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Eden Martin and Their Genetic Lives

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This text about the intersection of art and agriculture describes our era where the desertification of both soils and imaginations has brought productivism up against its limits. From the genetico-culture that took off in the early 2000s to farmer-artists with superexploited egos, it uses a series of examples – the Women's Lands in Oregon and Gianfranco Baruchello's Agricola Cornelia, among others – to explore the frictions between the autonomy of art and political autonomy as a means to write narratives on and with living things. This text is part of a series of publications in conjunction with the group show Les vies génétiques d'Eden Martin held at the biodynamic farm of Aude and Antoine Hentsch.*





Visual of the exhibition *Les Vies génétiques d'Eden Martin*. Design: Boris Meister

Interior Compost

While there are many ways to practice agriculture, the agro-pharmaceutical industry has come to dominate the cultivation of the land over the past five centuries. The earth is treated like the human body, with the recommendation of therapies that divide it industrially into parts to be kept unified so as to resolve local problems at the global level. The ecological crisis, which seems to be more a product of humanity's new awareness than a recent phenomenon, has brought about a realization that the ecocide extends to impoverished subsoils as well as saturated air and exhausted oceans.

Starting in the early 2000s, the fusion between the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors became complete with the rise of biogenetic corporations that upend and accelerate the long-term process of genetic selection and the symbiotic adaptation of species to their ecosystem. The colonialist myth of an agriculture that could eradicate famine everywhere thanks to the wonders of genetic engineering (such as GMOs) has gone over to technological absolutism. The mass media (the Web and the digital rhizome) were said to promise the democratization and concretization of the general intellect.[1] Here what could be called a "genetico-culture" has encountered what could be one of the twenty-first centuries biggest problematics: one of life's basic characteristics [2] is to mutate in response to the circumstances and constructions of its manifestations.[3]

Today we're said to have two models for what rurality could be, a choice between technocrat lawn gnomes who impose technologized agrarian normativization to maintain their economy of life (traditionally conventional while seeking an over-the-top modernity) and rural activists fighting to defend squatter communes and other sons and daughters of the 1960s who hope that reappropriating the subsoil can deliver them from the oppressive technico-genetics of life on the surface. The gap between these two models points to a profound interrogation of the link between work and living beings, biology and politics, and capital and aesthetics: How to work with living things? What distinguishes between servitude and genetic selection (whether called natural or artificial)? How to run, affectively and ethically, our economy of life and death? In ecology, can aesthetics merge with biopolitics? Can power be exercised without domination? In response to these questions there arises a spectrum that borrows from both the universalist myth of the Enlightenment based on the sovereignty and autonomy of the body (the subject become individual), and the social contract become ecological (post-Rousseauist) whose concern is with the interdependency of ecosystems and the agency of their populations (the subject become agent).

The Uberization of farmers

We (the authors) represent a crossbreed of these two models. One of us grew up in a family that saw their farm as a project whose goal was independence, combining sheep farming with education and the sharing of agricultural skills among farmers in Southwestern France. The other spent their childhood on a productivist farm in Gros-de-Vaud, specializing in raising grain crops and dairy production. These two models were motivated by differing visions of autonomy. One sought to break with the market economy and return to an authentic way of life, while the other sought to use technology to rise above their class origins. These asymmetric aspirations are testament to the identity crisis family farmers are undergoing at a time when the status of many "independent" farmers is no different than Uber drivers, with industrial groups that dictate what to grow and even supply the inputs – whether seeds, plants, land or animals which they then buy back from the producers at "maturity" if the market price is high enough.

This pastoral drama is contextualized by a global crisis that in turn is giving rise to the old dream of autonomy that casts a troubling shadow on art, which has never really dealt with its own. The integration of ecological issues into artistic practices can be understood in terms of this question. Some social engaged art spontaneously falls into tune with alternative practices in agriculture. Both are rooted in the same schools of thought, particularly the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, a vector of libertarian Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy, and biodynamic agriculture. Some of today's artists and collectives take up these same questions with their advocacy of eco-education. The garden as a classroom for teaching a sense of mutual responsibility, the ethics of care and the emulation of ecologist thinking.[4] Here the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys, the generally recognized progenitor of these practices, is reactivated in a mix in which art, life and politics become almost indistinct. At the other end of the spectrum, galleries and museums show art that represents the Anthropocene with

varying degrees of success. They strive to represent and proclaim the end of the division between nature and culture, or the organic and synthetic. Artworks that present petrified and fetishized forms of raw materials and the refuse of our post-industrial civilization in a squeaky-clean laboratory-like setting.

