

In the Arboretum of Values: The Moringa Tree Plates

Dr Jonathan Willet

Humanity is the rich effluvium, it is the waste and
the manure and the soil, and from it grows the tree of
the arts.

— EZRA POUND (1914)

The Moringa Tree Plates are a new chapter in the long History of Trees, which as truly ancient beings have evolved from the first vascular plants (those with internal plumbing) in the early Devonian period. Around 95 million years ago there emerged a number of species we would recognize today such as laurels, magnolias, planes, maples, oaks and willows (Thomas 2000: pp 3-5), the Moringa Oleifera being native to the sub Himalayan tracts of Northern India. If we compare the biography of trees with that of the first modern humans who appeared in Africa 200,000 years ago, we get a sense of their longevity in the grand scheme of things. The cultural history of trees, although a late arrival has accumulated a weight of symbolism, its layers of mythology and mystery orientated around the recurring archetype of the Tree of Life. In the Icelandic *Prose Edda* it takes the form of Yggdrasil, a cosmic ash tree that provides support for nine worlds. The *Book of Genesis* distinguishes between the fateful Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, the latter being associated with peace and wisdom in the *Book of Proverbs*. In India, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment after meditating for a week beside the Sacred Fig or Bodhi Tree. And in Chinese legend, a Taoist fable tells of a tree that produces a peach every three thousand years, to eat the fruit is to become immortal. Trees have such a high level of symbolic resonance, their material qualities are seldom experienced without the veneer of cultural meaning, perhaps to the extent that we sometimes forget to really notice the physical presence of the tree itself; we cannot be sure as to the provenance of Robin Hood for example, but we do know that the Major Oak has been growing in Sherwood Forest since in the 12th Century. If we experience the wood as distinct from our knowledge of the 'tree', a rich and diverse material history begins to unfold, one in which trees persist like anchors in time, against the fickle terrain of human affairs.

Across the centuries we have realized the tree's capacity to transform our world; the wood technologies of early modern ship-building saw the pioneering Portuguese and Spanish explorers navigate the far reaches of the globe. In early European warfare the powerful spring of the yew bow enabled the 'English archers to make short work of the French knights at Crecy in 1346 and Agincourt in 1415' (Tudge 2006: 89). In Europe, the art of carpentry evolved over many centuries, The Carpenters Company in London was originally a medieval trade guild dating from 1271, and received its first Royal Charter in 1477. A wood economy has persisted throughout history, as trees continue to be an important global resource for health, nutrition, and manufacturing, providing an abundance of fruits and nuts, oils, tea, coffee, medicines, building materials for aviation, agriculture and architecture, paper, rubber, fuel, glues, dyes, and perhaps most importantly oxygen as a by product of photosynthesis; 'a mature beech tree can produce enough oxygen for 10 people every year, and fix 2kg of carbon dioxide per hour' (Thomas 2000: 7). Trees are increasingly seen as a long term investment, black walnuts for example are in high demand as luxury veneers, fetching up to '\$60,000 for a single straight bole at auction' (Beresford-Kroeger 2012: 22). The tree's symbolic power is partially derived from this wealth of material history, in which the cultural composites of arboreal matters create a dialogue between sign and substance; 'the Chinese count wood as the fifth element, and Jung considered trees an archetype' (Deakin 2008: xi).

As part of this cultural exchange between sign and substance, *The Moringa Tree Plates* join an art historical lineage art that continues to draw upon the symbolic value of trees. Leonardo da Vinci's drawings reflect a fascination with the geometry of a tree's branches, which suggest 'algorithmic rules governing tree growth', in order that they 'retain their fluid bearing capacity as they branch' (Ball 2009: 130). Trees for Leonardo were a complex system of hydraulics, plumbing and architecture all rolled into one. Durer's *Linden Tree on a Bastion* (1494) is homage to its sacred properties; known to live for over 1000 years, linden trees were used to make medicines, musical instruments, and the elaborate Gothic altarpieces of Veit Stoss and Tilman Riemenschneider. The Dutch landscape artist Jacob van Ruisdael painted a series of majestic trees in the early 1650's, the most notable being *The Great Oak* (1652), its intricate foliage a prime example of Baroque extravagance. In contrast, the dishevelled state of Van Gogh's *A Wind Beaten Tree* (1883) conveys the fragility of life in the face of the natural elements, as does the vulnerability of Schiele's saplings in *Autumn Trees* (1911). The modernist trees of Mondrian and Klee shed their natural

