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Fallen Fruit: How Social Practice Art Adapts to Success

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FALLEN FRUIT: HOW SOCIAL PRACTICE ART ADAPTS TO SUCCESS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The Department of Art History

by
Caroline Marie Giepert
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Abstract

This thesis will discuss the development of socially engaged art collective Fallen Fruit (active 2004 – present) in regards to their community-oriented projects, museum exhibitions, and recent online artwork *Endless Orchard* (2017). Fallen Fruit presents an interesting example of a social practice art group since they straddle both an activist agenda as well as the commercial world of mainstream institutions and the Internet. This paper will analyze the rationale for Fallen Fruit’s manner of adapting to commercial success by considering their progression from localized projects in the communities of Los Angeles to curated exhibitions in well-known museums and venture into the online world. The research conducted here will present both the positive and negative effects of navigating the commercial art world as a socially engaged art collective. This research was completed by analyzing texts by social practice artists and scholars, such as Suzanne Lacy, Grant Kester, and Claire Bishop. Additionally, information was gathered about the larger context of urban gardening and foraging from authors like Alys Fowler. More specific information about Fallen Fruit and their projects were gathered from their website, blog posts, journal articles, books, and an artist talk I attended.
Introduction

Since their beginning in Los Angeles in 2004, Fallen Fruit has executed projects in over thirty international cities, including Madrid, Spain; Cali, Colombia; Guadalajara, Mexico; Malmö, Sweden, and Copenhagen, Denmark. The original trio of Matias Viegener, Austin Young, and David Burns began their grassroots urban foraging efforts by leading groups of people around their neighborhood of Silver Lake in Los Angeles in order to collect fruit that had either fallen or was hanging over the property line. More recently, Fallen Fruit has invited their participants to plant fruit trees in their own cities, whether along their property lines or getting permits to plant in public parks. One of the major goals they promote is community engagement and enrichment, hosting multiple public projects along with the tree planting. Aside from the public works, Fallen Fruit also creates visual artworks documenting their projects with prints, videos, and installations. These physical art objects are made for the purpose of exhibition in galleries and museums in the cities they have visited. The phenomenon of social practice artists exhibiting in art institutions and entering the commercialized sphere of the art world has become more commonplace in the past few years. However, this challenges the authenticity of social action that occurs within the realm of capitalist institutions, including major museums and private galleries. Despite their commercialized positions, museums and galleries can benefit social action art by providing artists with a larger platform to gather funds for engaged projects outside of the institution. The group’s progression from localized public projects to shows at

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1 Note: I volunteered at the fruit tree planting and adoption event in Pontchartrain Park in Gentilly, which gave me the opportunity to personally interact with Austin Young and David Burns. Since I was denied an interview with the artists, this informal meeting and project was my only direct communication with them.
prominent museums serves as a case study to explore the challenges and adaptations socially engaged artists face in our capitalist society.

Each member of Fallen Fruit offers particular skills and knowledge that are complementary for the whole group. Matias Viegener is a well-published writer, artist, and curator with a wide range of research interests, including critical theory, gender studies, and, of course, social practice art. He remains in his position as a professor at the California Institute of the Arts.

Austin Young studied at Parsons Paris before moving to California to continue his career. On his website, Young has noted that his interest in social action stems from the “hyper-synergistic qualities of collaboration” and the formation of a collective narrative and meaning that is realized through all participants.² For instance, his work with Fallen Fruit outlines both the cultural and familial narratives of the places they visit that are shared during their public projects. In addition to his work with Fallen Fruit, Young has also gained fame as a portrait photographer of the transgender and drag queen community in Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco.

David Burns received his Bachelors of Fine Arts and Masters of Fine Arts from California Institute of the Arts and University of California at Irvine, respectively. Currently, he is a professor at the Social Practice Graduate Program at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He also has professional experience in corporate advertising for brands such as Mercedes Benz, Discovery Channel, and SEGA Gamework that have informed the marketing techniques utilized by Fallen Fruit later on.³ Burns has also stated his interest in narratives, as

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³ Fallen Fruit, accessed October 17, 2017, http://fallenfruit.org/. Note: While David Burns mentions in his biography on Fallen Fruit’s website that he has this background experience in corporate marketing strategies, he fails to explain in detail its role in his work with Fallen Fruit.
well as in the exploration of social and political boundaries. The group utilizes narrative as a means to engage with the public they work with, to observe how community members relate to one another and with their natural environment. Due to social practice art’s nature as both art and social action, it is common for socially engaged artist collectives to be interdisciplinary. For example, the Russian collective Chto Delat? was formed in 2003 by artists, writers, and philosophers all focused on political activism. Fallen Fruit has combined social practice, visual arts, digital media, botany, urban planning, and communications, in order to conduct their projects in the best manner. In the introduction to his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art: Materials and Techniques Handbook* (2011), author Pablo Helguera notes the necessity for such an interdisciplinary approach, bridging aspects of art, sociology, psychology, ethnography, and communications.

Tackling global crises is ambitious, so naturally many art collectives begin on a local scale, sometimes in their very own neighborhoods, as was the case with Fallen Fruit. Fallen Fruit was originally founded in Los Angeles by professors Matias Viegener, David Burns, and Austin Young in 2004. Viegener left the group in 2013, leaving Burns and Young to continue without him. Although social practice artists often apply institutional critique, following the example of conceptual artists like Hans Haacke, Fallen Fruit presents an example of a socially engaged collective that does not wish its projects to be critical. They are challenging the idea that socially engaged art needs to react against something in order for it to be effective. They only want their

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projects to focus on positive ideas and results. They do not cite an ideology or political agenda, only benefits for the community.

Professor of Rhetoric and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley Shannon Jackson has noted that neoliberalism has also infiltrated the art world, challenging artists to adapt to this capitalist socioeconomic system. She cites artists like Thomas Hirschhorn and Phil Collins who sell materials and documents from their socially engaged art in order to be able to afford to create more like them. Fallen Fruit has also creatively sourced funding for their public projects. They have an online shop which sells both merchandise and art objects from which they allocate some funds to their public practices. They have also gathered crowdsourced donations, operating on crowdfunding websites such as Kickstarter. Lastly, they have received national grants and awards from endowments which sponsor their work. Social practice artists and collectives over the past couple decades have had to navigate the arena of capitalism, deciding whether to work independently or conform to art institutions. Artists have become heterogeneous in their approach to social engagement and art in order to synchronize creating community-oriented projects while also being successful artists.

