

THE FEMINIST PEDAGOGY OF SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE: A DOUBLE-CODED ART INSTALLATION

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Abstract

SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE (2006), is a site-specific art installation in New York City's *Le Petit Versailles (LPV)*, a public garden maintain by neighbor volunteers (see Figure 1). Issues concerning housing, graffiti, gender and sexuality—including queer representation, women, and the transgendered—are regular themes in *LPV* programming, along with activities, events, and meetings often involving music, poetry, and visual arts. As an alternative public arts space, *LPV* is a small garden located in the East Village in an effort toward environmental sustainability. My installation addressed the issue of sustainability of community gardens. This visual essay concerns a feminist pedagogy of double-coding that I embedded and embody with this art project.



Figure 1. New York City's *Le Petit Versailles (LPV)* entrance sign.
Digital photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006).

Le Petit Versailles Garden

Community gardens are an amalgam of neutral and resistant urban spaces. *Le Petit Versailles (LPV)* was created in 1997 by *Allied Productions*, and other neighborhood members, as a *GreenThumb* public garden located at 247 East 2nd Street in the East Village. It is approximately 22 x 60 feet—located between two buildings that border 2nd Street and Houston Street. It has a formal unified design with an arbor, areas designated for seating and gathering, and a small stage platform. *LPV* is volunteer-based and is dedicated to preserving the vitality of NYC's greenspace through the arts. *LPV* presents six months of public events April-November, with temporary installations, performances, screenings, music and film series, visual art exhibitions and workshops. Total capacity in the garden is between 40-75 people. While target audiences and participants include gardeners, local neighbourhood residents, artists, activists, tourists, and visitors from around the world, the audience is primarily art students and professional artists. (See Figures 1, 2, & 3.)



Figure 2. A view of NYC, where the *LPV* project resides.
Digital photograph by Andy Horvitch (2006).



Figure 3. Entrance to New York City's *Le Petit Versailles* (LPV). Photograph by Pilar Viviente & Andy Horvitch (2006)

Jack Waters and Peter Cramer created *LPV* garden. They are long-time-community advocates and artistic directors of *Allied Productions, Inc.*, a non profit artist run organization established in 1981. As Peter Cramer writes in the project's blog:

In 1996 the removal of a site for disassembling stolen cars and illegal drug dealing was a golden opportunity for the establishment of *Le Petit Versailles* (*LPV*), now a *GreenThumb* garden located in the East Village of Manhattan. Through their efforts and dedicated neighbors, including Jill London, Beatrice Schafroth, and NeverNeverparty, we created an alternative public arts space that is a cultural oasis dedicated to fostering an appreciation of gardens and parks by enriching the public through the arts with exhibitions, music, film, performances, publications, and workshops that serve the general locality and visitors from around the world. One could locate historical antecedents in the Situationist International ideas for new approaches to the “social spaces of the city”. (2008, n.p.)

Allied Productions also produces a cable show for Manhattan Public Access (MNN): *LPVTV*, a 13-part public access cable TV series on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network. The series documents the history of the garden. *Le Petit Versailles* is also on the list of available sites for the community service proponent of the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Program. Partners and support for *LPV* have included *MIX NYC—The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival*, *The Film-Makers' Cooperative*, *Citizens for NYC*, a community advocacy organization, *Common Ground Community*, a housing advocacy group, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts.

SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE Project

LPV seeks presentations and activities that address environmental, social, and progressive issues, and the site-specific nature of the garden itself. These small gardens involve the local communities and are testaments to a Green Movement in New York City. Lawsuits were effective in renewing city sites as garden sites and in founding alternative solutions to abandoned, run-down, and potentially dangerous spaces between buildings. Unfortunately these legal settlements will only last until 2010, and there is an ongoing need to safeguard the longevity of NYC's *green spaces*.

In August 2006, *LPV* included my work, *SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE*, an installation of postcards and video. This project is about books and city urban planning as well as how we build and preserve *green spaces*. My artwork emphasizes the relationship between “plants versus buildings” through images—a *Postcard Installation* of stacked books as a metaphor of the cities, video screening of a natural environment and sounds (i.e., the soundtrack of the video) that integrates the *LPV* garden and its urban context. This artistic approach to the social spaces of the city through an installation with two components suggests a sort of equilibrium between city urban planning and *green spaces*. As urban planners strive for environmental sustainability, my work engages the consciousness of the audiences concerning this critically topical issue.

