

John Bela On The *Garden To Transform Hatred Into Love*

What does it take to compost, to purify one ounce of hatred?

The purpose of this garden piece in honor of artist and activist Bonnie Ora Sherk is to create a container, a receptacle, an organic machine, and an invitation to compost and purify our feelings of hatred.

Bonnie's work used both nature and culture as artistic mediums. Her work in the public realm operated on what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called the 'habitus,' an internalized set of assumptions about power structures and relationships. Bonnie's work engaged the process whereby built environments generate social signals that influence behavior. The social signals we hope to generate with this piece are that this is a safe space to feel, to grapple internally with feelings of hatred, loss, and suffering.

In my early work as an artist and designer at Rebar, our work was inspired by artist and architect Gordon Matta-Clarke who was cutting holes in buildings in the Bronx at about the same time Bonnie was creating some of her first 'portable parks' here in the Bay Area. Rebar's Park(ing) Day project traces its origins to Bonnie's interventions in urban space in derelict and abandoned lots in San Francisco that temporarily transformed them into vibrant, alive spaces for learning, doing, and questioning our assumptions about the norms and use of urban space.

Some of the feelings we hope to grapple with in this garden during the course of the exhibit are the cognitive dissonance of inheriting the legacy of colonialism, genocide, and appropriation of stolen land (The California state government sanctioned the mass genocide of Indigenous populations by local militia in the wake of the Gold Rush) while simultaneously being overjoyed and enormously grateful to be able to partake in the beauty, abundance, and diversity of the Bay Area today.

We can't talk about genocide, colonialism, and appropriation without thinking about and feeling the enormous tragedy that is unfolding at this very moment in the Middle East. Putting the complex politics aside for a moment, what we hope to engage with in this garden is a prayer for healing, for dissolving and purifying the hatred, intergenerational trauma, and suffering that is being put into the world right now. Of course this is an impossibly naive hope, but this is our invitation and offering with this space.

In the garden this time of year growth slows and many plants enter a senescence cycle. Plant senescence is the process of aging in plants. Chlorophyll degradation during leaf senescence reveals the carotenoids, such as anthocyanin and xanthophylls, which are the cause of autumn leaf color in deciduous trees. Leaf senescence has the important function of recycling nutrients to the growing and storage organs of the plant.

At this time of year, the soil is resting and regenerating. Soil microorganisms, mold, bacteria take dying cells and transform them. Decomposing plant and food waste results in a material that is rich in plant nutrients and beneficial organisms, such as

bacteria, protozoa, nematodes, and fungi. Composting is messy, rotten, and stinky. Senescence appears like a dying retreat. But without this act of digestion, recuperation, and loss there will be no possibility for regeneration and renewal. Because this garden is sitting on top of asphalt, it limits the ability of our prayers to go deep into the earth, to open the cracks in the pavement. Because we are sitting on a former military base that itself is a landfill into the bay, this garden cannot connect the soil and water and life cycles in a deeper way. Therefore the invitation is to transform our feelings into smoke and carry them up and away. The invitation is to start the process of growing and healing and then take it away with you, back to your home garden.

What do you hate? Why do you hate? Please take a moment to reflect on your experience of hatred. If you have none or feel none, please meditate on the hatred that exists in the world today that divides us as a people. The concepts and phrases from global spiritual practices: tikkun olam, jihad al-nafs, ahimsa, love for our enemies, and metta capture the sentiment and intention of this space. Dig your fingers in the soil. Inoculate an oak log with mushrooms. Prepare and drink a medicinal tea. Write down your hatred on a piece of paper and hang it in the teaching hut. This entire garden will be composted, re-used, and repurposed. Every ounce of hatred felt here will be actively digested and transformed.

Because this garden will open around the honoring and remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King on his birthday, we share a passage from his thoughts on hatred. In one of his most famous sermons, 'Loving Your Enemies,' Dr. King preached: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

We close with words from the distinguished contemporary Arab poet: Fadwa Tuqan
"Enough for Me"

*Enough for Me
Enough for me to die on her earth
be buried in her
to melt and vanish into her soil
then sprout forth as a flower
played with by a child from my country.*

*Enough for me to remain
in my country's embrace
to be in her close as a handful of dust
a sprig of grass
a flower.*