Subsoil and subtext

The exhaustion of the subsoil and subtext fatigue go together. [5] Both of them, locked into anthropocentric approaches, are sucked up to the surface so that their substance cultivates and transforms ecosystems meant for humans seeking autonomy, visibility and power. Our body has become the first and last property we can possess allegorically or materially. This romantic dream of property must be given every opportunity to express itself by capitalizing energies and telluric forces so that they can be made available for perception and consumption. The subtext, a rough draft of tangled meanings, an ecosystem that allows the text to emerge and take form, is thus overworked to boost its productive capacities.[6]

Medication is to the subsoil what aesthetics is to the subtext: the latter must be processed like our performed bodies so as to engender, depending on humors and emotions, a specialized or specific consciousness: the processing of the code (DNA, subtext, medication) and its sign (its manifestation, the text, its form).[7] Whether in the contemporary art industry or agriculture, the surface serves as the setting for the expression of property. Both have become predators that by appropriating ground (symbolic or physical), cultivate (and often clean up) perceptions or territories to proclaim that they are in “nature.” In late capitalism, promoting and activating ecosystems augments the myth of our bodies as our property, and its objectification by the earth or artworks amounts to nothing more than greenwashing for the surgical space of the White Cube become the Brown Cube.

This reification of the subtext and the subsoil also signals a paradigm shift in commodity fetishism. While once upon a time artworks were purchased for their symbolic surplus value (their aura), nowadays, in a perspectivist osmosis of the body’s property owner, we can now sell ourselves as commodities (our image, value, interiority, etc.). To be the proprietor or producer of an artwork comes down to buying yourself in an attempt to transcend yourself or free yourself (become autonomous) of the guilt of the deleterious effects of having the responsibility of possessing a body. In the end, the artwork, like the earth, ends up with its resources exhausted. The end of the imagination we are experiencing is also synonymous with the crisis of our interior ecology that now posseses us.

Myths of autonomy

In these dystopian times can artists take back agricultural lands in any way more meaningful than laboring on them or simply trying to exemplify them? Here we want to mention two kinds of historical research on the quest for autonomy in art and agriculture.[8]

In her book *Women’s Lands* [9] the French sociologist Françoise Flamant recounts the experiences of groups of American lesbians who sought to reinvent their social, political and spiritual lives through ecologically-friendly subsistence farming in the harsh Oregon mountains. Dispensing with male expertise, the members of these lesbian separatist movements learned to build their own houses, farm the land and cut wood. While some trained artists like Tee Corinne[10] lived on these lands, by the early 1970s the practice of art became common. Photography was particularly widespread as a documentary medium and especially as a form of subjective expression through self-portraits, the staging of naked bodies and the use of mirrors.[11] In another unique practice, even as they worked the land for their subsistence women sculpted the landscape to resemble women’s bodies or vulvas. This symbolic re-gendering of nature was reciprocal with the marking of these women by

their work on it.

