for. Another timely conversation helped to place this moment in the larger lifespan of the project. The Trellis Project could be thought of as a performance in three acts – the first, the conception and building of the initial structure; the second, the collection and assembly of participant submissions; and the third, the future of the project and its community. It became obvious that the second act needed a resolution – with the participants and their work in mind, I would assemble their submissions and document it for their gaze.

Much of this assembly happened in a very tactile, physical way that seems antagonistic to a digital arts framework. The digital processes of the project needed to



Figure 10: An image inside the trellis with submissions printed and displayed on monitors.

be represented, but so too did the intimate and sensual qualities of participants' submissions. A trellis kit was crafted for them by hand and sent through the mail for them to work with their hands. With this tactility in mind, writing submissions were printed with

inkjet onto semi-transparent paper and tacked up with simple fishing line and tape. Other writing selections were transferred with paint marker directly onto the structure itself, while certain photographs were printed and taped too. To contextualize these decisions, we can turn to Claire Bishop. In 2012, Bishop wrote that analog trends and

the use of physical media in contemporary art were linked to a “disavowal” of the ever-present background of digital technology³⁸ Looking back at the context in which this work was made, digital technology was not just in the background, it was aggressively foregrounded. Being subject to the conditions of never-ending Zoom calls and digital work, study, and surveillance technologies take a toll on the mind and body. Engaging with the postal service, sculpture, and print became an analog catharsis, a necessary disavowal. Ultimately, monitors would be placed throughout the structure to display submitted images and video, opening up a space for the material and immaterial to intermingle.

Documentation

This intermingling is not without its complications. There are inconsistencies in this work tied to its perception by an audience resulting from the split between the work’s physical presence and its online assemblage of documentation. For example, when visiting the current sculptural site in person, there is not enough information or context provided to allow a visitor to situate themselves. Likewise, comments have suggested that the documentation as it stands does not allow for significant interaction with participants’ writings and submissions. Who, then, is the site for, and how should its documentation function?

³⁸ Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media*. September. Accessed June 2021. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/digital-divide-contemporary-art-and-new-media-31944>. Quoted in Berry, 151.

The work in The Trellis Project is the sum of the installation and the collaborative processes which produced it. The sculpture as it stands, then, with these submissions from this group of participants would not be exhibited or shown again. The physical site itself is intended for the participants that helped construct it as well as other members of a given community that might be present to witness it. In this instance, that includes a small group of friends, professors, or folks affiliated with UC Santa Cruz that have access to the geographical location. As the participants for this work have helped construct it from a distance, and there was not a safe way to have a proper “opening” to any kind of broader public, some of this intent has been lost in translation.

My hope for the work is that participants would find it to be a meaningful process, and that the documentation would function for them as a record of their participation, a receipt that shows their contribution was heard and mattered to the construction of the work. Secondly, the documentation should function as a model to reproduce this performance in future sites and communities. For audiences removed from the process, viewing the documentation should be an experience related to the pedagogical. On practices concerned with art and pedagogy, Claire Bishop writes, “It seems telling that when the most artistically successful instances of pedagogy-as-art today manage to communicate an educational experience to a secondary audience, it is through modes that are time-based or performative: through video...the exhibition...the lecture...or the publication.”³⁹ For this instance of the work to be

³⁹ Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells*. London: Verso, 272.

shown again, it would need to take one of these forms, and even then, the work would not be very effective without a community of participants wanting to create a new instance of collective construction and discussion amongst themselves. The ideal state for The Trellis Project is best expressed by Thomas Hirschhorn when he writes, “Doing art politically means building a platform with the work”⁴⁰ The goal of the documentation of this rendition of the performance, then, is not to become a precious object, but to be something on which different communities might stand to execute the work again to serve their own purposes.⁴¹

Participant Demographic and Race

One of the ironies in planning to execute a participatory work is that the artist often maintains the assumption of participation. The final sculptural work had not even half of the number of submissions I originally planned to work with. This was due to the time required to create and send each trellis kit as well as the investment of time, labor, and energy asked of each participant.⁴²

⁴⁰ Hirschhorn, Thomas. Edited by Lisa Lee and Hal Foster. 2013. *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 74.

⁴¹ On this topic, artist Laurie Palmer mentioned the phrase “seeding communities.” See also John Malpede’s work with the Los Angeles Poverty Department in Lacy, 261.