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9 Ibid.
Chapter 1. Context

The past three decades have borne witness to a multitude of tumultuous socioeconomic, political, and environmental issues, and although these crises continue to mount, the government institutions in charge seemingly cannot, or will not, implement solutions for these various problems. Among these issues, there has been increased anxiety over the effects of global warming, the Great Recession of 2008, arguably the worst economic situation for this country since the Great Depression, and a sweep of ultra-conservative parties winning over governments both here in the United States and abroad. Unfortunately, this situation is the result of neoliberal policies that worsen living conditions for the working and middle classes in these countries. Since the 1970s, neoliberal government models have instituted policies that favor corporations and capitalist pursuits. During 1981-89, the Reagan Presidency trickle-down economics accelerated free-market capitalism and led to the increased privatization of public resources. This has resulted in the continued enrichment of the elite, while the majority of the population has suffered and experienced increasing income inequality. It is no coincidence that, as free-market capitalism progressed, there was a marked rise in so-called Do It Yourself incentives, beginning in the 1990s, often led by grassroots, community, and non-profit organizations. Massive cuts to welfare programs, healthcare, and education gave rise to a need to imagine alternative means for improving one’s living conditions.

With this mindset, a new methodology of art has taken root in communities across the globe. Social practice art, also referred to as socially engaged art, or art as social action, emerged to find practical solutions for the vast issues the global population faces today. These projects allow people to think critically about our society, and, through group brainstorming, develop means to act on their concerns. It is a constant process of sharing, listening, and support.
Participatory art was also popularized in the 1990s in reaction to the rise of the Internet as a means to affirm the importance of real-world social interactions. Open dialogue helped the projects be more egalitarian, often diminishing the role of the artist as author or director. Dialogue gained a prominent place in art with Relationalism, a trend identified by French critic and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud in 1996. Claire Bishop, author of *Artificial Hells*, clearly lays out the main distinction between relational art and socially engaged art as follows: the former is concerned with the aesthetics of social interaction whereas the latter is concerned with the practical applications and results of it. Bourriaud’s aestheticizing of relational art made it attractive to museums and art professionals as it remained a conceptual approach to social interaction.

Social practice art uses dialogue as only one tool to achieve real-world solutions. Ethical works, not merely aesthetic ones, are being required of artists now. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera notes the need for an “urgent imagination,” a tool that will allow artists to effectively and innovatively confront public crises to achieve overall improvement and empowerment. Art can no longer simply challenge the status quo with metaphors and critiques. Art must challenge it with actions. In lieu of government programs, artists might collaborate with each other and the public to confront issues and create change in innovative ways. Social practice has become an effective art form because the audience becomes more involved than it would when simply looking at or interacting with an art object. It has also changed who the audience is. Art has transformed itself so that it is no longer meant only for the elite or intellectuals; rather, social

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practice art is for the public, including non-art individuals. Fallen Fruit’s public projects stand testament to this since they often operate in working and middle class communities.

Social practice art depends on collaborative efforts between artists or art collectives and impacted communities. Engagement is a central force and is generated through the active participation of community members to aid in the creation of change. Pablo Helguera, focuses on engagement as a means to foster community-building by connecting people with shared interests and enabling them to participate in a meaningful way. Lending the participants a degree of agency makes the project more important to them, therefore effective. The participants for socially engaged projects tend to be concerned citizens who have a personal investment in the project. For example, Fallen Fruit appeals to residents who not only care about improving their natural environment, but are also investing in building a neighborhood with strong bonds. A successful social practice art project aims for positive solutions for change by inspiring communities to help themselves. Tactical media and interventionist art scholar Rita Raley called this a “visible structural transformation,” meaning that there is an observable change in society. Change can come in various forms, from starting dialogue to enacting official policies. The active participation of the individual can alter her perspective by providing an insightful experience, allowing change to start with the people.

Suzanne Lacy’s book *Mapping the Terrain* (1996) laid out some of the initial groundwork for what she called new genre public art, another term for socially engaged art. She emphasized the role of humanism in public practices as well as the significance of moving interactive art into the public sphere. She also noted the tendency for social practice art to align

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itself with political leftist ideals as a tool to promote their agendas of feminism, social and racial equality, and environmentalism in often radical ways. A contemporary example of this is Chto Delat!, who has publicly denounced the Russian government on more than one occasion. Their most famous protest occurred when the collective decided to withdraw from Manifesta 14 in St. Petersburg in 2014 to protest the Russian military occupation of Ukraine. The ideals cited by Lacy and the antagonistic artworks created by Chto Delat! stand in direct contrast to the depoliticization that Fallen Fruit has embraced. The neutral stance of Fallen Fruit has aligned them with the positive results of social practice art, rather than the radical agenda of other socially engaged groups.

In 2004, Grant Kester published *Conversation Pieces*. True to its name, his book focused on dialogic art, which is art that is created through the social exchanges of the participants. These aspects of empathy and dialogue have resonated with the community projects of Fallen Fruit since they seek to form relationships with diverse community members. The literature on Fallen Fruit is scarce in theoretical texts such as the ones mentioned above. Instead, most of what has been written about their collective relates to the community gardening movement, not the art aspects of their projects. For example, British horticulturist and journalist Alys Fowler’s book *The Thrifty Forager* (2011) celebrates Fallen Fruit for their urban foraging initiatives, but does not frame them within the context of social practice art.

Fallen Fruit offers an interesting contrast to other practices of urban agriculture since they have allied themselves with government departments rather than working against their laws. For

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example, during the 1970s, the Green Guerillas of Greenwich Village were notorious for taking over abandoned lots without permission and putting them to agricultural use. In contrast to this unapproved use of land is artist Meg Webster, who worked throughout the 1980s and 90s. Another California-native artist, Webster moved to the East Village of New York and executed most of her site works in the Northeast rather than the West Coast. Her manicured gardens were quite different from the impromptu community gardens of the Greenwich Guerillas since they were public commissions. Webster’s curated gardens serve as a precedent for the organized public orchards that Fallen Fruit has created in collaboration with local governments and organizations.

