

**The Fermenting Room (return of the rhizome)
Plot 16 Residency - Art in Rose Hill
Modern Art Oxford**



Mellow Fruitfulness by Dr Tracey Warr

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One sunny evening in September I answered an invitation from artists brook & black to an event at Plot 16 Allotment in Rose Hill, Oxford. Arriving, I strolled past patches sporting the expected rows of veg, but at the far end of the allotments was the uncommon sight of the Plot 16 hop garden. A white aluminium sculpture resembling a 3D drawing of a small-scale glasshouse from Kew Gardens rose 25 feet into the air and spanned 30 feet across, but was barely discernible beneath the fecund heft of a great swathe and swag of hop vines garlanding its frame. Although the sculpture was ostensibly there - made from metal and paint - it had an ethereality and conveyed the quality of a drawing or a thought held down by the swarming vines. Alongside it yet more hops twisted and tangled up a fretwork of canes and strings, made leafy teepees, arrayed themselves at the top of poles like living Maypoles. Hop vines are beautiful things. The hops are the female flower clusters and seed cones of the hop vine, *Humulus lupulus*. The pale green and flashes of white of the hops are like oversize pointy Brussel Sprouts, dangling in bunches from the darker green leafy stems.

Visitors were invited to help harvest the rampant hops. You could push aside the plant curtain cladding the sculpture and enter the cool, green shadow of its interior, stippled with sunlight. Youthful amorous outdoor escapades concealed in bushes and woods sprang immediately to mind in that hidden fertile space, along with the echoes of centuries of May and Harvest rites.

Things change and they don't.

Inside, a projection showed a sequence shot using time-lapse photography from a static tripod, telescoping the changing seasons on the plot, from the stripped down foliage of winter enabling a view of the Norman Church next door to the long buzzing heydays of summer. The projection moved through the year of the changing plot, from bare soil to fruitful bounty, forced by sun, rain and the nutrients of the soil from nothing to abundance.

The ancient art of horticulture has been practiced through time from monastery and manor gardens, to the market gardens, hop fields and fruit orchards that supplied the Victorian cities



of the south, through to allotments now. An allotment is an alternative space, an escape, a small kingdom. There is the camaraderie of chatting over the garden fence, and a considerable amount of interest from other allotment holders as to what you are doing, occasionally bordering on competition or surveillance. The other gardeners of the Lenthall Road Allotment Association offered the artists advice and assistance as they laboured in wellington boots and manure.

At the Hop Fest event in September 2011, the two artists, Leora Brook and Tiffany Black, wore straw hats garlanded with hops, reminding us of Green Men and stilt-walking hop pickers. They invited the growing group of visitors - artists, curators, allotment gardeners, the neighbours from over the road - to sample bottles of green hop beer made from the hops. The bottle labels showed the green tangle of robust rhizomatic roots, the unseen part of the plant beneath our feet, tangled like hair, like blood vessels, like nerves.

As the first beer caps twanged, the celebrations began: speeches of congratulations and thanks followed by the prancing, hanky swishing, leg-bell jangling, stick clashing of Morris Men and Women, followed by Matt Black's declamations of vegetable poetry and greenery odes accompanied by Bruno Guastalla's cello, followed by a processing jazz band named Horns of Plenty, playing and dancing round and through and round the hop-covered sculpture with their ups and downs trill of saxophone and trumpet, celebrating and giving thanks for nature's cornucopia.

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Months later, everything on the allotment plot is gone - the hops, the frame, the dancing, drinking, declaiming people. The soil is returned to its plain brown state but the memory of the heavy bines of late summer, loading the white frame still hangs in the crisp winter air.