At the *Postcard Installation* (a component of the SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE project), audiences associated a stack of books double-coded as skyscrapers to the urban planning culture of New York City. To communicate such ideas wasn't difficult because the perception of the green (trees and plants at the garden) in symbiosis with the stack of books/skyscrapers creates a unity of perception concerning the environmental sustainability.

Nearly all tall buildings can be considered phallic symbols meant to represent male generative powers (Butler, 1990). The metaphor can be extended to interrogate prototypical and ideal forms of social organization as well as patriarchy versus patriarchy. The patriarchal hierarchy associated with offices on lower versus upper levels is also raised in the *Postcard Installation* concerning symbolic status of lower and upper classes.

Double-Coding of the *Postcard Installation*

Double-coding, as a contemporary feminist art practice, is a way to create a work so that it speaks to two or more different audiences in different ways (Gude, 2007). The variety of audience response to the double-coding is expected, but also my goal is to involve participation in the game of interpretation. Even if it does not seem so at first sight, the postcard image in the installation is a figure of books. But they may be contextualized according to another frame of reference and then offer the viewer another interpretation. As a visual double "lecture" the interchangeability of books and buildings make this image dynamic. The perception of a topological association precedes the understanding of an image (Asenjo, 1972). In this project there are two phases: the visual identification of the figure and the subsequent aesthetic appreciation. The figure helps viewers to become aware of the existence of two phases by interpolating a lapse between them (Asenjo, 1972). Both postcards are affected by this condition (see Figure 4).

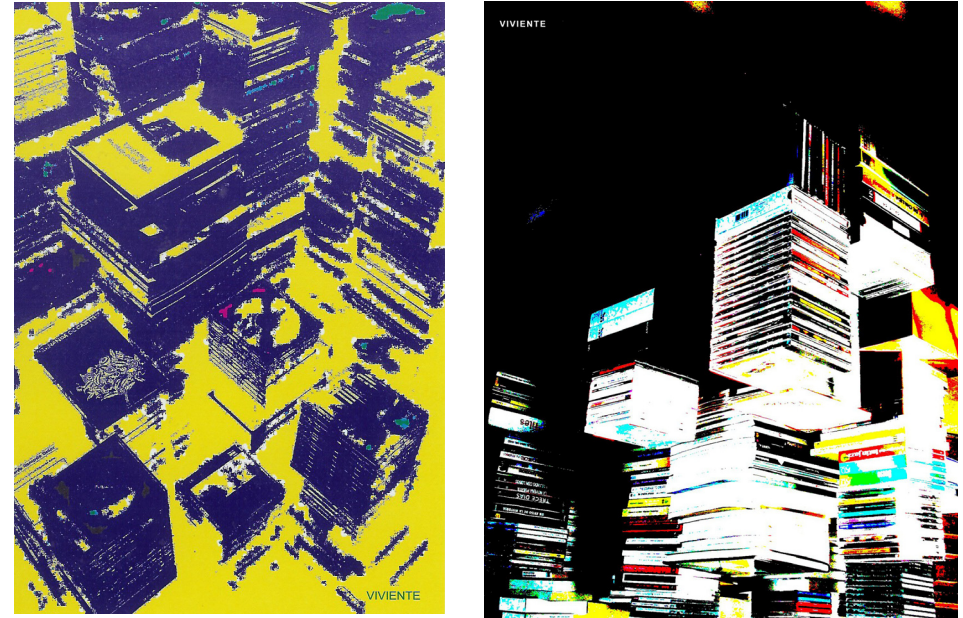


Figure 4. *Postcard Installation*.
Digital photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006)

We have, then, in the two postcards (see Figure 4) a representation of a modern city and a representation of books in the same image. The multiplicity of meaning, and in how we perceive truth and falsehood in visual images entices the viewer to discern meaning. As a photograph, the image testifies that those buildings are books, and only books. On the other hand, the image communicates a certain truth about the city view with the perception of all those buildings. The high contrast digital photographs vividly suggests this ambiguity of meaning.

That which is apparently true in the *Postcard Installation* (see Figures 5-8) is the city view, but this may be false, in the way that the city view links the books with the qualities of a skyscraper. The second "lecture"—books, CDR, DVD, video—which are the real objects in front of the camera is not so obvious. That image has a hard contrast, which is the result of a digital process, rather than a photomontage. However, collage techniques or in combination with printing could also be used as vehicles of fantasy, blurring a singular truth about the image.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figures 5-8. The postcards, available for free at the *LVP* entrance at 346 East Houston Street in NYC, also are strung between the trees to form a canopy of communication. Digital photographs by Pilar Viviente & Andy Horvitch (2006).