Following the radical approach of the Green Guerillas of Greenwich Village are the fruit tree grafters of San Francisco today. In 2012, a group of activists began the grafting fruit-bearing tree limbs onto fruitless trees in public parkways along streets and sidewalks throughout the Bay area. This illegal practice has garnered the attention of Carla Short of the San Francisco Department of Public Works, who explained their policy is set in place specifically for public safety. For example, once the fruit falls to the ground and rots, it becomes slippery, creating a safety hazard and also possible lawsuit for the city. While Fallen Fruit avoids these radical actions, the end goal remains the same: promotion of public gardening and harvesting to feed the public. Unlike the Green Guerillas of Greenwich Village and the grafters, Fallen Fruit has proceeded with their public projects by first asking permission. In the end, this has worked out

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18 Ibid.
better for the communities since they do not need to worry about their social actions being shut
down by the government. It could be argued that social practice art collectives that collaborate
with civic institutions are more effective than radical, interventionist groups.
Chapter 2. The Progression of Fallen Fruit

In the summer of 2004, the Los Angeles-based *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* called for projects to address sociopolitical issues with proactive solutions. In response, Matias Viegener, David Burns, and Austin Young, all arts professors as well as neighbors at the time, decided to address issues they noticed in their community of Silver Lake.¹⁹ Silver Lake is recognized as a thriving artist and hipster community; however, it has not been impervious to the homeless crisis in Los Angeles, highlighting wealth disparities throughout the metropolitan area.²⁰ The men noticed the abundance of fruit on the ground and saw this as an opportunity to address matters of hunger, property ownership, and community building. Avocados, apples, bananas, grapes, figs, peaches, pomegranates, and all sorts of citruses grew freely, left over from commercial farms that had existed there before the expansion of Los Angeles and its suburbs.²¹ The fallen, wasted fruit became a representation of class distinctions: those who have too much and those with not enough. Their practice requires a specific knowledge of property laws and borders, such as fences and sidewalks. Fortunately, Viegener had recently discovered an arcane city ordinance in Los Angeles that stated any fruit-bearing tree hanging into public space was considered public property, following usufruct laws.²² From this, the trio was inspired to start their organized fruit walks and collective urban foraging. The results observed from these

activities were multi-faceted: reduction of food waste, public accessibility to free fruit, the encouragement of walking, and social connections.

The decision to work with fruit trees took advantage of the plethora of social, economic, environmental, and health benefits that trees provide. Fallen Fruit has cited a 2012 study completed by University of Colorado Professor Austin Troy, who specializes in urban planning with attention to environmental impacts. Troy’s study showed that there was a negative correlation between crime and tree cover, indicating that a ten percent increase in trees would result in nearly a twelve percent decrease in crime in an urban area. More greenery in an area usually establishes that residents care about their neighborhood and maintain a stronger social network. Fallen Fruit hopes to strengthen community ties by providing fruit trees that neighbors can share. In an earlier study of the communal benefits of trees, Frances Kuo found that people living in greener urban areas were more successful in their daily lives, proving a vital relationship between people’s surrounding environment and their ability to thrive. Economically, property values in green neighborhoods tend to be higher since they are more attractive to both home and business owners. Additionally, there are multiple important environmental benefits that trees provide. The United Nations Environmental Program has promoted the planting of trees as one of the most effective ways to combat global warming due to the ability of trees to store rainwater runoff, prevent flooding and soil erosion, remove carbon dioxide and other pollutants from the air, and release oxygen into the atmosphere. Trees also

help local wildlife, such as birds and small rodents, by providing habitats. Currently, more than ninety percent of Americans live in cities as opposed to rural areas, so there is a need to expand agriculture into urban environments to provide for the whole population. Public fruit trees provide the community with free access to organic produce. All in all, by inviting their audience to walk around their neighborhoods to harvest from these trees, Fallen Fruit is promoting a healthy lifestyle.

When they began to organize their fruit trails in 2004, Fallen Fruit wished to reach out to the homeless by distributing hand-drawn maps the group created. Homelessness was and remains a major problem in Los Angeles. In 2005, one out of 110 people were homeless in Los Angeles County, the highest rate in the nation. But, the collective soon realized that the homeless community already knew where to access fruit trees as a means of survival. Therefore, the project became more geared toward the homeowners in the area who did not realize they had such an abundance of fresh, free fruit in their own neighborhoods. Fallen Fruit also encouraged the local residents to plant more fruit trees, growing the fruit tree network available to the homeless in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Fallen Fruit organized nighttime walks with a couple dozen local participants, obscuring the legality of the practice, as if it needed to be done in secret. This form of urban foraging confronts the typical notions of ownership while playfully redistributing resources and bringing owners into the project. In fact, the artists write that the majority of homeowners in Silver Lake welcomed them, often inviting them to pick more fruit or come into their yard to reach trees on

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their private property.\textsuperscript{28} The first walks were held in Silver Lake, but they branched out into other zones of Los Angeles, including Westlake, Venice Beach, and Sherman Oaks. From these nocturnal outings, they hand-drew urban fruit maps, which were then uploaded onto their website to be readily accessible for anyone wishing to explore the fruit trails on their own (Fig. 1). The maps rarely include street names or other landmarks in order to prompt participants to innovatively navigate their neighborhoods as urban gardens, using the fruit trees as markers to wander among. In 2006, David Burns used the term “social geographic exercise” to describe this practice, since the forager was both familiarizing themselves with the natural landscape as well as the culture of the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{29} There is also a specific list of instructions included with the maps which make sure to clarify the purpose of the project:

- Take only what you need.
- Say ‘hi’ to strangers.
- Share your food.
- Take a friend.
- Go by foot.\textsuperscript{30}

This became their mini-manifesto and was circulated to encourage local business and homeowners to plant fruit trees along their property lines, within the public’s reach, thereby supporting a budding community orchard.

