

NEWS IN FOCUS

A Knotty Problem: Arts Based Action Research in and out of a Community Garden

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Abstract

What happens when A/R/Tographers attempt to build a sculpture out of Japanese Knotweed, an “invasive species” in a community garden in Provincetown, MA, U.S.? Using an arts based performative approach, media artist and researcher sam smiley organized a series of community interventions with gardeners, and naturalists and sculptors during the Appearances Environmental Arts Festival in May of 2016. This article is a debrief of the journey of a Knotweed Sculpture from the B-Street community garden, to the side of the highway, and its ultimate destruction in a bonfire on National Seashore, in a public event called Smouldering Thing. The article is primarily methodological from an arts based research perspective, but draws theoretically on the STS fields of the public understanding of science, as well as media and science studies.

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Introduction

Description of Art and Research Intervention at Appearances Festival (Spring 2016, Provincetown, Massachusetts)

B-Street Gardens has an alien visitor. The name of the visitor is Japanese knotweed, *Fallopia japonica*. However, it has many other names throughout the world, including Huzhang (China), Duizendknoop (Netherlands), Mexican Bamboo, and Fleeceflower, to name only a few. Originally introduced to the Netherlands in the 1800s from Japan, eventually this world traveler made its way to B-Street Gardens. In the spring of 2016, I worked with Americorps volunteers and community garden members to create a sculpture of Japanese knotweed rhizomes and roots on the premises of B-Street Gardens, located in Provincetown, Massachusetts, USA.

As an artist, I faced the daunting task of designing a community arts intervention that both served the community aesthetic and had conceptual value as art. I believe that the crossroads of this type of intervention is humor. Humor can be an important tool in revealing complexity. Ultimately, I wanted to create an intervention that would spawn complex dialogue about Japanese knotweed and the concept of “invasiveness” in general. “Invasive species” and “weeds” have emerged as the modern day ecological “villains” of climate change – killing native species, taking “over,” and destroying native habitats. Many have critiqued this rhetoric as nativist, racist, nationalist, and unproductive for conservation biology and ecology. I drew on these critiques to create a Japanese Knotweed Festival, a celebration of the consumption and celebration of this “invasive” species that is both edible and useful to the community in which it has settled.

The intervention at B-Street Gardens became an open-ended inquiry into the messiness in bringing together science, arts, and politics. It also framed a larger question of arts method as epistemology. I ask: How can arts interventions be used in a community garden context to bring a greater understanding of a specific plant that is considered “invasive”?

Field Site and Context

Situating My Research

The B-Street Gardens are located on a Provincetown-owned conservation trust run by the Provincetown Conservation Commission. Provincetown is an ocean side town at the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, with a year-round population of under 3,000. In the summer it becomes a tourist town, and the population swells to 60,000. It has an “off-season” from November to March, a “shoulder season” of May-June and Sept-Oct, and a “high season” of July-August. It has a large gay, lesbian, and bisexual population, both on season and off season, and is marketed as a tourist town for the GLBT community. [Link: Town of Provincetown. <http://ptownchamber.com/>]

Situating B-Street Gardens

B-Street Gardens are near wetlands, and the land itself was bought as filled in wetlands, so gardening use is considered appropriate given that history (personal communication, A. Brandt, July 1, 2014). Care for the garden is held together through the work of some dedicated community volunteers and through the muscle of *Americorps*, whose work at B-Street is both to provide an infrastructure for the garden and to identify “invasive” species and manage them (see Fig. 1).



Fig.1

There is a large stand of Japanese Knotweed in the wetlands around the community gardens. Japanese Knotweed is a well-known adversary to the *Americorps* volunteers, since they spend each spring clearing it cape-wide. (personal communication, A. Brandt, July 1, 2014). In that sense, the “community” is currently being built around a common enemy, Japanese Knotweed (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

Situating Myself

I am a 50-year old white bigendered queer media artist, born in Michigan, United States. I have been living and voting in Provincetown since 2008. I participate in the Provincetown community, both as a volunteer on community projects and as an artist. After being waitlisted two years for a community garden plot, I finally got a plot in 2014 (see Fig. 3). I had never had my own garden before, so I was excited!



Fig. 3

Situating *Appearances*

Appearances is an Eco-Arts festival that takes place annually in April and May in various locations throughout Provincetown over a two-week period (see Fig. 4). First organized in 2012 by artist Dorothy Palanza, the festival emerged out of the Provincetown Conservation Trust, a private non-profit organization that works with the town Conservation Commission, and the Open Space Board to create more open space in Provincetown. 2016's festival was its fifth iteration.

