

Emily Floyd: In the knowledge garden

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Gardening is perhaps the most cultured activity in which most people participate. It is constructed, dismantled, renewed constantly and often in front of our eyes. Through understanding gardening – and I use that term to encompass agriculture as well as the humble garden bed – we gain a greater understanding of our society and community.

Primarily known as a sculptor and working with and across installation, wood, felt, printing, text and, more recently, steel in the form of outdoor public art, Emily Floyd's work is incredibly thoughtful and singular in the way it deals with the idea of the garden, of growth and renewal. It is a theme that has run across her practice since graduating in sculpture from Melbourne's RMIT University in 1999. Gardening can be both social and anti-social, communal or deeply personal, and being a gardener can be a lot like being an artist. It is also an immensely political activity, and Floyd's work explores and examines the garden's role – as food source, as a site to be developed and contemplated, as a beautiful constructed space, and as metaphor.

At the moment, for instance, it seems that the whole world has gone market garden-crazy. There is a certain kind of fascism and cultism growing around the cult of heirloom seeds, organics and community plots – an interest which is both long overdue and mildly over-the-top. I regularly have garage sales at my house in inner-city Sydney, and recently an artist I know came along. I was selling lots of plants – succulents and bromeliads. He said he wouldn't buy anything unless he could eat it.

This kind of monocultural thinking comes under Floyd's ambit in *Organic Practice* (2009). The work consists of a series of carved wooden fruit and vegetables and long strips of timber engraved with the URLs of green and activist websites, piled into the type of cardboard box we might get at an organic market – no plastic of course. The work plays off urban fears of hopelessness in the face of environmental catastrophe and the desperation of the educated public who

may feel that by somehow partaking in an organic market – now marketed to inner-city hipsters and feel-good baby boomers – they will somehow play a role in saving the planet.

It's a movement not to be discredited, but when you add the food miles from both producer and consumer, the type of product and the often agriculturally intensive means by which commercial quantities need to be produced and maintained, the benefit is positive but not dramatic. For now it's better than shopping at Australia's larger supermarkets perhaps. The real benefit goes into supporting small producers and suppliers – the cultural ecosystem of food production, the network.

In Floyd's work this interconnectivity is paramount – in the whirligig form of *Garden Sculpture* (2009) the URLs of various food and political blogs are etched once again into timber slats. The work is an up-scaled version of the typical spinning doodad you might see in a student house, but its spiral form is also reminiscent of a DNA double helix, or even a handheld seed sower where the seeds spin out of the hopper to spread evenly across a prepared bed. But here, rather than seeds, ideas spin out from the centre and settle to grow once the conditions are right.

This body of work also creates a correlation between the subcultures of the food market and the art world in which – to make a fairly general analogy – our larger institutions resemble the dominating presence of the big supermarket chains, while the smaller and more responsive artist-run initiatives (and the artists themselves) represent the community-minded organic markets. I know when I go into a large supermarket I close down to social interaction, while at a market this interaction is actually a very real part of the exchange. In the former we hold production and consumption at arms-length, while the latter incorporates these aspects into the commercial narrative and exchange – which, it must be said, resembles the strata of the art community and its institutional relationships.

These works grew, in part, out of Floyd's analysis of the writing of Bill Mollison who, in 1978, co-authored *Permaculture One* with David Holmgren.¹ Permaculture, as the name suggests, is an amalgam of 'permanent' and 'culture' – a sustained model of farming and agricultural practice that is a system of renewal and return. Floyd links the ideas of Mollison and Holmgren to minimalist and conceptualist practices in Australia that began in the 1970s and that are roughly contemporaneous with the formation and publication of their initial collaborative work. The illustrations in *Permaculture One* have a particular relationship to hard-edge painting or minimal sculpture, while the almost cultish air that surrounds the work is pungent. They are also very much of a particular moment in Australian art, and it is no coincidence that in the acknowledgments of *Permaculture One* the authors thank both Col James, the radical architect, and Robyn Ravlich, poet and broadcaster, both of whom were part of the creative community around the Tin Sheds open studio, established at the University of Sydney in 1968. Floyd has also noted the book's sense of being instructional – again very much within the conceptual spirit of the time in which it was published.