\textsuperscript{29} Raley, “The Ordinary Arts of Political Activism,” 292.
In 2006, after a couple years of mapping out different fruit trails around Los Angeles, Fallen Fruit began to host more interactive local projects that operated as social experiments. The most popular examples were their public jam sessions, a playful double entendre composed of both literal jam making as well as “jamming” as a party. They held their first public fruit jam
in August of 2006 at the Machine Project Gallery in Los Angeles (Fig. 2). These events are aimed at fostering community relationships through entertaining activities. These jam sessions follow the example of renowned American education reformer and philosopher John Dewey, who promoted egalitarian tactics both in the classroom and society. Dewey argued that real art occurred “in the experience,” which is why active participation is required. While Dewey advocates for social service through democratic ideals, Fallen Fruit is not as serious about their jam parties. They are not expecting participants to experience a major epiphany that will change society, but hope that bringing together diverse members of the community will at least promote engaging conversations. Everyone brings something valuable to the table in order to enter a productive dialogue and co-create. Here, there are no recipes, only suggestions, and everyone is asked simply to bring what they have and share, creating a gift economy cycle.

Fig. 2 Public Fruit Jam at the Machine Project. Los Angeles, California. August 2006. Photograph by Austin Young. Source: fallenfruit.org.

The jam sessions provide what professor and author Grant Kester has referred to as, “creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange.”\textsuperscript{32} He believes casual gatherings foster authentic interactions among participants, which in turn become more meaningful for the attendees. The fun and informal environment that Fallen Fruit arranges for these public projects allows people to share family recipes and memories without realizing that they are also creating the art. Kester describes this phenomenon as dialogic art, which has been influenced by the teachings of nineteenth century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.\textsuperscript{33} Bakhtin believed that all art is a conversation, meaning a conversation between the art object and viewer. However, social practice art has adapted this concept to mean a literal conversation between audience members, no longer centered around an art object but rather a shared experience. In projects such as these, the quality of collaboration is often more important than the formal elements. For example, the jam was merely the by-product since the real art lay in the cross-cultural and cross-generational conversations occurring among the participants.

Today, Fallen Fruit is best known for two practices: their public tree adoptions and public parks plantings, both of which they continue to execute, map, and distribute. After a few years of mapping pre-existing fruit trees, the group realized that they could expand these resources by hosting events in which they allow local residents to take home these fruit trees for free. The group began fruit tree adoptions in 2007 and now hosts them in every city they visit. Fallen Fruit chose the term adoption specifically to imply the individual’s responsibility to take care of the tree. First, Fallen Fruit advertises that they will be hosting a fruit tree give-away. Then, any interested resident has to sign up for a tree and pick it up on the day of the event. For those

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Grant H. Kester, “Introduction” in \textit{Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art} (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 10.
\end{itemize}
residents who may be impaired or do not have access to transportation, Fallen Fruit and their volunteers go to their home and plant the tree for them. There is no fee; however, the recipients of the tree must sign a waiver that states their intent to plant the tree where it will be accessible to the public. This expands the network of fruit trees within the urban-scape. Fallen Fruit’s website promotes this practice by inviting their participants to, as they state,

   Experience your city as a fruitful place, to collectively re-imagine the function of public participation and urban space, and to explore that meaning of community through creating and sharing new and abundant resources.\(^{34}\)

The best way to increase fruit trees as a resource is to provide them to the community for free.

On their website, the artists also include multiple guides detailing how to successfully cultivate fruit trees. The artists serve as the experts on types of fruit trees while the locals are the experts on their own area, their culture and terrain.\(^{35}\) By providing the trees and these guides, Fallen Fruit is giving communities tools to improve their neighborhoods and allowing them to carry out the work independently.

In addition to providing fruit trees for adoption, Fallen Fruit has also petitioned for the inclusion and cultivation of fruit trees in public parks and greenways. Many American cities have enacted laws that ban the planting of fruit-bearing trees in public spaces.\(^{36}\) The councils in these cities, Los Angeles City Council included, cite public safety hazards, both for passersby and drivers in the event that rotting fruit makes sidewalks and streets slippery. Austin Young believes this is a way in which local governments seek to deter homeless and vagrant populations

\(^{34}\) Fallen Fruit, http://fallenfruit.org/.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 66.
from these public green spaces by removing readily accessible food. This waste of land use upsets Fallen Fruit, but rather than outwardly rebel against these policies, they have collaborated with local government departments and organizations to reach agreements. In order to organize and plant within public parks, Fallen Fruit must navigate the necessary channels in order to receive the proper permits. For example, in 2012, they created the Del Aire Public Fruit Park, the first orchard in a public park in Los Angeles, by cooperating with Los Angeles County, Los Angeles County Arts Commission, and the Department of Parks and Recreation (Fig. 3). Former Director of Creative Time Nato Thompson discusses this predicament of current artist collectives in which many of them must operate within the parameters of government institutions and their regulations to accomplish their goal. Diminishing the interventionist aspect of the social practice art project can lead some to question the authenticity and motive of the work. However, Fallen Fruit argues that this does not make the project any less effective. They challenge current government policies by actually working with the government to reach an agreeable outcome. This idealized version of social action highlights that Fallen Fruit’s foremost goal is to provide community with necessary resources, not stage a protest.

The most recent series of public projects by Fallen Fruit occurred in New Orleans, from January through April 2018. The group contributes to the city’s tricentennial celebration by planting 300 fruit trees. Fallen Fruit partnered with local groups Pelican Bomb, A Studio in the Woods, and Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University. In July 2015, Pelican Bomb extended

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37 Fallen Fruit, “Talk with David Allen Burns and Austin Young of Artist Collective Fallen Fruit.”
the invitation to Fallen Fruit to create a project for the upcoming tricentennial in 2018.\textsuperscript{40} The organization supports contemporary art in New Orleans through residences and their magazine. A Studio in the Woods focuses specifically on the pairing of environmentalism and art practices through interdisciplinary research. They are particularly concerned with the preservation of the Mississippi River Delta and the surrounding bottomland forest that can support a natural environment for artists in residence.

Fig. 3 Del Aire Public Fruit Park. Los Angeles, California. 2012. Photograph by Austin Young. Source: fallenfruit.org.