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forms through an emphasis on line, colour and abstraction. Mondrian painted a series of progressively abstract trees between 1908 and 1913, which served as a means of breaking the connection between nature and representation. Klee's *Abstraction with Reference to a Flowering Tree* (1925) doesn't deny nature as a pictorial source, but rather re-designs and re-distributes its elements on an imaginary plane; as he once remarked the artist is like a tree drawing the minerals of experience from its roots – things observed, read, told and felt - and slowly processing them into new leaves. (Klee in Tan 2001: online).

Since the late 1960's, artists have reprocessed the 'minerals of experience' in order to challenge both the situation and status of the artwork, in particular the cognitive ground of Conceptual Art in the 1960's. The most influential figure in this tradition was Robert Smithson whose 1972 essay *Cultural Confinement* denounced the curator's rationale as an unnecessary limit on the potential for creative expression. Smithson proposed 'an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation' (Smithson in Zepke 2009: 209), and worked toward a type of 'second nature' where the forces of art and life were synthesized in the creative act. In works such as *First Upside Down Tree* (1969), art begins to break its way back into Nature and in the process questions the cultural distinction between natural and artificial forms. Joseph Beuys, like Smithson, tapped into this vital continuum as a means of subverting the institutional restrictions of the conventional gallery space. He perceived trees as 'an element of regeneration, which in itself is a concept of time', and from 1982 to 1987 planted 7000 oak trees in Kassel, Germany, a major intervention in the urban ecology of the town. John Newling has practiced the art of negotiating the elementary forms of 'second nature' since late 1970's, as in *The Nine Twists of Nature* (1979), a series of geometric constructions in the form of copper plates attached to a tree trunk. This convergence of organic and inorganic materials formed a temporary second skin for the tree, an abstract veneer of copper overlaying the romantic ideal of an unadulterated Nature. Newling suggests a subtle but complex perspective of 'ecology without nature' (Morton: 2009) in this early work, which foregrounds the natural environment as a dynamic material construction, alive 'in the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation' and in the texture of thoughts and signs.

In the creative ecologies of contemporary art there are a number of projects that explore the 'second nature' of trees by working with culture as a mixture of biological, environmental and social

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processes. These include Mark Dion's *Neukom Vivarium* (2006) which creates a micro-ecology in a dynamic state of growth and decay by enclosing a fallen hemlock tree in a controlled environment that gradually becomes home for a colony of ferns, mosses, fungi and insects. The artwork develops what is commonly known as 'nurse log' to convey a sense of the care, attention, time and energy required to maintain the precarious balance of living systems. Giuseppe Penone's *Ripetere il Bosco, To Repeat the Forest* (1969 -2003) are a series of sculptural works that extract a 'second nature' from felled or uprooted trees. Penone hollows out the trunk to expose the knots in such a way that they resemble a sapling growing inside the tree, the dead wood revitalized through the artist's creative labour. Natalie Jeremijenko's *Tree Logic* (1999) is a refrain on Smithsonian's series of upside down trees, comprised of six inverted maples suspended above the ground in a custom built truss, which over time begin to follow an abstract line of growth toward the sunlight. The installation presents us with a surreal 'second nature', out of synch with our expectations of the natural world, and yet in keeping with the organic principles of phototropism. And Myoung Ho Lee's *Tree Series* (2006-9), frame individual trees in their surroundings by inserting giant white backgrounds into the field of vision. Lee's technique of physical separation and photographic abstraction, endows the trees with an afterimage that exposes our received vision of Nature as a composite process of specific naturalizations, which take place in the discourse between technology, perception and culture.

