

# PLENTY

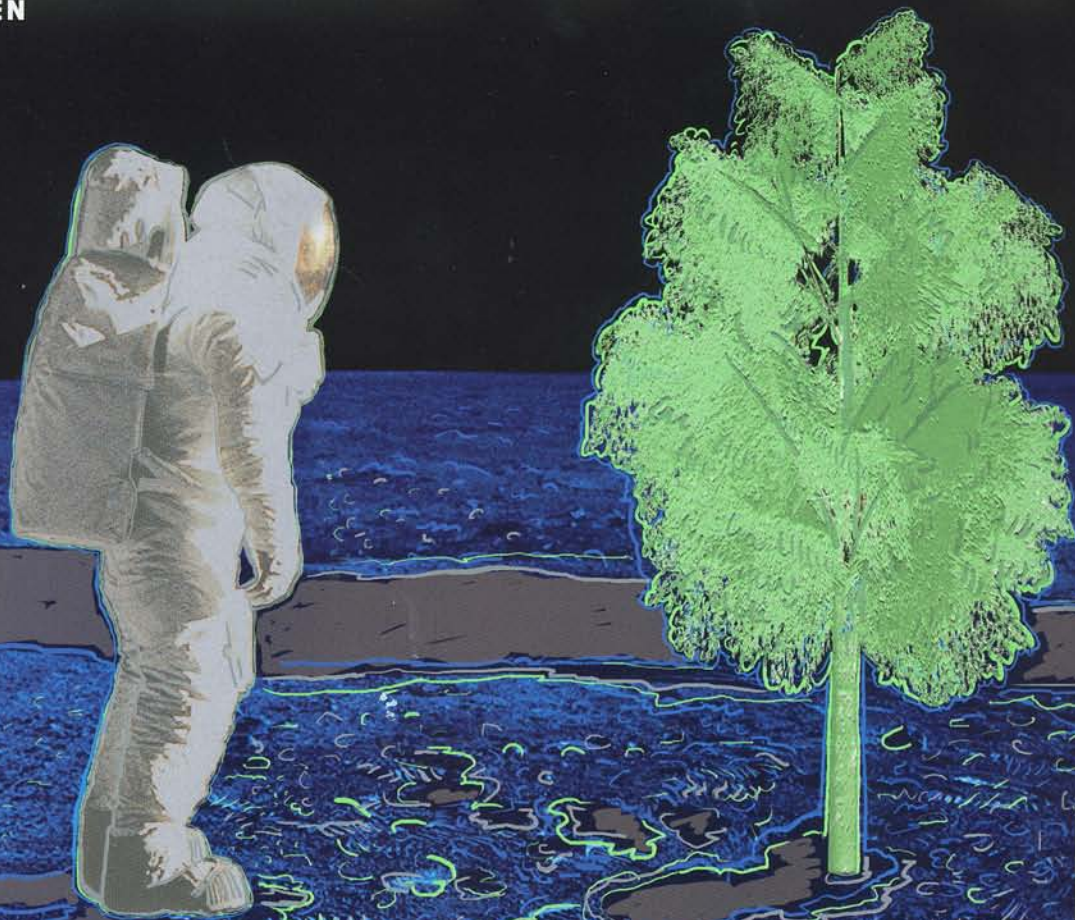
IT'S EASY BEING GREEN

**SPACE:  
THE LAST  
RESORT?**

**SAVING  
THE WILD  
A WRITER'S  
MANIFESTO**

**IS NICARAGUA  
THE NEW  
COSTA RICA?**

**THE COOLEST  
ECO-JOBS**



## Earth '06

**AN ELECTION GUIDE**

★ BUSH'S ENVIRO RECORD ★ KEY RACES TO WATCH  
★ THE ISSUES, STATE BY STATE

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2006





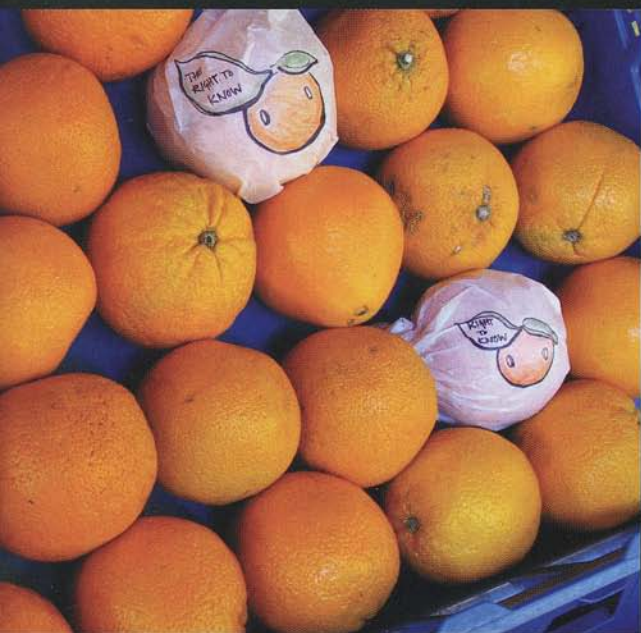
BEFORE

# ART FARMS

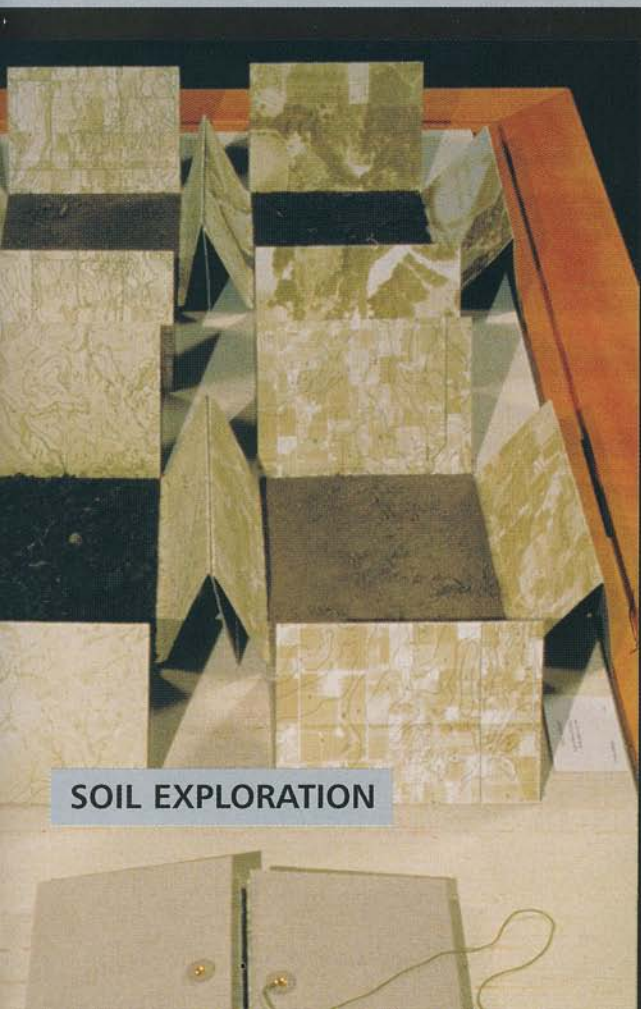


WITH AND SANS LAWN: A family in suburban Los Angeles now grows their favorite veggies at home, thanks to a makeover by eco-artist Fritz Haeg.

The eco-art movement is bringing  
agriculture back into urban  
environments By Justin Tyler Clark



**AG GETS ARTSY:** Gallery shows like “Beyond Green” and “Hybrid Fields” examine our relationship to food and farming. The artists’ collaborative Free Soil (top row) and artist Christy Rupp (bottom, left) focus on food labeling, while Laura Parker examines soil’s connection to place (bottom, right).



RT HAS ALWAYS BEEN FOOD FOR THOUGHT, but these days it’s also thought about food. At Northern California’s Sonoma County Museum, patrons this autumn can dispense with the usual crackers and brie; instead, they’ll head straight for the hydroponic rooftop vegetable garden set up on an adjacent building. They’ll hear the music of a “fruit-a-phone,” a xylophone that amplifies the sound of fruit falling from a tree above it. They’ll gaze at piles of fruit that go unharvested in local orchards, a vivid symbol of modern agriculture’s waste. They’ll see exhibits explaining what’s in their food—and there’s a good chance they’ll pause as they sit down to their next meal.

The museum’s “Hybrid Fields” show, which focuses on slow food, agricultural land use, and genetically modified crops, is just one of several recent and upcoming art exhibitions that give new meaning to the term “museum fare.” In Los Angeles, artist and landscape architect Fritz Haeg replaced a water-wasting suburban lawn with an “edible estate” composed of seasonal crops. Last year, New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) organized the “Groundswell” exhibition, featuring a number of large-scale, sustainable land-redevelopment projects. (One documented the transformation of a French industrial park into a botanical garden with food crops.) This past spring, MoMA’s neighbor, the Museum of Arts and Design, hosted “Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art,” which included a piece



**LAND IMPROVEMENT:** The international exhibit “Groundswell” showcased innovations in urban agriculture and eco-landscaping, including a water garden in Bordeaux, France, by Catherine Mosbach (above), and Martha Schwartz’s “Ditch Fountain” in Exchange Square in Manchester, England (right).

demonstrating how far the average orange travels from the grove to the urban consumer.