For the first part of this project, Fallen Fruit and their local partners hosted two separate public fruit tree adoptions that were open to any resident of the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area (Fig. 4). Their next step was to provide fruit trees in public parks just as they had done in Los Angeles. In order to legally do this, they had to work with the City of New Orleans Department of Parks and Parkways, Lower 9\textsuperscript{th} Ward Center for Sustainable

Engagement, and the Movin’ for LIFE organization. They created two installations: one in the Bienvenue Wetland Triangle in the Lower 9th Ward, and the other in Pontchartrain Park in Gentilly. Both of these neighborhoods were severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina, and they still bear those scars in the form of abandoned houses and crumbling infrastructure. The local ecology of southern Louisiana was destroyed by that 2005 natural disaster, so these fruit trees provide a welcome resource both for their aesthetic beauty and practical use. In addition to the tree plantings, Fallen Fruit also hosted community-centered projects, following in the tradition of their jam sessions. For example, they and their local partner organizations hosted a pickle-making party that followed the same model: it was broadly participatory and required no skills (Fig. 5). There were no recipes and it was geared more as a social exercise.

Fig. 4 Public Fruit Tree Adoption at Pontchartrain Park. New Orleans, Louisiana. January 20, 2018. Photograph by Austin Young. Source: fallenfruit.org.

41“The Art of Contemporary New Orleans,” Pelican Bomb. Note: Movin’ For LIFE (Lasting Improvements for Fitness and Energy) is a program with Tulane University Prevention Research Center. They operate solely within the 9th Ward of New Orleans to improve the quality of life of the residents, by promoting exercise and healthy diets.
Fallen Fruit’s tree adoptions and park plantings offer a convenient way to gather organic produce so that the community will not have to rely on largescale agribusinesses and supermarkets. This is an especially useful tactic for those who reside in food deserts, in which there are no nearby grocery stores or agricultural land. Therefore, Fallen Fruit have used these collaborative social practice art projects to address the concept of urban agriculture in order to fulfill community needs of accessible, healthy food choices. Through their projects, Fallen Fruit has promoted the redevelopment of cities to include more fruit trees for the benefit of the local population. The Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) has suggested that increasing community gardens may be one of the best tools for fighting hunger.42

42 Darrin Nordahl, Public Produce: The New Urban Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2009), 78. Note: The Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project was created by the Food Research and Action Center, a national non-profit organization, to conduct research in low income socioeconomic families to gather information about childhood hunger.
Furthermore, community gardening provides a sense of self-sufficiency and food security, especially in impoverished neighborhoods, operating as both a psychological and physical resource. Exploring alternative means for food production subverts the control of global agricultural corporations like Monsanto, known for their widespread production and use of pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Cultivating fruit trees locally alleviates the environmental impact of international transportation and chemical treatments as well as the anxiety over the use of genetically modified organisms in agribusinesses’ produce.\textsuperscript{43} Public planting challenges the idea of food as a privatized resource. Matias Viegener argued that no one can own a tree since it is a natural resource, therefore open to the public.\textsuperscript{44} Planting and gathering from these public trees also has a social aspect since it encourages people to become acquainted with their neighbors.

Fallen Fruit’s social practice projects strive to build community relationships that will be as lasting and fruitful as their trees. The public tree plantings are equally about reaping the benefits of fruit trees as they are about the experience of communal bonding. They collaborate, engage, and share knowledge with community members in a beneficial and playful manner. Fallen Fruit’s public projects emphasize the concept of empathy as well. This is especially illustrated by their work in the impoverished and hurricane-ravaged neighborhoods of New Orleans. Empathy has been a key component of social practice art since the beginning since it is necessary for authentic modes of collaboration. Suzanne Lacy, who was a forerunner of socially engaged art practices, emphasizes humanism in social practice art in order to establish meaningful and productive relationships with community members.\textsuperscript{45} However, with social

\textsuperscript{43} Thompson, “Living as Form,” 24.
\textsuperscript{44} Viegener, “Fallen Fruit.”
\textsuperscript{45} Lacy, “Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,” 34.
practice art’s transition into the institutionalized and capitalist world of museums and the Internet, the elements of empathy and collaboration are being challenged.
Chapter 3. The Institutionalization of Social Practice Art

In addition to their collaborative public projects, Fallen Fruit has also participated in a handful of exhibitions. For some, working within the museum’s walls subverts the ideals associated with social practice art. Suzanne Lacy explains that art collectives moved out of the art institutions into the public sphere since, “art in public places was seen as a means of reclaiming and humanizing the urban environment.”\textsuperscript{46} Social practice art emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, and real-world solutions, so what place does it have in museums? Museums and galleries are market-oriented and operated by wealthy board of directors. Showing critical work may clash with the business operations of such establishments. The canonical example of using the museum to critique museums is Hans Haacke’s \textit{Shapolsky et al., Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System} (1971), which was pulled from the Guggenheim since it implicated one of the board members as a slum lord.

Fallen Fruit does not critique museums, but their first solo exhibition \textit{United Fruit} in 2008 that showcased their work in Cali, Colombia, as part of the series \textit{Colonial History of Fruit} did adhere to the tradition of institutional critique.\textsuperscript{47} It included a video interview with local residents about the Banana Massacre of 1928, reflecting on the violence of the workers’ uprising against the United Fruit Company (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{48} \textit{United Fruit} highlighted Fallen Fruit’s evolution from local foraging and jam-making in the communities of Los Angeles to confronting issues of hunger and gaining access to food resources on a global scale.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 150.
It is becoming more common for social practice artists and collectives to create both public and gallery works, often using the latter to fund and promote the former. Fallen Fruit is comfortable working with the public and showing in fine art museums. For instance, they completed a year-long artist residency at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art called EATLACMA in 2010. One component of this was a commissioned exhibition within the museum walls, centered around the theme of fruit as a cultural and social object. This curated exhibition was titled *The Fruit of LACMA* and consisted of pieces hand-selected from the museum’s permanent collection in addition to the new pieces created by Fallen Fruit (Fig. 7). Among these new artworks were an installation of picnic tables, a video of people eating fruit called Fruit Machine, and a decorative wallpaper of different fruits found around Los Angeles. The other part of the residency included creating six new fruit gardens around the campus of the museum. One of these outdoor projects was the Public Fruit Theatre (Fig. 8), a concrete
amphitheater built around a lone citrus tree, the sole performer. Fallen Fruit also held participatory events at the museum including a watermelon eating contest and an electronic melon drum circle. The group built a large mandala from dinner plates for one of these community projects, and each visitor took a plate of food home as the mandala was ritually dismantled. Through this combination of curated show, gardens and community-oriented projects, Fallen Fruit sought, as one reviewer noted, to “delve into the social, artistic, cultural, environmental, and humanitarian meanings behind natural food growth.” In this sense, it utilized the museum space as a platform to promote the same ideas related to their public practices, turning the art institution into an advertisement of social practice art.

