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Hope is a Wooded Time

An eco-performance of biodiversity in discarded geographic and social space

Susan Haedicke
Dramaturg University of Warwick

Sarah Harper
Artist Friches Théâtre Urbain



Is a wasteland wasted space? What role does this tangled mess of brambles and creepers, impenetrable for half a century, play in the ecosystem? Were we to lose ourselves, retracing the faint fox-paths through the ivy, turning in circles, what could we gather to eat, drink or heal ourselves? What journeys have the seeds of the 'wild' plants made, borne on the wind, to arrive in this nowhere? And the neighbours, rooted, uprooted, without roots, or just passing through... what stories do they bring with them? forgotten knowledge of flower and fawn?

Where wastelands and squatters are, survival and tenacity can be found... rooted in neglect.

'Left to its own devices for almost half a century, the wood developed its own wayward charm. The crumbling plaster walls let no clues escape as to the secret and mysterious ways behind. Many a passer-by, intrigued, poked their nose through the twisted wire and broken fencing, hoping to catch a waft of spongy undergrowth, a glimpse of Eden. But garden no longer, the order of all human toil had given way long ago to the tortured twistings and windings of this enormous scrub: this hive of invisible life, impenetrable as a forest, busy as a city, solitary as a tomb...'

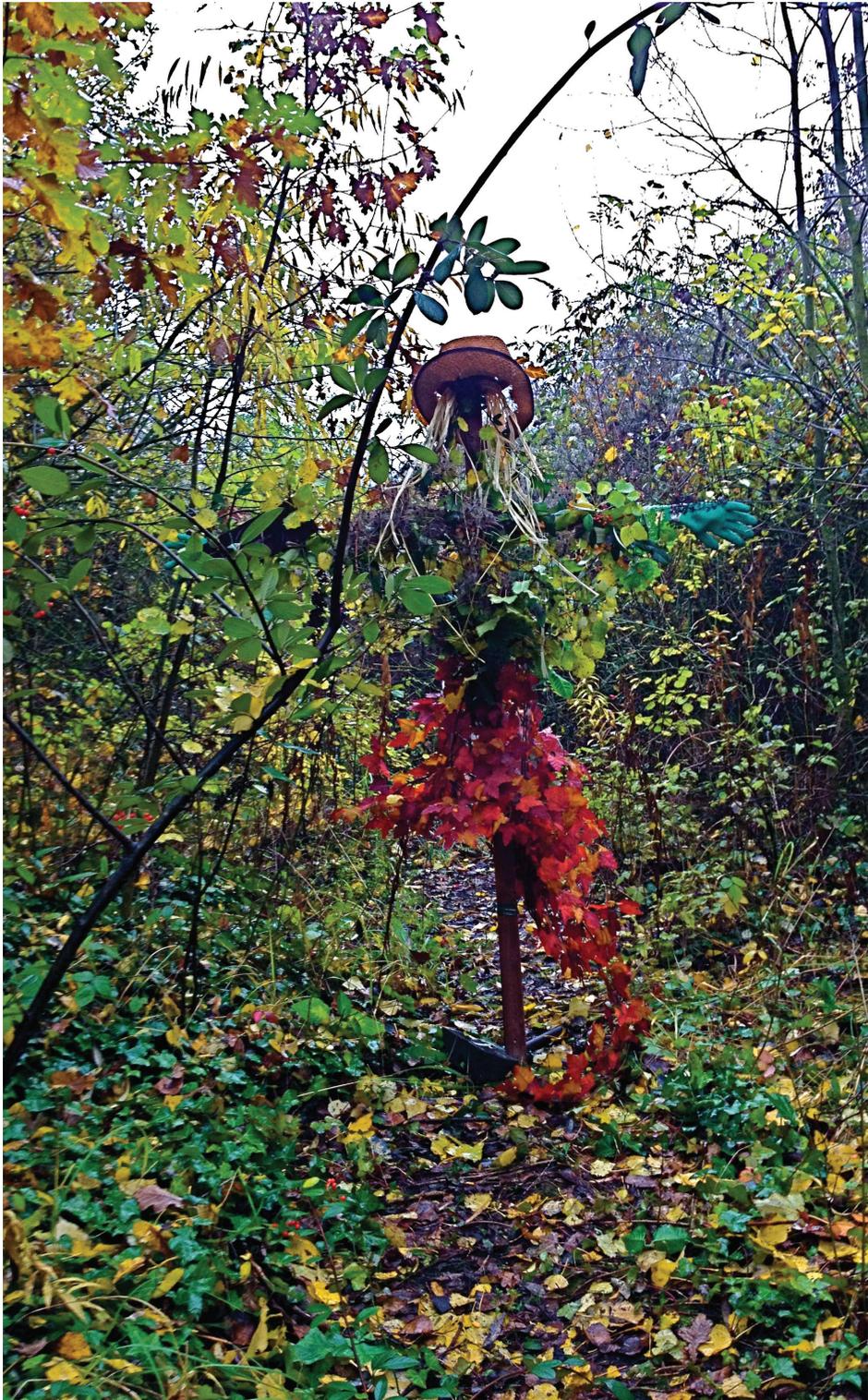


'The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up. There is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety; grass grew over the track years ago and now the rabbits and the foxes make their own runs in the subtle labyrinth and nobody comes. The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out.... A little stream with soft margins of marsh runs through the wood but it has grown sullen with the time of the year; the silent blackish water thickens, now, to ice. All will fall still, all lapse.... The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me. It is easy to lose yourself in these woods.'









Don't stray from the path....



Hope is a Wooded Time: An Eco-Performance of Biodiversity in discarded geographic and social space