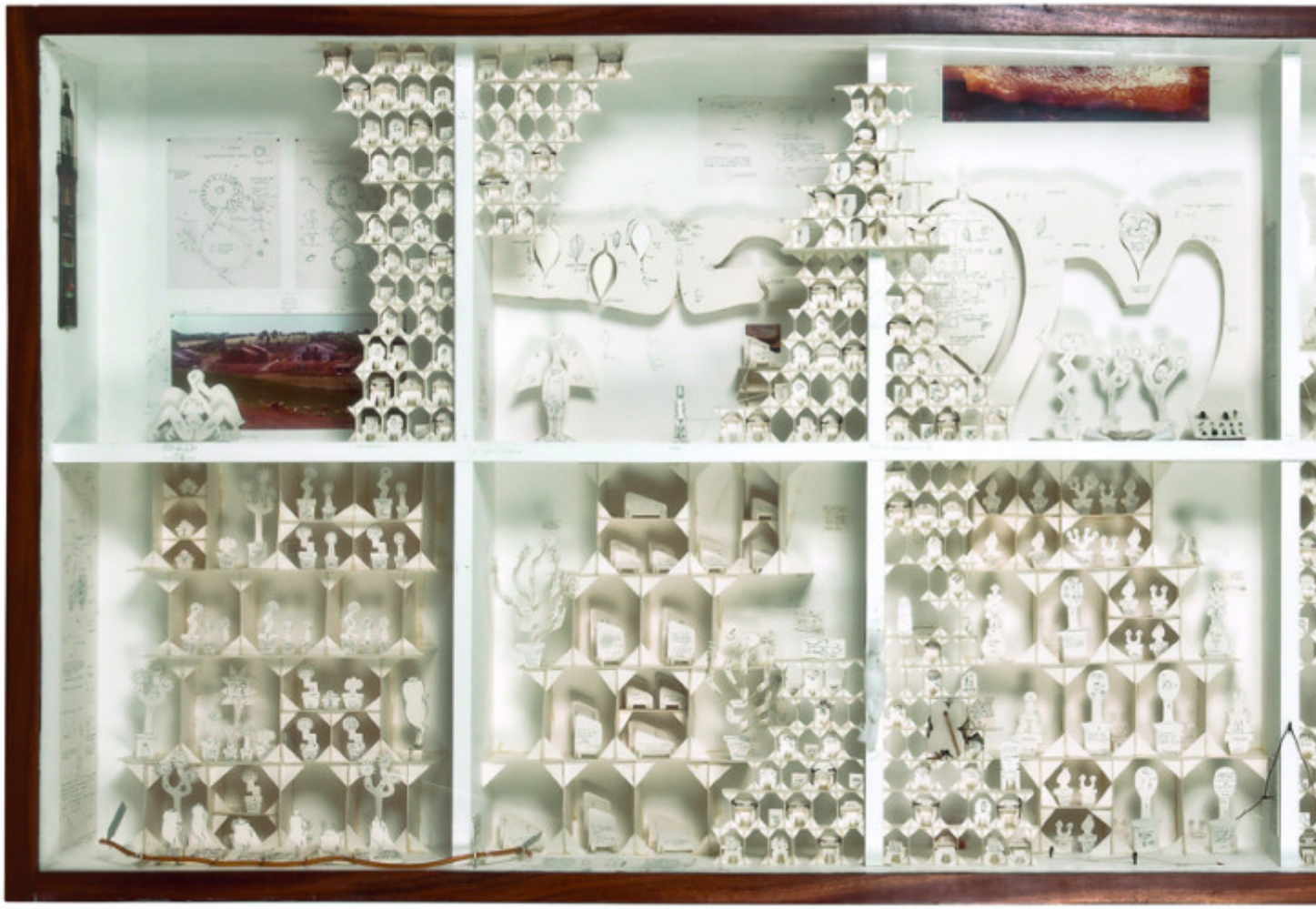




Extract of the book by Carmen Winant, *Notes on Fundamental Joy*, Printed Matter, 2019

The cultural disappropriation of artistic production by its naturalization in this eco-feminist movement distanced and distinguished it from the identifiable and well-trodden aesthetic paths of art as a specific or professional practice. Cultural production was linked to actually cultivating the earth and not only representing it.[12] Withdrawing from capitalism doesn't just mean developing non-commodity relations but also no longer reproducing patriarchal systems and their corollary, the patriarchal family (considered as principally constitutive of relations of domination and the reproduction of classes). They were totally opposed to traditional (or conventional) farming and ecologically deleterious modes of land management based on ecological predation that appropriate ecosystems.[13] Inspired by rurality, the newly-established artistic representations and aesthetic perceptions were put forward in opposition to urban machismo and predefined gender relations. The multiplication of biological interdependencies, whether cultural, agricultural or spiritual, fuse into a single topos. It would be difficult to distinguish between fields transformed into vulvas and representations of the female body in photographic practice.

During this same period, the Italian artist Gianfranco Baruchello, a far-left militant, distanced himself from the small groups that hurled themselves into violence and instead engaged in a more discreet and individual project. An early rural squatter, from 1973-1981 Baruchello lived illegally on a farm on the outskirts of Rome. These few hectares had been bought by real estate developers, speculators who were unable to build because the municipality had zoned them for agriculture. Baruchello cleaned up and restored the land to agriculture with the help of a sympathetic small farmer. He declared that this farm, which he dubbed Agricola Cornelia S.p.A, was an artwork. Conceptually, this was a radicalization of his friend and inspiration Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, because this object had no need of museum magic to become art. All the artist-alchemist had to do was to designate it as such and work it. After a few years of farming, just as Duchamp had been disappointed by the failure of his *Rotoreliefs* to become commercially successful, Baruchello glimpsed the political impasse his project had reached, even though, unlike Duchamp, it brought him financial prosperity. "If I had been a proletarian squatter and not an artist, I would have been immediately arrested by the police," he said.[14] The municipal authorities and the landowners tolerated his "para-political happening" because they considered it an art form. This attests to the irreducible "as if" of art, arising from its autonomy, which authorizes everything but at the same time separates the artwork from political activism and instead situates it in the parallel world of fiction and commentary.



Gianfranco Baruchello, *Eros Sélabeille*, 1977. 88 x 172 x 19,5cm, mixed media wood, glass. Photo: Gina Di Maggio Collection, Mila

In these two projects art and agriculture fertilize each other to make new narratives, whether collective or individual, comprised of erogenous landscapes or Baruchello's cosmogenic works. In Oregon, art seemed rediscovered through pseudo-naïveté and sensual freedom. The practice of art was put in the service of the autonomist political project and from this point of view deprived of its autonomy, but nevertheless art is not to be confounded with political activity itself. Artistic expression functions as an emancipatory practice, an act of disappropriation. Baruchello's naïveté lay in his political project. But this agricultural squat, even though it never became remotely controversial, still nourished the artists' imagination regarding art's political relations with living things and their aesthetic representation.