The Moringa Tree Plates are part of this same creative currency; derived from the rich and diverse history of trees, it accumulates into an arboretum of value that transcends the particulars of time and place, and yet remains true to the spirit of the first public arboretums in 19th century Britain. It was the Victorians' who established the arboretum as a public space dedicated to the cultivation of social wellbeing, and not unlike the contemporary art installation it marked an aesthetic intervention in the urban environment, its design informed by a growth in botanical writing and illustration, which in Loudon's *Arboretum Britannicum* (1838) had become something of an art form, 'its wealth of drawings and information the most famous of a series of works that were, in effect, virtual page bound arboretums, but which were based on detailed observations of trees and collections in specific places' (Elliot 2011: 1). The Victorian arboretum emerged from the historical convergence of cultural, scientific and aesthetic values, which established a creative dialogue between imaginary and physical spaces. In the founding philosophy of urban parklands, the 'virtual page bound arboretum'

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evolved into a type of living public sculpture, designed to throw into relief the historical importance of trees and other types of plant life. Arboretums and larger botanical gardens were intended to impart both knowledge and pleasure in the constitution of green public space, as education became embedded in experience, and a picturesque vision of nature was conveyed through the mythical grandeur of trees.

John Newling's arboretum of value spans three decades of installation sculptures that make connections with the intelligent materials of nature. The artist's recent collection of studies in the cultural value of trees are constructions of a 'second nature', derived from an expert mix of arboreal histories, natural symbolism and institutional practice. It is fitting that the first study took place at the National Arboretum as *The Westonbirt Wishes* (2004), which established a bureau in the grounds for visitors to record their wishes and attach them to single point on a nearby tree. Newling's *plein air* branch of the office, converted the production of records into a place for negotiating the uncertain flux of nature, the ritual accumulation of four thousand wishes formed a bolus on the tree, an ephemeral graft of hope, expectation and desire, eventually cast in bronze and re-transcribed into a book that together made the *The Westonbirt Wishes*. In subsequent projects Newling's arboretum becomes a changing locus of value, an artist's application for exploring the contingencies of time and place, and their relation to our cultural perspectives on trees.

The Clearing (2009-11) was one of a number of projects to emerge from the *Noah Laboratory* (2008-9) which developed a material dialogue between art and the natural world, what Newling later describes as an 'intelligent ecology based on the values that are immanent in the complex workings of nature'. In *The Clearing*, the tree becomes the expression of a ground composed from a mixture of meaning and material – the shredded documents of local histories relating to industrial wastelands along the River Trent - made into a bio-mass or soil used for growing nine beech trees using hydroponics at Bio City, Nottingham. A documented history is converted into a natural history, embedded in a renewed sense of place through the formal public planting of the beech trees. The artwork draws upon the spirit of the 'virtual page bound arboretum' to create a tree-knowledge composite, blurring the boundaries between document and material reality in a remarkable continuum of forms.

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The Lemon Tree & Me (2009-10) adopted the format of a meticulous gardener's diary, expressed as a personal ecology of the artist and his cultivation of a lemon tree sapling over a period of one year. Planted in a soil composed from the *Noah Laboratory* documents in a method similar to that of *The Clearing*, the lemon tree became the focus of a very particular art of gardening, one premised on the labours of tending, caring, nourishing and understanding; turning a sickly tree that was barely surviving into one that flourished. As a 'sign of life', the lemon tree embodied an ethical practice and a subtle mode of critique, born out of a social concern that the 'values of intensive market capitalism have caused a rift between humans and nature, which can only be bridged by a shared ecology of values. The everyday currency of contemporary art can illuminate a common creativity of sustainability if we can extend our vision beyond our back gardens into the wider social field.' (Newling: 2010) Informed by the philanthropy of the first public arboretums, *The Lemon Tree* cultivates a shared sense of responsibility, a duty of care toward our social and natural environments, in this case taken on by the Lincoln Collection who acquired the artwork as a 'living composition' in April 2010.

In keeping with the *Lemon Tree and Me*, Newling's *Moringa Tree Projects* disperse the arboretum of value across a series of interconnected artworks, where the intimacy of the gardener's atelier is experienced through the workings of public space. The first installation brought the *Moringa Oleifera*, commonly known as the Miracle Tree, into the Study at Nottingham Contemporary, in what the artist described as the 'slow time' of careful observation. *The Miracle Trees* (2011) required the traditional approach of the artisan's attention to detail, an empirical craft honed by Newling into an aesthetic of care and sensitivity, evolving over time into a finely calibrated method for tempering the uncertainties of the growing cycle. In optimum conditions the *Moringa Oleifera*, 'the world's most generous tree', has the capacity to provide a wide range of vitamins and minerals from its leaves and seedpods, including seven times the vitamin C of oranges, four times the calcium in milk, and three times the potassium in bananas. Preliminary studies also suggest that it may have antibacterial and antiviral properties, and could help improve glucose intolerance. In the *Miracle Trees*, this abundance of value is not so much represented but cultivated as a 'sign of life' expressing itself through the slowly unfolding yield of a generous nature, a material event which resonates with the Greek *semeion* "sign" translated as "miracle" in the early English bibles. (Harper: Online Etymology Dictionary). As a refrain on the 'sign of life', the experimental work of cultivating the moringa trees was