⁴² Thanks to artist A.M. Darke for sharing her comments and feedback as a participant and for highlighting the labor asked of each *treillageur*.

This reduced scope was also combined with an under-considered approach to selecting participants. It made sense to begin by asking my immediate support structure - family and friends - to participate in the work. From there, those initial participants brought in more folks, and as I posted about the opportunity online, the spots began to fill up. While this approach did lead to some diversity of gender and sexual identity amongst participants, it led to very little diversity in race or class, resulting in images of trellis labor from largely white, middle class Americans.

In a conversation about art and who it benefits between the artist Tania Bruguera, the curator Annie Fletcher, and the artist Renzo Martens, Martens says something that can be useful here: “I don’t have power over many things. I don’t have power over the global economic structures. The only thing I can possibly have a little bit of power over is how I disclose my own position within that”⁴³ In order to take Martens seriously and to stay true to a project that is about support structures, it is necessary to look critically at this white structure and attempt to disclose my own position within it. The participants that I immediately reached out to in order to kickstart the project were also those that were the easiest to reach. The resulting assemblage of submissions is thus also a portrait of me, my support structure, and who I could most easily form a co-laboring community with. When taking this into account alongside the work’s engagement with European labor history and images

⁴³ Arte Util. 2017. *Interview Tania Bruguera, Annie Fletcher and Renzo Martens*. July 6. Accessed June 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHoPGYulQME>.

and stories from my own family, this iteration of the project can be read as being about some of the underlying economic, labor, and emotional conditions of white people. This was not my intent with the work, and while it is not inherently a negative thing, it means that making collaborative art that engages across racial lines will require more work on my end to form new, intentional relationships. It will also require a hard look at who benefits within and from the work that takes place.⁴⁴

Additionally, the trellis forms in this project are modeled on those frequently sold in kits at hardware store chains and built in suburban backyards owned by the white middle class, which is a double-edged sword. At one edge, the installation is very consciously an artificial, constructed idea of a bourgeois garden. With its AstroTurf, fake sunlight, and birds chirping indoors, it is not actually supporting plant growth; This “engineered product” highlights the fact that support structures are indeed invented.⁴⁵ White, middle class life is artificially constructed, and the world is full of competing sets of constructed fictions. At the other edge, this can limit a reading of the installation to a simple list of the struggles of a small, privileged demographic. People have different perceptions of or relationships to the formal object at the center of the work depending on their intersecting identities, and future

⁴⁴ See note 43 for further conversation on who benefits from art. See also the G.L.A.M. Collective (<https://glamcollective.ca/>) who spoke on this topic in relation to collaborative projects at the UCLA TAPS Graduate Conference *Contact: Performing Proximity*, Feb. 19, 2021.

⁴⁵ Diller Scofidio + Renfro. 1998. *American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life*. June 16. Accessed June 2021. <https://dsrny.com/project/american-lawn>.

collaborative construction projects could take this into account to work with forms that are relevant to a specific community and its members.⁴⁶

(In)Formal

A number of critique conversations have also centered around formal aspects of the installation that remain unresolved, like the electrical cords appearing as vines on the trellis or the hanging texts representing flowering growths. They may appear too sparsely and randomly; to make these connections clearer and to guide the viewer more purposefully, the overall presentation could have benefitted from pushing its messy aesthetic further and incorporating a much denser display of both cords and participant submitted material. The text on the structure, too, appears undesignated as authored by the artist or participants. These less resolved aspects exist in tension between formal aesthetic traditions derived from modern and contemporary art and what one might refer to as community aesthetics. Suzanne Lacy quotes Judith Baca on these different approaches to image making,

“In some productions where you are going for the power of the image, you can get a large amount of input from the community before the actual making of the image, then you take control of the aesthetic. That’s one model. Another is a fully collaborative process in which you give the voice to the community and they make the image. Both of these processes are completely valid, but there’s very little room for the second because artists take such huge risks becoming associated with a process that might not end up as a beautiful object”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Thanks to artists Emily Irvin and Jillian Groening for their insight in our working group during the UCLA TAPS conference. See note 44.