Fig. 7 The Fruit of LACMA. Multi-media installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. 2010. Source: fallenfruit.org.

The most recent largescale museum installation by Fallen Fruit was created to accompany the public projects they completed in New Orleans for the city’s tricentennial. *Empire* opened at Newcomb Art Museum in April and will run for the remainder of 2018 (Fig. 9). Fallen Fruit worked with archivists, historians, and collection handlers in order to create a show that encapsulates the cultural legacy of New Orleans over its three hundred years through an amalgamation of historical and documentary photographs, artifacts, busts, audio recordings and various other art objects. They want the installation to operate as an immersive experience in which the audience can peruse the artifacts and develop their own interpretative narratives. *Empire* explores cultural and political histories, and the objects take the place of the community members that participate in the public projects. Commenting on their community works, Austin

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Young explained, “for us, the art was about meeting people you didn’t know, and talking to them.” However, Empire warps this sense of intimacy by adding an extra step. Visitors are welcome to become intimate with the artifacts in the gallery in order to familiarize themselves with the culture and history of New Orleans, thus learning about the people of New Orleans as well. But overall, this approach will never be able to provide the same level of intimacy that is inherent in the community-oriented projects of Fallen Fruit.52

Fig. 9 “Empire.” Exhibition at Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University. April 2018. Source: https://newcombartmuseum.tulane.edu/portfolio-item/empire/.

How are the results of social practice art affected by incorporating aspects of art institutions and commercialization? In his critique of social practice art, critic Ben Davis

51 Aitken, The Idea of the West, 120.
52 Note: On the opening night of the Empire exhibition, the artist’s held a talk that was open to the public; however, when it was time to take questions, Austin Young, David Burns, and the moderator from Newcomb cut this discussion short. It was strange for a group that promotes engagement to not fully engage with their audience.
concedes that in America the practice cannot escape its position within a capitalist society, citing Marxist art theory that art cannot intrinsically be anti-capitalist.\(^{53}\) Davis follows this up by explaining:

> What appears at one juncture to be radically opposed to the values of art under capitalism often later appears to have represented a development intrinsic to its future development, for the simple reason that without changing the underlying fact of capitalism, you cannot prevent innovations in art from eventually being given a capitalist articulation.\(^{54}\)

Today, the artists, critics, and other professionals associated with social practice art appear to be steering the field in a more disciplined and marketable direction. Therefore, social practice artists must find a way to operate within this economic and sociopolitical model to achieve goals of community improvement.

It could be said that social activism itself has become commercialized. Caroline Lee, author of *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, uses the term public engagement industry to describe this phenomenon.\(^{55}\) The increase of professions and establishment of graduate programs within the arena of social practice art has marked its progression into the mainstream. One example is the Social Practice Graduate Program at California College of the Arts where David Burns teaches, which was established as the first of its kind. Artist and educator Ted Purves helped found the program in 2005 as a “pedagogical necessity,” for students to learn social and political theories in addition to the art practices.\(^{56}\) California College of Arts (CalArts) wished to create a program


\(^{54}\) Ibid.


for social practice art that would address how future generations of socially engaged artists would develop into professionals.\(^{57}\) Specifically, the Social Practice Workshop at CalArts focuses on field work with faculty as well as visiting artists. Programs such as these offer art students a different path than do typical studio disciplines. However, this utopian notion of mentoring the next generation of activist artists is marred by the fact that programs such as these cost upwards of sixty thousand dollars a year, placing students in serious debt. Claire Bishop critiques academic capitalism, insulting universities as “bureaucratic and stifling uncreative environments.”\(^{58}\) She argues that since the 1980s, higher education in the West has operated as a business, geared towards market success.\(^{59}\) This tendency towards financial gain has brought the motivations and effectiveness of social action under scrutiny.

In the past decade, social practice art has joined the mainstream art world. Museum exhibitions devoted to social practice art are common. Exhibitions like the ones created by Fallen Fruit prove that this methodology is becoming institutionalized, and, one might say, therefore commercialized. In abiding by the institutional aesthetics, artists are putting their work on display in hope of attracting a larger audience. This audience may then become invested in artists’ social projects outside the museum walls, becoming possible donors. Even if social practice art rebels against issues caused by capitalism, it cannot escape the fact that it exists inside a capitalist society. Therefore, it requires money. Artist Pablo Helguera believes social practice art is the antithesis to the art market, yet he admits to working within the system out of


\(^{58}\) Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells}, 245.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 268.
necessity. In addition to his art projects, he authored the widely popular handbook *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011), and serves as the Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art.

One motivating factor for artists, whether socially engaged or not, when exhibiting in museum and gallery shows is that they provide the artists a means to make money by exposing them to wealthy benefactors and a larger audience. For social practice artists, this money can be funneled into their public projects. This platform can also give exposure to artist collectives and their mission. Museums also benefit because these activist artworks may attract and engage more visitors, especially since social action has become a trendy new activity. That is why the motivations of such institutions and the artists that decide to work with them should be questioned. While it may be spreading a positive social message, it is tainted by the capitalist pursuit aspect of it? Operating like a for-profit business can feel disempowering and disengaging for the public participants. Additionally, Nato Thompson expresses concern over the possibility to fetishize activist art as a cool fad or résumé-building exercise, which challenges the genuineness of socially engaged collectives. Social practice artists should not be concerned with profiting from market-favorable artworks or gaining fame, but this is the reality they face. In order to create meaningful projects within the with which communities they work, usually some type of capital is required.