At the moment we are writing this text, even before the realization of the art show at Aude and Antoine Hentsch's farm in Gollion, it's our impression that *Les vies génétiques d'Eden Martin* attempts to situate itself at the confluence of the ensemble of these interrogations. Mixing the strange and the idyllic, threats and sanctuary, in the tradition of *Walnut Grove* and Antoine Volodine's *Terminus Radieux*, collective farms and Sergei Eisenstein, [15] there is a fascinating confusion in projecting ourselves into the genetic-culture matrix and its ecosystems, whether the biotope of the Eterpis farm or the work of artists. The two incestuous figures in Eden – a paradise lost of abundance without working – and Martin[16], fertility god of the soil when it is worked – evoke an imaginaire that, sterilized by its pretense of being nature and culture, has dispossessed us of our references and allowed us to confuse the figure of the family farmer and that of the artist. This chimera we have pursued throughout the long period of preparing this exhibition has plunged us into the parallel worlds of "as if," or in

other words, a biodynamic imprecation open to the chemistry of interdependencies and its zoophile productions.

*Les Eterpis farm in Gollion (Vaud Canton, Switzerland), *Les vies génétiques d'Eden Martin*, https://www.eden-martin.org/ [https://www.eden-martin.org/] Participating artists: Orla Barry & Paul Bradley, Gianfranco Baruchello, Marc Elsener, Clément Froidevaux, Séverine Heizmann, Andreas Hochuli, Eden Martin, Stefan Tcherepnin, Ye Xe and Shirin Yousefi.





View of the farm des Eterpis, Gollion

[1] Called cognitive capitalism.
[2] This has already been observed in the effects of the chemical industry and radioactivity on biological activity.
[3] Transhumanism promises to extend human beings to their environment by means of technology. This conception has been rendered more or less obsolete by the idea of the Anthropocene, which views the entire earth as a vast human construction site. In this light, transhumanism means adopting humans to what humans have created.
[4] One example of such practices is the Spanish art collective Inland that organizes a wide variety of agro-ecological activities. They can take the form of courses in livestock raising for urban youth or Inland's installation at the 2015 Istanbul Biennale offering forums, workshops, mutual exchange platforms, political propaganda and meals so as to provide a multiple-angle view of agricultural issues in Turkish Kurdistan (www.inland.org).
[5] We offer our gratitude to the deceased Keith Basso for his magnificent book *L'eau se mêle à la boue dans un bassin à ciel ouvert. Paysage et langage chez les Apaches occidentaux*, Édition Zones Sensibles, 2016 (1996).
[6] On this point, see Tim Ingold's superb article "Culture, nature et environnement," *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, 2012. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/traces/5470; DOI:

https://doi.org/10.4000/traces.5470
[7] Here we are indirectly borrowing the concept of semiosis as put forward by Eduardo Khon, Comment pensent les forêts, Édition Zones Sensibles, 2017.
[8] While we chose to cite these two examples because that makes sense in terms of our research, there are many others. For example, starting in the 1970s Europe saw the emergence of “Longo maï” cooperatives meant to provide the knowledge needed to develop self-managed economic systems (and escape from dependence on capital). See the thesis by Béatriz Graf, *Longo maï, Révolte et utopie après 68*, Édition Thesis ars historica, 2006.
[9] Françoise Flamant, *Women's lands: construction d'une utopie*, Editions iXe, 2015.
[10] Photographer and draftswoman, author of the well-known *Cunt coloring book.*
[11] See the book documenting the experiments with photography in women’s lands in Oregon by Carmen Winant, *Notes on Fundamental Joy*, Printed Matter, 2019.
12] See the article by Catriona Sandilands, “Women’s Land in Oregon,” *Reclaim : recueil de textes écoféministes*, Édition Cambourakis, 2016, p. 243-267.
[13] See James C Scott, *Homo domesticus. Une histoire profonde des premiers États*, La Découverte, 2019 [2017].
[14] Cited by Eric Mangion, “Occuper la terre. Gianfranco Baruchello,” *Switch on Paper*, 2017, https://www.switchonpaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/G_Baruchello-occuper-la-terre-1_2.pdf
[15] “You can imagine that it’s a dream… a collective farm,” in the film *The General Line* (1929) by Sergei Eisenstein, who greatly inspired and founded our way of circulating through this ensemble of problematics.
[16] The name Martin comes etymologically from Mars, the god of war and fertility.

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