From the 17th to 19th centuries, much of Montreuil, a town just outside Paris, France, was divided into long narrow plots of land, surrounded by 600 kilometres of 'living walls': les *Murs à Pêches*. Built of earth, plaster and gypsum, these walls provided heat and humidity to the espaliered peach trees that became a major source of income for the town and supplied Paris inhabitants with peaches. The peaches, each one individually wrapped, were carried in woven willow baskets on the women's heads as they walked each morning from Montreuil to the market in Les Halles in the centre of Paris to sell their fruit. Today, many of these walls have fallen into disrepair, and the plots are squatted by Sinti gypsy or Romany populations or have become wild, overgrown and full of rubbish.

In 2010, Montreuil launched an initiative that offered grants to site-specific projects, both horticultural and artistic, to respond to the unique aspect of the city's history found in the *Murs à Pêches*. Sarah Harper, Director of Fiches Théâtre Urbain, received artistic management of Parcelle 343, an abandoned woodland site of one hectare on rue Saint-Antoine, for *Hope is a Wooded Time*. This on-going community-based eco-art project draws inspiration from the site's evocative heritage and its contemporary reality (see <http://parcelle343.hautetfort.com/about.html>). Crisscrossed by the living walls, Parcelle 343 is now a protected woodland site, so trees cannot be cleared, walls demolished, or structures built. However, Parcelle 343 challenges expectations of a beautiful ancient woods since it is overgrown, unkempt, and often spongy underfoot; a large 'dumping ground' for industrial waste fills one corner; pollutants have made the soil toxic in several areas; and wine bottles, discarded clothing, or broken tools and furniture are scattered throughout. And yet, hidden behind tangled vines and brambles, one can find ruins of the living walls or old wells divulging remarkable centuries-old horticultural and irrigation techniques; mushrooms blooming in abundance under their partner beech, birch, poplar and oak trees; and figs, quince, chestnuts and hazelnuts feeding birds, foxes and mice. Closed in on itself for over forty years, this 'wooded wasteland' has become a thriving ecosystem rich in biodiversity. Surrounding this eco-community of living organisms and nonliving partners (soil, water, stones) are diverse groups of people: extended family groups of Sinti gypsies who have squatted in neighbouring plots for over fifty years, recent Russian and North African immigrants struggling amid unemployment, neglect and prejudice; long-established indigenous French working class families, and a large group of Rom Kalderash living in a temporary campsite in a car park. The title of *Hope is a Wooded Time* refers not only to a past usefulness of