Figure 8

Artwork as Social Pedagogy

Many questions are explored through the project SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE, especially those dealing with contradictory perceptions and the resultant tensions and antagonisms. An important purpose of this series of photographs is to re-examine the nature of contradictory meanings, which are given today to such terms as reality, representation, perception, truth, falsehood, fiction, and illusion. The same image can be considered both true and not true simultaneously and at different times.

An image may be charged with truth or lie by virtue of how it is recognized and understood. This notion has been explored by several artists including Andy Warhol in his silk-screened repetitions and in Marcel Duchamp's (1919) *L. H. O. O. Q.*, also known as *La Gioconda* (i.e., Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*) with a mustache. Some of the best-known contemporary visual art has been concerned with taking up and transforming such popular imagery. It is considered a safeguard against reduction, unquestionable meanings, or normative authority.

Ecofeminist Art Pedagogy

The *Postcard Installation* announcement (see Figures 9 & 10) uses two images with different perspectives. The dialectic between the perspectives is an example of visual research. One image is a bird's eye view in full daylight, and the other one suggests a night perspective at ground level (see Figure 4). In the black image the viewer walks down the phallic skyscrapers, in the yellow image the viewer flies over the city, arriving to *sleep in the bed of the image*. The images transform the perspective window into a learning dialogue.

In order to capture an audience, they must have something to see and enjoy. The visual treatments of the images are oppositions, yellow versus black color, minor versus major, slight versus heavy, light versus darkness, patriarchy versus matriarchy. In their juxtaposition each image denies what the other one, alone, might suggest. From an ecofeminist's point of view, I invite viewers to consider the elimination of capitalism and the nation-state and the restructuring of society into decentralized, cooperative communities.



Figure 9. The postcard, a 15.2" x 10.2" digital photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006), is designed as an announcement by Peter Cramer (2006). Printed in NYC.



Figure 10. The postcard announcement was available in the LPV garden. Digital photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006).

Environmental Integration: Wo/Man, Spirit of the Cities, Culture of Files

Perception is a kind of remembering. The postcards express changing sensibilities and space orientation in the electronic age within the complex spaces of a metropolis. The person who lives in a city is bombarded with sensory data simultaneously from all sides. From the chaos of images claiming our attention, we select, and in this way our sense of criticism and aesthetic judgment is developed.

Two varieties of space appear simultaneously in the postcard—city skyscrapers and stacked books. The postcard imagery is from photographs of an assemblage of art books, art catalogues, video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, materials that gather in my home (see Figure 11). I intended to set up numerous perspectives rather than isolate a single point of view of the buildings of my eclectic collection of media. Post-modern philosophy argues that there is no single point of view or way of life that can claim absolute authority or legitimacy. I try to create equilibrium of views based in dynamic tension. It is this “tension” which is important. At the present time human society is an irreducible pluralism.



Figure 11. I created a home installation of books, CD-ROMs, DVDs, video cassettes and documented in digital photographs. Photographs by Pilar Viviente (2006).

I digitally manipulated the photographs of books to appear like skyscrapers from the point of view of apprehension of the overwhelming large scale of what in reality is relatively small-scale. We easily observe this polarity of the microscopic extrapolated into the macroscopic. Disruption to our everyday experiences helps us see our life from a macro lens. Our identity is inseparable from our environments, whether focused on the collections in our homes or within the buildings we pass each day. My photographs suggest micro and macro aspects of identity fused with my environments.

I strung the postcards with images of stacked books and DVDs under the eaves of the pavilion and between trees (see Figure 12). As the viewer walks along they see the images in rapid succession. Like cells in a film or a flip-book animation, the images are fused in the conscious mind. What was at first imperceptible in the photograph becomes organized knowledge.

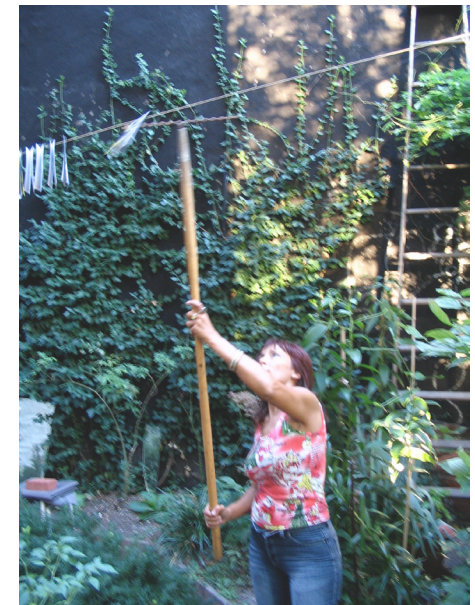


Figure 12. Pilar Viviente working in her *Postcard Installation*. Digital photograph by Andy Horvitch (2006).