From 2010-11 Brook & Black's art project, *The Fermenting Room: The Return of the Rhizome* inhabited Plot 16 of the Rose Hill Allotments on the south west outskirts of Oxford and forayed too with events and a residency at Modern Art Oxford gallery in the city. The frame that the artists grew the hops around was a scaled down outline of the Modern Art Oxford building which, in its previous incarnation, had been Hanley's City Brewery built in 1882. Writing in 1890, Alfred Barnard described the state of the art, steam-powered brewery equipment and processes: 'we never saw a place so well arranged and kept in such exquisite order'. David Elliot, the first Director at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford (the gallery's former name) describes how the six-storey tower in the centre of the building was strengthened to accommodate the weights of water and grain used in the brewing process, that the basement had been the malting floor



and what is now the upper gallery had been the fermenting room. Surrounding place names are redolent of the area's brewing history - the Old Malt House, Brewer Street - and of its reliance on the streams, brooks and wells that riddled the area. Brewing and malting was one of Oxford's leading trades for centuries, serving the thirsty scholars and workers of the city, producing a 'good, nutritious and exhilarating beer.' Beer and books were such natural partners for academics that a Trinity College drinking song declares M.A. to stand for Master of Ale.

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The Plot 16 sculpture with its green-loaded frame of the gallery invaded by the unpredictable energy of plant growth, is a vivid image of how nature can and will overgrow culture and reclaim defunct spaces. Years ago I went inside a derelict and long-closed Edwardian department store. Small trees pushed through the peeling wallpaper, damp and mould climbed the ornate winding staircase, gaggles of pigeons replaced the throng of disappeared customers, and where the salesmen had lent their knuckles on the wooden counters, mounds of pigeon shit clustered like dull cairns.

The artists used the hops to brew two editions of Plot 16 beer with Shotover Brewery. The process of growing is not an easy business. It takes time - nature's time, and the patient time of gardening: mulching and weeding, fertilising and turning over the soil, sowing the seeds, pruning and watering, then harvesting. Long-term collaboration is a feature of brook & black's work - with each other over more than ten years, and with communities. They were in residence at Plot 16 for one and half years.

The ghosts of the brewing process haunt the Modern Art Oxford building - the malting, milling, mashing, lautering, boiling, fermenting, conditioning and filtering. It is possible to imagine the coppers, kettles and vats occupying each specialist room and floor, as the concoction moved from process to process, conveyed by a steam-powered hoist in the transformative alchemy of fermentation or zymurgy. We can almost see and taste the malted barley steeping in water in the massive oak mash tun, fermenting with yeast, flavoured with hops to offset the sweetness of the malt. The hops add floral or citrus or herbal aromas and flavours and have natural antibiotic and preservative qualities. The brown, earthy, almost sickly pungency of malt mingles with hops, loading the air - impossible to forget once savoured, lodging permanently in your olfactory memory. Outside the building, are the echoes of the cooperage and the horse drays on cobbles in the loading yard, tended by men in white jackets and aprons. 'We were much struck with the tidy and natty appearance of the stablemen and draymen.' Compared to the processes of growing and brewing, the process of consuming beer is a much simpler business.



In *The Fermenting Room* project brook & black resurrected the histories of their two sites: Rose Hill, close to the Norman church of St Mary the Virgin in Iffley and the Thames, and Modern Art Oxford in the city centre. They conducted an archaeology down through the layers of time, through the archive of the soil. They grew not only hops, but a visual history, a manifestation of memory, creating a third imaginary site between the allotment and the gallery.

In the 12th century the area now known as Rose Hill was simply Iffley Hill, a low hill of amphill clay rising from the river meadow (the ley), safe from flooding. There was a bridge, a bridge hermit, a malthouse, a water-mill grinding malt, barley, corn, and a miller constantly arguing with the bargees who wanted to get past the mill. The community living here were farmers, carpenters, masons, shoemakers, servants, labourers and paupers. They caught eels in the river. There was a ferryman to bring coffins across the river to the churchyard because it was bad luck to carry a coffin across the bridge.

Iffley Lock was built in the 17th century and in the 18th century the stocks stood on Church Way opposite the hop garden. (It was probably the effects of beer that put most of the offenders in the stocks.) In the 19th century the occupants of the area were railway workers, bookbinders, college servants and grocers.

Aside from its ancient university, Oxford was principally known for brewing and malting, along with publishing, iron foundry and marmalade making. In 1913 Morris Motors was established and Oxford became a city of car manufacturers, dons and writers. In the beginning of the 20th century Iffley was still a village surrounded by fields. 'A sturdy village life persisted: there were mummers at Christmas, May Day celebrations, visits of Jack-in-the-Green and travelling bears ... Walking weddings and funerals were still the village custom.'