the site as a distinctive orchard in the 17th to 19th centuries and as a wild larder of edible plants for the wood's neighbours in the 20th century, but also to a confidence that its current damaged state can be overturned. From its inception, *Hope is a Wooded Time* encouraged encounters between ecological processes of biodiversity in this wooded wasteland and human interventions by ethnically and culturally diverse populations. Since 2011, the on-going project has created on-site workshops and interventions based in art and pedagogy that seek to increase awareness of ecologically sustainable practices in the interactions between humans and the environment here. In addition, these workshops draw attention to ethical questions around issues of ecological preservation certainly, but also of equitable access to land, environmental justice, urban foraging, food security, and varied expectations around land use. A key initial task for Harper and her fellow artists was getting to know the wooded site and its neighbours. The artists were the outsiders, and many local inhabitants feared that they would ruin the wood. Thus, a key to the success of the project was to develop trust. Over many cups of coffee, Harper chatted with people who lived close by, asking what this abandoned woodland area meant to them, how they used it and what they would like it to be. For some, the woods offered a place to dispose of waste since the city does not collect rubbish from 'temporary' dwellings; for others, a private 'park' for parties and romance or a natural site of solitude; for still others, a bit of 'countryside' for foraging and hunting; and for many, a toilet as the neighbouring gypsy plots do not have running water. Gradually, the local inhabitants began to see Harper as one of the woods' 'neighbours' as she was able to reassure them through actions that the artists were not there to 'change' the wood, to 'gentrify and tame' it, but rather to work with the neighbours, through artistic and performative activities, to understand how the wood performs. The gate remains open; no fences fill spaces where the walls are broken.

'Les ballades artistiques' or self-guided *art-walks* of *Hope is a Wooded Time*, designed around discoveries of the many spatial and temporal layers of the site itself and the larger socio-historical context in which it is located, are participatory art events in themselves. In a 'ballade artistique' held in November 2012, visitors entering the wood were guided by hand-painted arrows on bits of wood hanging from the trees that took them on a circuitous route past mushrooms growing abundantly. Close by, one could find an old wicker chair for 'contemplating the mushrooms' and handwritten 'love letters' dangling from the trees that were actually an email exchange between Harper and a mushroom expert on the inseparable relationship of the beech tree and her mushrooms, an exchange that was both poetically romantic and scientifically accurate. Further along, as the walker passed the remains of an old well, children's voices could be heard discussing how deep it was and whether they

would dare to descend to its depths. In another overgrown area, children's agitated voices were again heard talking about their fears of the woods, and observant visitors could make out a fox peering through a gap in the wall. In a part of the wood that seemed most like an orchard, a black and white video of a woman espaliering an invisible peach tree to the 'living wall' was projected against the wall itself, and just past the video was one of the old barely surviving peach trees with a ladder leaning against it and old bucket at its base. These site-specific land art installations and temporarily placed sound installations, with voices of the site's neighbours and enhanced sounds of the woods itself, sought to establish a respectful and knowledgeable engagement between the land and the people and to draw attention to the many different food crops growing naturally in the wood. The project's multiple and varied activities over the years draw attention to the significant role that each species of flora and fauna plays in this site's ecosystem (for example, medicinal broomrape fastening itself onto roots of neighbouring plants for its nutrition since it lacks chlorophyll) and to the impact of human involvement with the site in the past and the present, involvement that ranged from the beneficial to the harmful. The activities highlight the past usefulness of the site as well as suggest scenarios for an environmentally healthy or, conversely, damaged future *presented* by the site itself. That ecological dimension is inextricably entwined with an ethical dimension that points to our responsibility to listen to and preserve nature, not as a museum piece, but as a productive partner. It also emphasizes an awareness of what links class or 'citizenship' to the land and what we mean by equitable access to affordable and nutritious food, even for some of society's most vulnerable members. The ethical-ecological-aesthetic dimension contests ideas of what constitutes a 'beautiful' landscape and dislocates the neighbours' and the wider public's perceptions of beauty. *Hope is a Wooded Time* challenges us to take up the task of learning from nature how to live with diversity and 'messiness' so evident in this wooded wasteland. The hope in the title is hope for renewal of the site's original purpose as a source of local food production: a transformation from woodland wasteland fighting valiantly against degradation of the soil to a sustainable urban foraging and agroforestry project. And the wooded time reflects Harper's conviction that the trees must remain integral to any future food production on the site. These concepts are embodied in the interventions and installations that very often reference or use the wild edible species growing naturally in the wood. The nature-human relationships forged here represent an embodied give-and-take between humans and non-humans.

Texts accompanying the joined images of the wood are from Angela Carter, 'The Erl-King', in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* and an adaptation of Victor Hugo's 'Le Jardin de la rue Plumet' in *Les Misérables*.