This use of the principles of permaculture is what I remember seeing in Floyd's *How to make a manifesto grow* (2008) in the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art's 2008–09 survey exhibition 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism'. I was impressed by the work's simplicity, and its flippant disregard of modernism's legacies, all set up within an environment that seemed to play with the idea of a utopian workspace. It asked children to make a compost garden using some of the leading art manifestos of the twentieth century, and it seemed to suggest that ideas (in art and culture) are permanently in a state of entropy and renewal – like a good, rich compost. It treated the twentieth century as a kind of stinky pile through which we can sift pungent pockets of energy and nutrients to return to the garden and grow ideas back into a living cycle.

Similarly, the work *The Garden (here small gestures make complex structures)* (2012) was also a commission for children – this time as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's Bella Program for children with specific needs. Here the garden was a multisensory space, as beguiling for adult as for children, and the one thing that stays with me from the work was its particular woody, earthy aroma. Smell is a sense not employed with enough sensitivity in a contemporary art context, but one paramount in a 'real' garden. As with *Make a manifesto*, its charm lay in its combination of smart ideas and beautifully made objects, with meaning made readily accessible through play and activity. Never underestimated was the intelligence of the possible participants to engage with the work on a multitude of levels – from the kinetic to the intellectual, creating in the process 'a place of growth ... a knowledge garden'.²

If you have ever looked at gardening at its high point – places like Sissinghurst or Hidcote – you realise that the garden space functions, physically and architecturally, like a museum or gallery. The walls, hedges and paths define the space like gallery walls and floors. The plants themselves play off against this structure in much the same way that artworks bounce off the gallery wall – ping-pong and popping in the same way that a well-curated exhibition of great artwork can, where the texture, forms and ideas link objects across space both through the eye and mind.

The gardener cannot help but pay attention to volume, space and form, and as an artist working mainly in three dimensions, these too are Floyd's preoccupations. (The formal use of space is something she has noted as having been a particular focus with her lecturers at university.) There is a constant consideration of the work as you move around it and the perspective extrapolates and foreshortens. Images coalesce and disappear, words change to blocks and back again to words. Texts are often at a different scale to the overall composition – it is both a macro and micro view – in the same



Emily Floyd, The Garden (here small gestures make complex structures), 2012, installation views, Jackson Bella Room, National Centre for Creative Learning, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2012; recycled timbers, wool felt, beeswax, fabric, baked ink; images courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery; © the artist



Emily Floyd, Permaculture Crossed With Feminist Science Fiction, 2008, installation view, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; wood, vinyl, polish; image courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sydney

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way that a good planting scheme draws you to look down and close as well as up and across. And, of course, in *The Garden* and *How to make a manifesto grow* you are in the work in the same way you could be in an enclosed or hedged space.

It is somehow perfect that Floyd's work is being shown in a survey at Heide which, more than any other venue in Australia, has a garden at its very heart. The landscape shaped and formed by Sunday and John Reed is palpable, living and undeniable proof of the power of gardening as a cultured activity. Through Floyd's work being placed within this context – where the big floor-to-ceiling windows project out into the garden space – time is also pulled into her orbit. Her time plays with the utopian ideals of the past and looks at them as specific cultural objects and moments. Is gardening not a push against time? Against mortality? Any good gardener will tell you that their work is never finished and if you are ambitious enough it can last for hundreds of years – as can art. But perhaps even more distinct in gardening is its ephemeral nature – this is its special beauty: to create something within which change is constant and obsolescence is built.

Importantly, if there is one place where the world of art and gardens diverges it is in the concept of the artist

actually creating something that can exist in perpetuity within the world, of taking ideas and fixing them in a solid form. We can trace this impulse or desire in Floyd's recurring use of web addresses carved into wood – making permanent what the artist calls 'an ephemeral text that everyone has circulating through their life, a new form of language'.³ In this way Floyd uses art's advantages over the natural world. With her field of specific objects and cultural moments, she has created a knowledge garden, fixing the ideas of the fecund recent past in the still growing present.

1. David Holmgren and Bill Mollison, *Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements*, Transworld Publishers, Melbourne, 1978.

2. Emily Floyd, from 'Artist's Voice: Emily Floyd', Museum of Contemporary Australia, Sydney, 31 January 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FojFnzZUWw0, accessed 1 March 2014.

3. Emily Floyd, from Michaela Webb, 'A Conversation with Emily Floyd', *Broadsheet*, Melbourne, 3 May 2010, www.broadsheet.com.au/melbourne/arts-and-entertainment/article/emily-floyd-conversation, accessed 1 March 2014.

'Emily Floyd: Far Rainbow' is at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, until 13 July 2014.