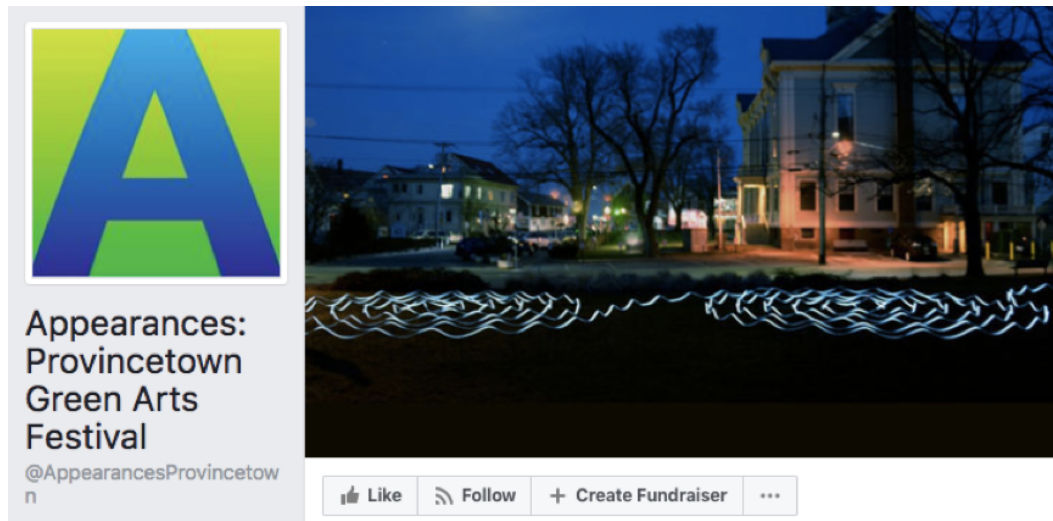


Fig. 4

Procedure: Migrations And Translations

I conceived the community art project as a way to bring a clearer understanding about the uses and ecological behaviors of Japanese Knotweed to the community within B-Street Garden. I decided to approach the project as an A/R/Tographer: Artist, Researcher, Teacher. This is a method within the field of Arts-Based Research that has emerged from the University of British Columbia.

I had two collaborators for the knotweed intervention: Stephen Wells, an artist in Provincetown, and Laura Kathrein, an artist, ecologist, and M.Ed. candidate in Community Arts at Lesley University in Boston, who brought her expertise in social media and photography (see Fig. 5). Stephen, Laura and I came together to formulate a plan to make a knotweed sculpture in B-Street Gardens during this festival. We worked with *Americorps* volunteers early in the spring to dig up the rhizomes of Japanese knotweed, create a temporary sculpture of them in the garden, and then burn the rhizomes at the end (Child and Wade, 2000). Stephen and I used the dried parts to build knotweed animals, including a knotweed turkey from a lobster trap (see Fig. 6). It worked really well in the end because it got a lot of visibility from people passing by in cars.

We stored the rhizomes safely in garbage bags nearby in preparation for the following bonfire. At the end of the festival, we took all parts of the knotweed, piled them up, and made an enormous and ceremonial bonfire called *The Smoldering Thing*, in a nod to Burning Man events (see Fig. 7).

Then...we ran into trouble. Human trouble. Members of the B-Street Gardens in no way wanted a knotweed sculpture at the garden site. Help came in the form of resourceful work of Dorothy Palanza, the organizer of the festival. She had ascertained that the campground who was hosting the festival might also NOT want the knotweed on their premises in any form but food. [I did some talks during the festival about the uses of Japanese knotweed in pies.] She found an area where there were some other artists at the side of the highway. That area of the highway was out of jurisdiction of anyone who might be fearful of the plant.



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig. 7

Fear Of A Knotweed Planet

The protests against our knotweed sculpture made me wonder what was so threatening about a plant, albeit one with gigantic rhizomes. I did some research on Japanese knotweed's prior history as an ornamental in England to see if there were any parallel conversations. According to the Japanese Knotweed Alliance, an organization based in the U.K., "Knotweed's stout rhizomes (underground stems) are notorious for

pushing through asphalt, building foundations, concrete retaining walls and even drains, causing significant damage. This can add huge costs to development and regeneration schemes. Contaminated soil should be treated as controlled waste” (see Fig. 8).



Fig.8

Moreover, I discovered in that in the U.K. Japanese Knotweed pieces are considered and treated as “controlled waste” under the Environmental Protection Act of 1990. Jeff Howell, a columnist for the *Daily Telegraph*, notes that “the surveying profession has become terrified of Japanese knotweed. Mortgages are being refused on properties where it has been spotted, even in a next-door garden. And some homes have become “blighted” and unsaleable because of the hysteria surrounding the issue.” Indeed, the out of control panic rose to the point that in March of 2014, a man killed his wife and himself because he thought Japanese knotweed was invading their home!

Inconclusions

I am calling this section “Inconclusions” because, rather than ending with an answer, I want to end with a question.

I believe that, during our arts-based intervention, these Japanese knotweed plants shaped our actions, often in ways that enabled its continued propagation. For example, during the project we dug up the plants in an attempt to find rhizomes and we cooked them using our peculiar human methods of consuming food. We were aggravated by knotweed, frustrated by it, and we eventually burned it. Reflecting on my experience, I cannot but ask myself about the framing of the problem: In what ways have knotweed plants used *us*, the artist-humans, in their continued struggle for epigenetic survival?

The only answer I have been able to come up with, as a community arts-based practitioner, is to celebrate it! And hold a festival in its honor which is educational, edible, and yes, cultural. Because Japanese knotweed, that alien invader, is indeed part of the natureculture (Haraway) of Provincetown. Perhaps a better question is: how we can live **with** this species of plant? And how can we make ourselves part of its ecosystem?

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Bio

sam smiley is an artist, researcher, and educator. They teach arts based research and community arts at Lesley University and has an M.F.A. in Electronic Arts from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Their research explores invasive species, weeds and plant subjectivity and uses STS (science, technology and society), cultural studies, history of science and arts based research. They live in Provincetown, Massachusetts.