The *Postcard Installation* creates the impression of a continuum and integrates the city. The experience has the visual properties of the continuity and connectedness that is assumed in Euclidean space. “Most common to all arts is repetition. Repetition is in one sense a form of continuity. It not only establishes a rhythm to pattern and mass but by repetition of the element, identity becomes unity” (Sherman, 1972, p. 184). People, like the postcards in the various sequences, are ordered by repetition. The ordering symbolizes social role expectations furthered by the spaces we make and inhabit. Repetition breeds familiarity and often what is familiar is not questioned. Thus, repetition is a double-edged sword in that it brings unity and also inscriptions of expectations that may not match embodied experience.

Postcards are distributed in the Le Petit Versailles garden at its entrance at 346 East Houston Street. (See Figures 5 & 6.) The *Postcard Installation* contributes, in a very schematic way, to experiences of the relationships between terms: Inside versus outside, private versus public space, real versus representation, matriarchy versus patriarchy, global versus local. *Le Petit Versailles* became a locus for organizing to bridge the gap between art and politics and provide ways for public engagement on the issues of the war and police states, sexual identity, urban growth, commercialization versus community, and art as social tool not connected to the marketplace. In this way, the *Postcard Installation* serves as an image of the labyrinth: Spirit of the cities, culture of files, the file or collections of books, DVDs, CDs, those files of what we collect. The cultural engagement at *LPV* celebrates diversity.

Consumers as Distributors

The importance of the visual relative to the verbal has grown in advertising, especially in print media. My photographs, like commercial advertising are done for consumption. The installation is the opposite of commercialization because it integrates community and uses art as social tool not connected to the marketplace.

The free postcards can also be seen as an informational message about the project presented in the *Le Petit Versailles* garden. We are

faced with a seemingly simple, yet complex association of symbols with potential interpretations. As Michael Schudson (1986) says, “the primary messages in most ads are simple” (p. 20). Yet “it is insufficient to examine the symbolic content in cultures, be its ads or television programs or paintings or science or literature, without attending both to the social situation of the symbol makers and to the responses of the audiences for the symbols” (p. 5). During the opening and in the days after many free postcards were distributed, many visitors recycled the postcards and sent them by mail to their friends (see Figure 12).

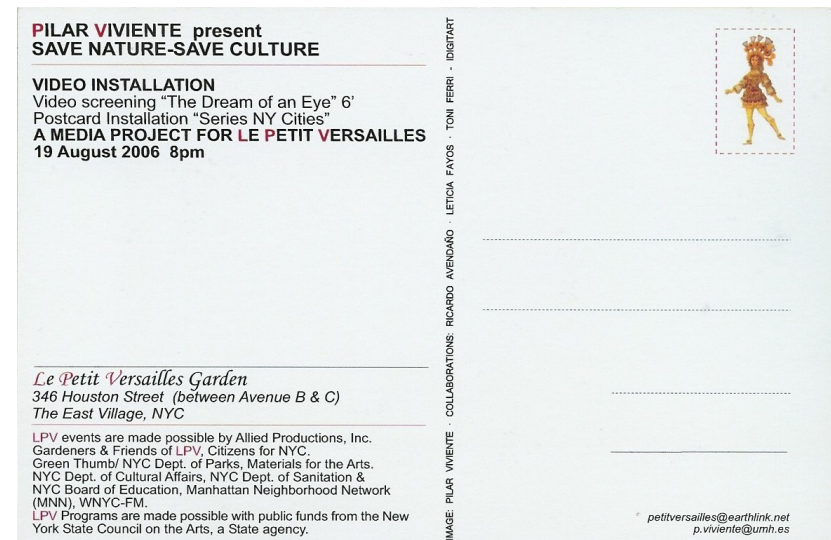


Figure 12. Back of the postcard in the *Postcard Installation*.

Digital photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006).