The Old English customs of the May Day Maypole and the Harvest Festival band and supper are redolent of times that moved to a different rhythm, a different dependency on the rhythm of the growing year. When I was eleven I was crowned May Queen at my primary school's May Day. My head and my throne garlanded with flowers, I announced the commencement of the Maypole dancing and the May songs. That is not a forgettable experience.

In the early 20th century fritillaries grew by Iffley lock and communication with the city was by horse-bus and river barge. The Iffley Foresters held a feast and fair, accompanied by a brass band, in early July and September. In 1908 Iffley Mill burnt down after eight centuries of operation. Dig down into the layers of soil and there are the traces and detritus of earlier times, fragments of letters and bills, broken crockery, discarded toys, nails, buttons.



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The Rose Hill estate was built in the 1930s to house people from the Jericho slums in central Oxford, many of whom came from old river bargee families. In the 50s and 60s more homes were built here for the Morris Motor factory workers. The road previously known as Iffley Highway was renamed Rose Hill after an early 19th century house that had stood there belonging to Dr Ireland, a Scottish apothecary. Dr Ireland 'made up [his] own medicines, attended ladies at the most interesting period of their lives, sold Epsom salts, blisters, hair powder... He was a grandiloquent, pompous man ... a dissolute old scamp'.

The archaeology of site and echoes of past structures mapped onto contemporary structures occurs in brook & black's earlier work. Art projects are rarely discrete and entirely self-contained. They spring from the artists' ongoing obsessions, they build on and have a continuity with earlier work. There is a coherent visual language in brook & black's projects. Their work, such as *Behind the Facade* at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2008, often engages with the highly cultivated spaces of museums - storehouses of memory, packed with fetish objects of other times and other lives. Beds are a recurring trope in their work: beds to sleep in and seed beds: sites of generation. The excitement of space and engagement with themes of the contained and the habitual runs through their art. Their project *Loco Solis* at Greenwich Maritime Museum in 2005, where they installed telescopes capped with mirrors in the courtyard, examined the formal order of the 18th century: its measuring, taxonomies, discoveries, and appropriations. Their work often translates one place, one time, into another and also frequently draws on the work of earlier artists. *Drift* at the Henley River and Rowing Museum in 2009 was an installation created from doors, inspired by Gericault's painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819).

For *Bagatelle Parallel* at the Wallace Collection in London in 2008 they were inspired by Fragonard's *The Swing* (c. 1767). In the painting, also known as *The Happy Accidents of the Swing*, as a young woman is pushed on a swing by her elderly husband, one shoe flies off and her skirts and petticoats rise revealing her legs to a young man hidden in the bushes below. brook & black installed an abstracted sculpture of a swing on top of the museum's entry portico that also suggested a guillotine and on the lawn below a white cast of a 17th century lady's shoe was captured under a bell-jar. Inside the building, video and sound installations reflected the daily routines of cleaning the artefacts, winding the clocks, opening and closing window shutters.

At the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi, France in 2011 brook & black unpacked Lautrec's visions of the dancer Jane Avril and of his own absinthe-swilling culture. Their works reimagine art history and turn the 2D into 3D and back again. Their artworks often invite the viewer to travel



imaginatively through windows and doors, or through the looking glass and the back of the wardrobe.

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The Fermenting Room project resonates with many alchemies: nature, growth and decay, time and history, the chemistry of the artists' shared imaginations, the transformation of places by people.



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Dr Tracey Warr has a mixed practice as writer, curator and teacher. She has developed a mode of writing with contemporary artists as opposed to about them. She sees curating and art writing as part of a continuum with artists' practice, rather than segregated categories. Her research work focuses on the body and site in contemporary art. She is the editor of *The Artist's Body*, a major survey book published by Phaidon and she has published on a wide range of contemporary artists.

Tracey Warr was amongst the visitors to the final on-site celebration. In this text she considers the work, its legacy in her imagination and associations with rituals and the seasons of the land.

<http://traceywarr.wordpress.com/>

Thanks to the artists for an interview that contributed to the writing of this article, conducted in their studio in southern France.

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First published in 2013

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Publisher: IXIA

Modern Art Oxford is supported by Oxford City Council and Arts Council England, South East.
Museum of Modern Art. Registered charity no 313035