⁴⁷ Lacy, 44-45

This work tries to harmonize aspects of both of these approaches. On the one hand, participants were allowed to do anything they wanted with their trellis creations. Guidelines were offered, but ultimately the images and videos submitted were fully their voice. On the other hand, I was in control of the assembling all of the various inputs and trying to make them work together in a cohesive image. This process extended beyond the participants, as many of the key decisions like the grass, the cords as vines, and writing in a graffiti style on the trellis were suggestions taken directly from colleagues and advisors. Future works using these methods might benefit from staying more strictly within one process or the other, or at the very least keeping them intentionally in mind at the outset of the work. Lacy continues on to quote critic Jeff Kelley who argues that works like these must be evaluated by their processes as much as by the end product.⁴⁸ Thinking along these lines, perhaps the submissions from participants function too much as window dressings on the final sculpture. The formal aspects of the work might have been more completely resolved if the submissions themselves were somehow literally necessary to create the structure itself. If the submissions were the structure itself, the process and product might live together more harmoniously.

⁴⁸ Lacy, 45.

Towards the Future

At the same time that research was just beginning on The Trellis Project, I was also peeking into the future beyond the academic timeline of the thesis itself. I wanted to use the work to try out models of building an infrastructure for a practice. If we were going to build a trellis, I wanted to build a trellis for my trellis. I wanted the work to be able to support itself.

To that end, I teamed up with two different designers to brand The Trellis Project. Taking design cues from 18th century graphics and French revolution propaganda, we were able to create a prototype for two special edition trellis kits as well as a custom collection of *Treillageur* branded clothing. Though still in progress, the hope is that the launch of these kits and clothes will bring a larger audience into the project while raising money for a local support organization in Santa Cruz. This model



Figure 11: The primary logo for The Trellis Project.

of working has its precedents too. Art critic Ben Davis writes that “a small subset of superstar artists...function as the heads of design firms, with art objects being just one of the various product lines they are engaged with turning out (if still the most central).”⁴⁹ Interacting with a brand of this nature on social media is also one of the

⁴⁹ Davis, Ben. 2013. *9.5 Theses On Art and Class*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 135.

most prominent aesthetic languages of cultural participation that exists today. If these tactics can be successfully leveraged to create a material, economic impact towards building support structures out in the world, the work may still “function in the world of symbolism” yet also begin to “operate as a concrete agent of change.”⁵⁰

Lacy also acknowledges the importance of the continuity of relationships with participants in an artistic project like this. For The Trellis Project, this will unfold over a timeline that far outlives its academic one. First, a proper sharing of the installation documentation should take place and could be followed by group discussions and interviews with participants of this instance of the work. A plethora of video and sound artifacts from meetings like this could become part of the work’s documentary record and open themselves up to several possibilities for display and installation.

In an ideal world, if the work were to be scaled up, the performance sites could be strewn across an entire city. Imagine that the material gathering, conversation having, and structure building could take place in several dozen different locations in a city with people of varying identities and occupations at a diverse set of locations. If all these activities could be recorded and documented at their respective sites of performance, one would be able to assemble a dense map of a city or population with the capacity to zoom in or out on the living conditions, labor conditions, and structural supports of a city itself.

⁵⁰ Lacy, 46.

A more modest, near future effort with this work includes working with the Homeless Garden Project here in Santa Cruz, an organization that provides “job training, transitional employment and support services to individuals in Santa Cruz who are experiencing homelessness.”⁵¹ Dismantling, preparing, and reconstructing the trellis at the HGP farm will provide an opportunity to document the transition of the work from a sculpture to a functioning structure that will support plant growth as part of a larger ecosystem which supports members of the community. These processes will also give the work an opportunity to function specifically for this site. While the most recent iteration of the project saw labor and reflections from participants in a number of dispersed geographic locations, this upcoming iteration will hopefully provide the opportunity to critically examine the support structures of the Santa Cruz community in which it will stand.

The broadest notions of this work can be translated into different mediums as well and need not be restricted to garden architecture. Ultimately, the work is not about the trellis as much as it is not about other structures that have caught my attention, like windmills, oil pumps, telephone lines, railroad tracks, or the backs of signs. It is born from a formal, aesthetic interest in the structures that grind the actual gears of power together, and the involvement of all those who these processes touch. For all of its shortcomings, The Trellis Project is a starting point and a striving point,

⁵¹ Homeless Garden Project. n.d. *homelessgardenproject.org*. Accessed June 2021. <https://homelessgardenproject.org/>.

and in this, I am in good company. After all, “All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that’s more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.”⁵²

⁵² Bishop quotes artist Dan Graham on page 1 of *Artificial Hells*.

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