Video Screening: *The Dream of an Eye*

The persuasiveness of images remains attached to the character of the visual medium. The techniques are digital in both the *Postcard Installation* and video screening of *The Dream of an Eye*. However, the information projected in the screen presents nature and the need to save the natural environment. And this, the reverse of the artificial city envi-

ronment is an additional stimulus of this project, increasing the art works relationships within a symbolic system, while knowing that ultimately that all symbols are merely fictions.

The Dream of an Eye video screening—with images and sound from the nature, in mixture with Natasha Atlas and John Cage soundtracks—shows a natural environment located in Altea (Alicante, Spain). (See Figure 13.) The video screening was attended by local residents active in preventing NYC from destroying its community gardens, who held an open debate concerning the most suitable management of society and its environments following the screening (see Figure 14). Questions explored included: Can aesthetic appreciation join nature and culture? Can the relationships between nature and culture be designed to support both nature and cultures.



Figure 13. *The Dream of an Eye* video screening publicity poster, designed by Augusto Valdivia (2002), features stills from the video by Pilar Viviente (2002).



Figure 14. Digital photograph (by Pilar Viviente, 2006) of the video screening of *The Dream of an Eye*, a 6.03 minute digital video by Pilar Viviente (2002) was edited by Ramón Ricardo Jarne, director at the CCE (Spanish Cultural Centre in St. Domingo), at the Spanish Embassy's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Gardens from a Feminist Artist's Perspective of Building Community

The gardens often provide a space for summer yoga classes in the morning and evening performance art, as well as numerous bake sales and other community events. As many guides to New York City recommend, in summertime there is no nicer way to spend a day than to grab a picnic basket and relax under the lush trees and enjoy the afternoon. Different social groupings visit the green spaces and enjoy art-related activities.

The greening movement of New York City was a reaction to urban blight ravaged by inflation, insolvency and disintegration of social structures. This contributed to the D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) stance by residents to develop their own networks and resources to counter such neglect. The establishing of gardens is a prime example where derelict lots were reclaimed as local spaces for community regeneration. In 1978, *GreenThumb*, a federally funded city program of NYC Parks Department, was established to provide soil, plants, material resources and workshops to expand such endeavors (Cramer, 2008)

At the present time, there are many gardens and parks celebrating diversity of cultural engagement with a common cause. As public space, in these gardens, anyone can gather to pursue individual or mutual activities (see Figure 15).



Figure 15. *Le Petit Versailles*, now a *GreenThumb* garden is located in the East Village of Manhattan. Photograph by Pilar Viviente (2006).

Culture as Cultivation is a metaphor for world-wide farming that includes all who contribute, directly or indirectly, to save the culture/s. All of us are civilian gardeners, perhaps without knowing it. As an artist setting up my installation, I realized that art crosses cultural and national boundaries and can link different cultures in this global aim. My goal with both the *Postcard Installation* and video screening of *The Dream of an Eye* was to offer them as stimulus for a multi-cultural dialogue that considers social, cultural, and political meanings. Like the postcard images, the soundtrack of the video—music that comes from a cross-cultural mix—seemed to successfully generate such dialogue.

One of the aims of the project in NYC is to develop a better international understanding of a *Culture as Cultivation*. Such aim can be achieved by providing an artistic platform to those artists, art educators, academics, specialists, teachers, students, local residents, and visitors who would like to participate in this activist space. With the help of Peter Cramer, Jack Watersm, and Andy Horvitch, I set up the postcard installation. It took us two days. We had been discussing, framing, and shooting several views with a camera. We recorded both the installation process and the opening party as a documentary, which shows the process installation and people enjoying the installation. Another video that was recorded by Peter Cramer has been presented at the GARDEN OF THE 4 HOURS in May 2008 at the Contemporary Art Centre La Barbera in Villajoyosa (Alicante, Spain).

Relativity of Perceptions and Meanings

On departing from the installation I was interested in an interdisciplinary arts project with issues concerning green space and urban planning, environmental sustainability, as well as the human perception of its environment, and identity as inseparable from our every day life environments. Through my art I engage with society—discovering and exploring various media to stimulate meaningful, critical, and pluralist knowledge. Art practice is a creative and critical form of human engagement that can be conceptualized as a form of research and which can be directed towards a range of personal and public ends (Graeme Sullivan, 2006).

The *Postcard Installation* serves as a sort of discourse for the relativity of perceptions and meanings. Perhaps this is the single most important concept that the spectator can come to understand. Art is something that stimulates thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and ideas. The interpretation of the project SAVE NATURE-SAVE CULTURE presented in NYC and in this visual essay is dependent upon the observer's perspective and context.

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