

Compostourism

Compostourism- I saw the notice and was immediately intrigued. For the past few months at my studio, where there is a vegetable garden, chicken run and spacious courtyard, I have been taking care of the compost bin. What makes compost so exciting is the unhurried, elemental transformation of waste into dark rich earth. It happens as if by magic, but actually it's a process involving decay, bio-organisms, chemical processes, worms, heat, moisture and much more...in compost is buried among other things not only old cabbage leaves, egg shells, chicken dung, slugs and nests of newborn mice also the magnificent practical metaphor of transformation.

Transformation

This aspect of transformation is also what inspired the Swiss artist Lorenz Oliver Schmid during his 2 month long project with the artist residency Wander, that culminated in the Compostour. On the 16th of September, 2013, a group of about 15 compost aficionados gathered at the Nutstuin to go on a 4 hour trek through the Hague, visiting along the way 5 gardens with special compost bins and piles. Because, as Lorenz mentioned, there is no single type of compost heap; the differences reflecting a morphology of time, as each separate shape and size creates a different time frame within which the materials decompose. But more on this later. As may be already apparent, Lorenz takes an artistic approach to scientific research. At the end of the tour, he showed us a book of his with photographs of gorgeous pressed flowers. In answer to the question how he chooses of which plants to use, he answered it was determined by the juiciness of the plant, because a high water content gave better results when the plant was squished; in short, an aesthetic taxonomy.

Lorenz began the tour with a quote (recited first in ancient Greek then translated) from Homer, in which one the oldest references to compost appears; as Odysseus returns home, no one recognizes him except for the dogs, who are lying by an old pile of rotting manure that is eventually to be put on the fields. Besides the organizers, and the artist himself, I think I was the only other artist present on the tour. This wasn't perhaps surprising, but it does give pause for thought. Often artists are engaged in trying to dissolve the boundary between art and daily life, seeing and then framing mundane things in a new and exceptional way. One could say that life is a process, where things are constantly changing, and the artist observes these changes, both inner or outer, and records them in some form. This is something of a paradox, as often the result of these observations is fixed in the form of an art object. But more interesting to me by far is the art and artist that actually makes art of the process. So in this sense, compost is an excellent example and even better metaphor for how to bridge the gap between art and life.

Public

However, most of those on the tour were there for the tips on how to build or start their own compost bins, and to take a marvelous peek into other people's gardens, where you normally wouldn't get a chance to see behind the scenes, much less take a sniff at the compost bin. The gardens and compost heaps were undeniably a lot of fun to see. And the marvelous thing too was how excited people can get about compost. Passionate in fact. But a larger discussion of compost as art was not really on the cards that afternoon, and as the compost tour progressed I began to feel how odd meetings between art and non-art publics can sometimes be. It makes me aware of how in spite of the urge to try and mix the two, say what you like, people tend to stick to what they know, myself included. And in fact the tour did reveal some very unexpected things. What was great was to see these small examples of ecologically friendly places, but not in the places you would anticipate. We were given very generous access to gardens you would normally never see, and didn't follow the "ant paths" of tourism as Lorenz put it, but instead were guided through an area we thought we knew rather well, but that had a lot of the unexpected still to reveal.

Tour

We started the tour with a visit to an artist's tiny vegetable garden, like a little green room in the back yard, complete with greenhouse and compost heap. The garden rolled out of the bedroom as an extension of the domestic into the cultivated world, with a dash of nature in the form of little toads and frogs in the wild compost heap. The gardener mentioned that she could eat all seasons from the garden, but that it had taken quite a number of years for the soil to improve, with the introduction of the compost to the existing soil, and

for the fruits and vegetables to improve in taste. We then visited another garden that was at the back of a stately house on the Laan van Meerdervoort. We walked through a collection of fashion designs being prepared for the catwalk next week, silks and weaves of gorgeous fabrics to a room in which the sewing machine is placed next to the window overlooking garden and small compost heap. The creativity and flamboyance of the sewing room was reflected in the diversity of plants and animals living in the garden. Their compost bin was a self-contained one, a green plastic barrel, that actually speeds up the decomposition of the organic material, also thanks to the presence of plentiful worms.

The most surprising location for a compost garden was in a renovated horse stable from the 19th century transformed into a cafe and restaurant and found by going through a doorway in the facade of a block of social housing. And there the owner/manager was involved in a number of ecologically friendly enterprises, from using solar panels to collecting and filtering rain water with a water purification installation, and as well keeping a garden at the backside of the restaurant with a number of compost heaps. From there we went to a community garden shared by residents, a place one would expect to find ecologically friendly approaches. And they were there; from the compost bin to chicken run with piles of branches for nesting and water filtration system and bee hibernation hotels. But even there things also go wrong; the responsibility for taking care of everything was a big question, as sometimes group dynamics don't live up to expectations. From there we went to the last place before retuning to the Nutstuin to see and hear more about Lorenz's own project. This is a cloister garden, right in the center of the Hague, cared for by the inspiring Brother Franz. The garden is very large, and meant for use by all kinds of people seeking refuge, rest and a brief respite from the city. Filled with numerous signs, sculptures, places to sit, icons and images relating to faith and contemplation, burying place for pets, the link with the natural world and a form of inner peace is established. And there the compost piles really can grow; one of big branches left to rot and free for animals to hide and nest in, and another big enough to put a small shed on top, and piled up with wheelbarrows of greenery until it gets too big to mount when it is shifted to another spot. A sort of earthworks sculpture in time and movement.

Alpha and Omega

Back in the Nutstuin, we had a small talk given by Lorenz, about the ideas behind his work. During his stay he had among other things built a compost bin for the garden from discarded pallets. He talked about the various forms of transformation taking place on different levels that had influenced his choices and guided his process of making the bin. He used for instance untreated wood from discarded palettes impregnated with environmentally friendly linseed oil to make the compost bin, reusing waste material to create a new structure, transforming humble materials into something useful. He showed us the rusty nails removed from the palettes as well, now simply a weight of metal collected into a bucket. The transformation of waste into rich earth is a cycle of life and decay, alpha and omega; a tangible proof of resurrection. The compost pile is part of a living whole- it's not something that happens in isolation to the rest, but a part of the whole garden; we eat, live, grow and die, a whole cycle of growing and dying. In the bin is enshrined the contemplation of the transience of life, life in death, death in life, in that sense it's the ultimate memento mori.

I hope people will use the compost bin in the Nutstuin, and that it won't just remain an intriguing object in an otherwise pleasant but perhaps anonymous city garden. If anything I saw was true on the tour and in my own experience, gardening, and with that the maintenance and care of the compost pile, takes a kind of dedication. Perhaps it is even a calling! And it requires a continual presence of someone to take care of it. Often the strength of artistic vision is not to get lost in detail, but to operate on the level of metaphor while also inhabiting a viable form. But with this project there is more at stake perhaps. The danger for the compost bin in the Nutstuin is that it remains only an idea, or that it will just stand there as an interesting form, unconnected to the reality of engagement and commitment. I hope that Lorenz's bin becomes integrated into the garden and gets used by the neighborhood; metaphors also require maintenance as it turns out, as anything living, even in the process of decaying, still needs to be nourished.

Rachel Bacon
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