As social practice artists attempt to acclimate to the commercial art world, the pertinence of funding becomes more apparent. In order to attract sponsors and donors, artists must fashion a

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61 Thompson, “Living as Form,” 31.
branding strategy. The notion of artistic self-marketing is useful in a highly capitalist society to fund one’s art projects. It usually requires aspects of graphic design, branding, and the advertising of art objects as merchandise. Fallen Fruit has followed this model by setting up a shop on their website to market various kitchen appliances like chopping boards, wooden spoons and cocktail glasses. The cutting boards all include phrases that were taken from actual comments left on their Youtube video of urban foraging in Los Angeles, such as:

Dipshit liberals. Always looking for a handout.
So if a hippie leans over my fence, is it legal for me to eat them?
fucked in the head californian.
these guys are obviously anarchists (Fig. 10).

Ironically, these counter-cultural boards go for ninety dollars each. They also sell extra jam left over from their jam-making parties – for eight dollars a jar. Fallen Fruit’s promotion of free access to healthy food is undermined when they sell fruit jams that were inexpensive to make, at such a high cost.

Fallen Fruit’s online shop illustrates the group’s expansion into a business operation, and while this does not figure into the widely-accepted model of social practice art, they are not the only socially engaged group to market products in this manner. The notorious artist-activist group Guerilla Girls originally formed in New York in 1985, and has since spread internationally, to fight all forms of social injustice. However, in addition to their political art, the group also runs an online store. The webpage for the shop is headline reads, “Thanks! Everything you buy supports our efforts to expose discrimination and corruption.” One of their products is a mug bearing the slogan from a poster from their famous 1989 campaign: “Do

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women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” (Fig. 11). Additionally, they sell T-shirts, posters, and even gorilla masks. While these items publicize their message, simply sporting a shirt with a radical slogan does not accomplish the same as concrete social action.

Fig. 10 “So, If a hippie leans over my fence, is it legal for me to eat them?” Laser etched oak cutting board. 12.5" x 19.5" x 1.25". 2016 Source: fallenfruit.bigcartel.com/products.

Fig. 11, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” Ceramic coffee mug. 2018. Source: guerrillagirls.com/guerrilla-store/.

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64 “Guerilla Store.”
Half of all the website sales from Fallen Fruit’s shop fund their public projects, which begs the question of what they do with the other half of the money.\textsuperscript{65} One could assume that some of these funds are diverted into the manufacturing of more products, but does Fallen Fruit personally profit off of any it? They do not specify. While purchasing Fallen Fruit’s merchandise online invests in their social practice art, it may also be directly profiting the artists. So, it is both for the public good and personal gain. Unfortunately, this blurs the authenticity and intent of the artists’ practices.

Fallen Fruit also supports their public projects through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Creative Capital, and Murriel Pollia Foundation. They are also supported by the non-profit organization Fulcrum Arts that accepts donations on their behalf. Lastly, they utilize crowdfunding websites to fund their public works. Crowdfunding, a type of crowdsourcing in which the public is asked specifically for financial contributions, has arose over the past decade and is almost entirely Internet-based. There are many applications for this, and it is an apt mode for the funding of grassroots movements and activist projects. For example, Indiegogo designates an entire webpage specifically to the funding of art projects, claiming “Our mission is to empower people to unite around ideas that matter to them and together make those ideas come to life.”\textsuperscript{66} In Fallen Fruit’s case, they launched a Kickstarter web page to raise money for their projects in New Orleans. It proved to be a successful avenue for them since they raised $21,881.\textsuperscript{67} This crowdsourced fundraising proves that money is often required to create

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[65] Fallen Fruit, http://fallenfruit.org/.
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social projects. Crowdfunding may offer a good alternative to corporate funding since it allows individuals to feel like they have contributed to something meaningful. This model allows for like-minded individuals to benefit a movement they support, which is resourceful for Fallen Fruit’s global audience who may not physically reside in the city in which they are working, but would still like to participate in some manner. It also frees the artists from having to rely on corporations that may stand in opposition to what they are trying to achieve. Corporate funding can be problematic because often corporate sponsors utilize their funding of social projects as a façade to obscure their real agenda. For instance, Bank of America sponsored Rick Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* in Houston even though the company was under fire at the time for misleading and taking advantage of desperate homeowners during the housing crisis of 2008.\(^{68}\) This challenges the sincerity of the project. Branding to make oneself attractive to donors is required to drive public projects. Even if the artist or collective does not agree with capitalist wealth, it is a necessary evil.

Overall, social practice art does not fit into the usual parameters of the material art world since it is not an object-centered art practice. Its value exists within the experience, so it holds no capitalist value. However, the commercialization of our society has begun to infiltrate every aspect of culture, including art and social action, and turn everything into a commodity. Will this eventually suffocate the soul of our culture by turning even aesthetic experiences into commercial products?\(^{69}\) Derek Bok, the former President of Harvard University, argued that the “academic industrial complex” has ruined liberal arts education programs by turning them into

\(^{68}\) Davis, “A Critique of Social Practice Art."

another form of business model. Therefore, the liberal arts have traded in their humanist ideals in pursuit of capital instead. Artists, under capitalism, produce aesthetics and social service as commodities. This commodification of social action that has put social practice art in the spotlight at many museums, has also placed its motivations under scrutiny.

70 “Social Responsibility and the Commercialization of Society.”
Chapter 4. Social Action in a Digital World

Another type of institutionalized social practice that artists have embraced is the Internet as a means to reach a more dispersed and diverse audience. While the Internet offers a viable model for organizing and promoting activist movements and projects, it is a commercial medium and a privatized tool. Since its beginning, social practice art at its core has focused on community engagement and improvement. This has required intimate relationships between artists and other participants as Fallen Fruit has shown with their community-oriented fruit tree plantings. However, with increased digitization and the rise of social media over the past decade, social practice artists are learning to engage not only with localized communities, but also a larger online base of participants. How has this shift from personal to virtual interactions changed the scope of socially engaged art? Social practice artists, such as Fallen Fruit, have proved that they can adapt to the pressure of the online world in order to be effective.

In a society that largely operates online, creating digital projects is a critical step in remaining relevant. For example, artist and Co-Director of the Social Practice and Community Engagement Lab at the University of Texas at Dallas, xtine burrough, has made it her mission to utilize digital media platforms to create interactive projects with the goal of community enrichment.71 Her most popular work, Delocator.net, started as an open rebellion against Starbucks in 2005, and has now grown to benefit all sorts of locally owned business (Fig. 12).72 On Delocator.net, users can look up independent cafes, book stores, and movie theaters rather than continuing to funnel money into major corporations. Users can also add any businesses that

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may not already be listed on the map. Burrough incentivizes people to support their neighbor’s businesses, which not only strengthens the local economy, but also the social ties of the community.