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supplemented by the observation and study of the natural historian, as Newling took samples of moringa leaves and complete saplings to make a selection of books and wall mounted pressings that were shown alongside the living artwork. The Study as a place of learning was re-negotiated in the object lesson of the material event, context became the expression of content, and with regard to the ideals of the Victorian arboretum, 'education was embedded in experience' as knowledge became at once a question and condition of seeing the wood and the trees.

The *Moringa Tree Projects* were activated at Nottingham Contemporary but as with many of the artist's installations they began to assume a life of their own, extending beyond the gallery space into the networked materiality of contemporary culture. In *Transfer: The Relic of a Miracle* (2011) we encounter the 'happy accident' as a basis for the miracle tree tattoo, an image derived from one of four failed seeds in the *Miracle Trees* (2011) installation, which remarkably had managed to grow upside down in the soil; replanted and nurtured by the artist it lived for a few more days as a miniature version of a moringa tree sapling. The unlikely situation of the artwork recalls the 'second nature' of Smithson's *First Upside Down Tree* (1969) or Jeremijenko's *Tree Logic* (1999), and in the process reveals the creative imperative of evolution to adapt, survive and flourish in the most 'unnatural' of circumstances. In nature as in art, the mistake can become a positive condition of creativity,

In this sense, life - and this is its radical feature - is that which is capable of error. And perhaps it is this datum or rather this contingency, which must be asked to account for the fact that the question of anomaly permeates the whole of biology

(Foucault, 2000: 476)

If Newling's art is radical it is because he nurtures difference and treasures the anomaly in all its forms, making it the positive condition of the artwork, in this case the miniature template for a tattoo, which becomes a symbolic transfer of value between nature and culture, a 'sign of life' that will inform both the concept and situation of *The Moringa Tree Plates* for the Wellcome Collection in 2013.

The Moringa Tree Plates consist of nine limited editions of nine plate designs, plus an additional number to be used for service in the Wellcome Restaurant. The designs are photographic reproductions of the *Miracle Tree* pressings from the Study in Nottingham Contemporary, transferred onto selected tableware

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for the restaurant. The transition from two to three dimensional plates shifts the emphasis from spectatorship in the art exhibition to participation in the social situation. In a culinary setting, *The Moringa Tree Plates* begin to interface with the networked materiality of the wider social field, as a common ground emerges with a 2007 event the *Knowledge Meal*, an epilogue to Newling's *Preston Market Mystery Project* (2006-7). The artwork involved 'knowledge as acknowledgement' (Dickinson in Newling 2008:13), the simple act of giving in the form of hundreds of mysteries that local people had contributed to the project, was recognised in a public meal celebrating the collective importance of mystery as one of the magic ingredients of life. In recounting their mysteries and sharing experiences people engage in a transaction that exceeds the economic terms and conditions of the market. The *Knowledge Meal* is for an instant a unique value-form only made possible in the uncertain currency of the mystery, a rare opportunity to experience the supra-individual contents of everyday life *without* reducing them to the latest social commodity.

The *Moringa Tree Plates* emerge from this same aesthetic currency, made possible in the arboretum of values, they are a cultural point of convergence with the Wellcome Trust's support for scientific and social research geared towards enhancing health and wellbeing in the wider social fabric of the UK and abroad. In the networked experience of contemporary societies, these innovative partnerships of science, technology, art and culture signify a trend toward a Renaissance in the aesthetics of 21st century public life; social ecologies flourishing in the most unlikely places, such as the *Green Bronx Machine* (Ritz 2012: online) in New York City where the currency of food becomes the catalyst for a programme of social wellbeing, high-tech cultivation, critical education, and creative action. In becoming a part of this creative fabric, *The Moringa Tree Plates* take their place in service at the Wellcome Restaurant, a constant reminder of nature's generosity that not only sustains our physical wellbeing, but also provides food for thought in a world of insolvent values.

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