

Their installations are a mixture of social thought and Americana. They can talk theory—but they are apt to be doing it while planting toma-

ing,” and in naming it, Tsong saw herself as spreading the word that “Everything is Still Alive.” That term certainly applies to the poppies, which are still finishing up

An Alley to Some, Art to Others

Bringing Art to New Places

by Margaret Arnold

atoes or flowers or sitting outdoors on a summer evening.

“I love meeting new people this way,”



The “Love Apples” team on Eagle Rock Boulevard.

says Matias Viegner as he plants tomatoes on an island in the middle of Eagle Rock Boulevard. “It very much changes the way I and others look at the city.”

Artistic actions have been taking place in public spaces across Northeast Los Angeles. They are small and episodic, rather than spectacular. They are seldom done with pre-determined outcomes. Rather, they are artistic experiments, through which participants and observers are led to rethink their relationships to their neighborhoods.

A few months ago local artist Jane Tsong sowed her route to work, from Highland Park to San Marino, with thousands of poppies. The project was part of “From A to B” (curated by Highland Park resident Donna Conwell for the Fellowship of Contemporary Art’s new series of Curatorial Projects) through which artists mapped and explored the nature of the commute—that condition of being between one place and another occupied by the average Angeleno for over 368 hours per year.

Tsong’s poppies are a pioneer plant. There were poppies growing here before any of us arrived. Conwell describes Tsong’s marking of her commute as “layer-

their season on York Boulevard. But it also applies to the public spaces of the commute where, according to Tsong, “people treat public space as some sort of dead zone.”

There is a long tradition of sowing wildflowers in California. By the 1920s, people were starting to see that they were changing the landscape. Boy Scouts and women’s groups roamed hillsides sowing seeds.

As a native of the east coast, Tsong was accustomed to orienting herself to the time of year through seasons, something Los Angeles is famous for not having. She finds that the plants people generally put out for landscaping here are not

things that help understand seasons and time.

But Tsong has come to see that a sense of time of day and year is possible here—it is just more subtle. It is possible to achieve by watching what plants are doing. Poppies are a good indicator. They wake up and go to sleep with the sun. They tell time in what Tsong calls “a beautiful Spring thing.”

Tsong’s commute runs through three diverse landscapes. York Boulevard is a neglected landscape. When Tsong began her project, local residents warned her that what is planted there gets trampled or destroyed. But poppies were a good option. They flourish without much care.

“I knew they’d thrive,” says Tsong.

From Highland Park, the “Everything is Still Alive” Route moves through South Pasadena, where everything is lush and groomed, and on to San Marino with its big estates.

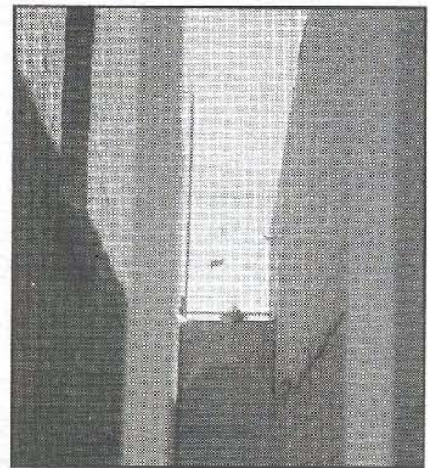
“Everything is Alive” was an art project, creating a ribbon of vibrant color. At the same time, sowing flowers through the three communities provided a fascinating lesson in land use.

In Highland Park, Tsong learned early on to talk to property owners. She knew

that the flowers would have a longer life if people understood what she was doing. But in many cases, she couldn’t find property owners. When she did, owners knew remarkably little about what was going on within their own property lines. In Highland Park and South Pasadena, many owners said go ahead, plant, the gardeners were lazy and never did anything anyway. Then the sprouts got pulled up by gardeners. The experiment showed how little property owners knew about how much effort “the help” was putting into maintaining their properties.

The poppy season in Highland Park peaked earlier than elsewhere. Poppies respond to heat. On York, between Avenue 51 and Avenue 57, the north side of the street bloomed first. It gets sun all day. Then the south side bloomed.

South Pasadena poppies came along



Stephanie Allespach: “Untitled (Site Lines).” Part of “Intersection 2008,” a joint project of Center for the Arts Eagle Rock and Outpost for Contemporary Art.

later. People there have a canopy of shade trees. San Marino was later still; it’s an oak woodland.

So the irony is that Highland Park’s lack of amenities such as shaded bus stops may be exactly what enabled the artistry of the poppies to thrive. Poppies do extremely well along edges of concrete, perhaps because there’s a hint of moisture underneath, perhaps because they’re less apt to get trampled. Either way, it makes them well suited for an urban landscape.