Important issues, sure, but what does the journey of a piece of fruit have to do with art? Everything, says Patricia Watts, curator of “Hybrid Fields,” who left the Los Angeles art scene to work for the Topanga Department of Conservation in Southern California. She is part of a growing movement of artists and curators who defy categorization (and frustrate some in the art world) by incorporating equal parts agriculture, environmental engineering, urban planning, and good, old-fashioned aesthetics.

Agriculture isn’t the eco-art movement’s only issue, but Watts suggests that it is a critical one in cities, where museums are typically concentrated. “It empowers people in urban areas to know where their

food is coming from, that they’re not completely at the hands of someone growing it hundreds or thousands of miles away,” she says.

This democratic sensibility is something of a mixed bag for contemporary eco-artists, though—just ask Fritz Haeg. The artist and landscape architect taught a class at the California Institute of the Arts called “The Fine Art of Radical Gardening.” Haeg’s students spent an entire semester planting an on-campus vegetable garden that defies easy categorization. Is it installation, landscape design, or land art on a miniature scale? Does growing crops count as artistic expression? The classic American lawn, with its connotations of ’50s suburbia, might not be very revolutionary, but not even Haeg’s progressive institution is thrilled about turning the school’s courtyards into farmland. “Some of the administration is

“It empowers people in urban areas to know where their food is coming from.”



**NEW CROP:** Last year, artist Lauren Bon created a 32-acre cornfield installation at the edge of downtown Los Angeles in a space left empty by urban decay (above and right).

scared of it because they think grass is pretty,” says Haeg.

In the past, these constraints have forced many environmental artists to travel to remote regions in order to find spaces that accommodate their work. While artist Lauren Bon, one notable exception to this rule, was able to plant a 32-acre cornfield installation at the edge of downtown Los Angeles last year, relatively few art aficionados have had a chance to see some of the best-known land art sculptures, like Robert Smithson’s celebrated *Spiral Jetty* (a gigantic spiral rock sculpture that sits in Utah’s Great Salt Lake).

But there is an important distinction between environmental art like Smithson’s and contemporary eco-art, say Watts and Amy Lipton of Ecoartspace, a bicoastal nonprofit that nurtures eco-artists. Many of today’s eco-artists are working in the opposite direction as Smithson, restoring natural spaces rather than altering them. “Smithson’s work was later questioned because it was a case of people permanently reshaping the environment,” explains Watts. “A lot of artists today are trying to reduce humanity’s impact.”

“Environment” is interpreted broadly. Many eco-artists have focused on large swaths of public lands, where it is easier to get funding for reclamation and restoration. But some, like Haeg, are interested in transforming small pieces of private property. With

“A lot of artists today are trying to reduce humanity’s impact.”

## NOT A CORNFIELD



# ART FARMS

**NATURE AS CLASSROOM:** An eco-art installation by students at Carnegie Mellon University (right) and a “radical gardening” project by Cal-Arts students (below).

## INDOOR FARMING



## GREENING THE SCHOOLGROUNDS



*Edible Estates*, a work that will appear at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in the fall, Haeg will show what happened when he replaced a Los Angeles family's front lawn with an edible garden that included everything from tomatoes to peach trees to exotic herbs. Haeg hopes to draw viewers out of the gallery and into a San Fernando Valley neighborhood where grass is considered, well, pretty. The eco-revolution, he implies, will not be gallerized.

Artist Robert Bingham, who teaches a class similar to Haeg's at Carnegie Mellon University, says that one of the most interesting parts of the movement is that it doesn't just redefine what art is, or where it's seen, but who makes it. “The hard part of eco-art is that it doesn't scream of art, but it's about creative thinking,” he says. He admits that because eco-art projects often consist of simply planting corn in vacant lots—or rolling up an entire meadow and placing it on a building's roof, as Bingham's mentors once did—some feel that it's not really art at all.

“The idea is everyone is an artist,” says Sam Bower of Greenmuseum.org, an online “museum” devoted to the genre. He likens eco-art to “social sculpture,” a concept developed by German artist and Green Party cofounder Joseph Beuys. “Whether you're a school teacher or postal worker, your aesthetics shape the world,” Bower adds. Eco-art often brings together individuals with disparate talents: Bingham, for example, is collaborating with other artists and the Army Corps of Engineers to restore a stream valley outside Pittsburgh to its pre-industrial state.

Watts agrees that the movement is a democratic one. “Environmental restoration is the art of this time, and artists are perfect to create those kinds of conversations,” she says. “The end result is it doesn't have to be art at all any more—it becomes a new way of living.”

At the very least, art lovers now have something to munch on at openings besides little cubes of cheese. ■

Photographs courtesy of Robert Bingham (top) and Fritz Haeg (left)