Fig. 12, xtine burrough. *Delocator*. 2005 – present. Online interactive database. Source: www.delocator.net/.

Similar to this model of an interactive database aimed at community improvement, Fallen Fruit launched *Endless Orchard* in April 2017 as a virtual expansion of the urban fruit trails they have been creating since 2004 (Fig.13). Using the data from their previous projects, they created the initial database that marked where they and their participants have planted public trees. User input is welcome, so visitors to the website are invited to add information, such as location and type, about trees located in their own neighborhood that are accessible to the public. The goal of *Endless Orchard* is to expand into a global urban fruit trail that will map public fruit trees for everyone to see and enjoy, promoting the cities of the future as fertile urbanscapes.73 This

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reflects the goal of Fallen Fruit’s original urban fruit maps and public tree plantings. Online interactive databases can be utilized for community engagement and improvement. In this same sense, Endless Orchard is benefitting local communities by dispersing knowledge of where to locate free and organic fruits. It represents a growing orchard that relies on the community to keep it alive. Therefore, it was developed as both a digital artwork and social project.

![Endless Orchard](image_url)

Fig. 13 Endless Orchard. 2017 – present. Online interactive database. Source: endlessorchard.com.

Endless Orchard is Fallen Fruit’s response to confront the behemoth of the online world. However, this Internet presence can manifest as a form of self-promotion and marketing. Therefore, artists like xtine burrough and Fallen Fruit who have expanded into this virtual sphere should take care to emphasize the community-building aspects of their online projects. Although online users were not their original target audience in their early public works, Fallen Fruit has realized the potential of building a global network – in the digital sense of the word – of participants who also believe in encouraging access to healthy food and strengthening local ties.
*Endless Orchard* operates as an extension of Fallen Fruit’s social practice art projects, but it has moved into the digital realm. It allows them to work on both micro and macro scales. They continue to work directly with local communities to plant fruit trees there, and add these trees to their database. For the trees given away at their public adoptions, the new recipients of trees sign waivers that allows their trees to be added to the group’s ever-expanding digital map. On a larger scale though, the map also includes all the cities that they have not worked in. They have handed over this online tool to the public so that they can map and harvest fruit on their own. This work utilizes technology to connect a greater number of people, so that is not only a localized project. While Fallen Fruit has mainly worked locally within specific communities, the concept of urban agriculture is one that is relevant worldwide. Fallen Fruit also intends to turn this Endless Orchard into an app, moving into the dominion of smartphones and social media. This adaptation to user-friendly digital modes may attract more people to actively participate in helping grow this global orchard.

Supporting this humanist ideal is the claim that the rapid development of the Internet has fostered a global consciousness that can produce collaborative experiences. As author of *Digital Art*, Christiane Paul has argued:

> As a vast distribution network, the Internet obviously provides an ideal platform for disseminating information, staging interventions and protest, or supporting remote and underrepresented communities.\(^{74}\)

*Endless Orchard* explores how online activity can affect the real world and promote community engagement. This demonstrates the potential for Internet artworks to be a great place for interconnectivity and activism. However, the positive results of this project do not change the

fact that online interactivity does not replace the personal relationships that are formed through community-based artworks.
Conclusion

Fallen Fruit seeks to explore social and cultural relationships through public practice and real-time experiences with community members. The group encompasses multiple aspects of a healthy society, such as inclusion, solidarity, mental and physical health, community interaction, and environmental awareness. They began with what Matias Viegener referred to as, “locational interventions to rethink public space, ecology, and ownership in urban neighborhoods,” in order to best utilize the greenspace in cities.\(^{75}\) Over the past fourteen years, they have endorsed fruit tree plantings in parks and parkways and along streets and sidewalks for everyone to use. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard describes that oftentimes, community-oriented projects operate independently and off-the-radar of any civic officials.\(^{76}\) Fallen Fruit’s original urban fruit maps and walks through the neighborhoods of Los Angeles resemble this model of grassroots organizing. In contrast, their structured public plantings have made the case for cooperation with both community and civic organizations to yield the most sustainable public projects for the public’s benefit.

Fallen Fruit’s community engagement has now moved past local projects to a worldwide, web-based community with shared interests. The transition has occurred over a decade, but has proved the group’s ability to adapt to ever-changing global modes of economies and communication. Suzanne Lacy advocates for “strong personal relationships… maintained by the artist over time and distance.”\(^{77}\) Although Fallen Fruit’s public works maintain this authentic relationship, affiliating with museums and the Internet mean that active participants tend to lose

\(^{75}\) Knechtel, *Alphabet City: Food*, 94.


\(^{77}\) Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, 34.
their sense of agency. This movement away from the real-world may result in losing creative solutions for society. Pablo Helguera argues that social practice art is an “actual art,” not a symbolic one.\(^78\) This means it is rooted in the real-world with concrete substance. Adhering to the aesthetics of the museum or the digital realm may undermine the practical applications of this practice.

Fallen Fruit has positioned themselves to accomplish two seemingly contradictory goals. On the one hand, they promote their positive practices with non-art individuals, while on the other hand, they market their works to the art world. They recognize the importance of commercialization as a way to garner success. The fame they have accrued today may seem like self-promotion, which might cause some of their audience and participants to question their motives. But, the fact remains that this success has allowed them to create public works in more cities, and they are still expanding. Despite the adverse effects of capitalism in social practice art, commercialization is a necessary evil in order to produce more projects for the benefit of the public. Fallen Fruit exemplifies social practice art that tries to balance public service and commercial success, and may provide a template for future social practice art.

\(^78\) Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 5.
Bibliography


Vita

Born in New Orleans in 1995, Caroline Giepert first became interested in art history at her local high school Ben Franklin. She began her career at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2013, and graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in art history and a minor in psychology in May of 2016. The following fall, she accepted a position in the art history graduate program at LSU, and worked as a teaching assistant under Dr. Susan Elizabeth Ryan. During her time in the graduate program, Caroline focused her research on contemporary art, specifically social practice art. Currently, she is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history, which will be awarded in August of 2018.