Tsong’s poppy project is not her first grappling with concepts of neighborhood and public space. A couple of her tree stump chairs, created with partner Robert Powers several years ago, still survive along York. A swivel chair was especially popular. Its location is now a poppy site.

In 2004, working with the Center for the Arts Eagle Rock, she turned the Eagle Rock itself into a sundial. “Time by the Rock” used light and projections to follow the daily shadows routinely cast upon

the rock.

"Time by the Rock" was large-scale spectacle, whereas the poppies are delicate and small. But the basic message of the projects is the same.

"Stop looking at the clock," says Tsong. "Look at shadow on rock or when flow-ers open. Learn more about the place we live in. Be more attuned."

Art as a vehicle to explore public space and to create community is at the core of Islands of LAs vision. Along Eagle Rock Boulevard, North Figueroa and San Fernando Road, Islands of LA has turned traffic Islands into territories of art and has declared them a National Park.

Meanwhile, activist art project "Fallen Fruit" began as a mapping project, encouraging planting, sampling and harvesting of "public fruit," anything on or overhanging public spaces such as sidewalks, streets or parking lots.

Together, the two projects have created "Love Apples." Love Apples was an early European name for tomatoes. (Early Americans thought they were poisonous. Europeans understood them to be an aphrodisiac.) The two groups have planted tomatoes on unoccupied, irrigated public spaces in Cypress Park, Glassell Park, Eagle Rock, Highland Park and other communities. Residents of the neighborhoods are invited to

help themselves to the fruit, but are asked to not hoard or destroy. The organizers — Ari Kletzky, Matias Viegner and David Burns — see Love Apples as a test of the definition and use of public space in the city of Los Angeles, as an imaging of new ways in which such spaces could be better utilized for the enjoyment of all.

"Part of embracing your community is in the sharing of its public spaces and bringing a human element to areas that many feel are inhospitable," said Helene Schpak of Glassell Park after a Saturday morning tomato planting. "We had people playing on the streets. It was fantastic fun."

The straightforward act of planting tomatoes becomes a daylighting. Islands in the middle of the street, seen everyday but hardly noticed from the automobile, become visible as gardens for food, places of beauty and public intersections for conversation.

When a truck pulling into a grocery store caused traffic to back up, suddenly motorists were chatting with urban farmers. Taken further, conversation about trolley car lines hidden under the islands or issues like domestic violence could move—literally—to the center of the street.

Several distinct populations that make up Northeast Los Angeles intersected for two weeks in June via the appropriately named "Intersection 2008," a collaboration of Center

for the Arts, Eagle Rock and Outpost for Contemporary Art curated by Julie Deamer.

Seventeen artists who live or work in Northeast L.A. installed site-specific "artistic interventions" at York Boulevard businesses. In addition to the artist and business communities, the third intersecting party was the area residents who may never visit galleries (or even realize that's an option), but walk York Boulevard every day with their children, or visit the post office, health clinics or party supply store where the installations were located.

Chris Diaz plugged in old TVs in the window of a 52-year old business, creating a sculpture reminiscent of when, before television was ubiquitous and assumed, people used to stand in front of stores to watch live programming — and when what is now private experience was often communal.

Stephanie Allespach created a facade extension with fluorescent paint and yarn in "Untitled (Site Lines)." A small passageway of dark space, largely unnoticed between two buildings, was suddenly reflecting sunlight amidst yarn rays, creating a sense of place.

When 19 tomato plants disappeared, leaving 19 holes in the ground in Glassell Park, a half dozen area residents came out on a Saturday morning and joined Kletzky, Viegner and Burns in planting 20 new ones.

"The tomato plantings were lovely for me," says Viegner, "because while we were

certain someone would appreciate our leaving tomatoes to share in public space, it was really nice to see a whole bunch of people who not only understood us but appreciated it. I've been thinking a lot about community gardening and so-called guerrilla gardening, and while I think beautification is good, we need still more layers of investigation into what public spaces are for and the varieties of ways people can partake in them."

Defining public space is complex. In its most beautiful form, there is a landscape painted with orange poppies and red tomatoes. But in a confusing urban world, people's needs and desires intersect and conflict. An artist plants poppies on a neglected boulevard. An owner says okay. A neighbor sees sprouts in the dirt and helps by raking them up. Twenty tomato plants on an Eagle Rock Boulevard Island are gently tended. Someone comes along with a scythe and gonzo gardens the tops of the plants off. On public space, who's allowed to say who's right and who's wrong? The answer at this point seems to be, you just keep planting, and sooner or later, you find yourselves talking. Maybe, as time moves on, more and more becomes daylighted, and that process becomes understood as the whole point of the art.

Later in the summer, when the tomatoes are ripe, Love Apples will be holding a Salsa Festival in celebration.