

Issue VII — Summer/Fall 2013

WILDER

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Community Planting

Artist Fritz Haeg's mission to make Los Angeles bloom



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Photo by Annie Novak



Courtesy of Fritz Haeg and Annie Novak

If there were an art-world Johnny Appleseed, it would be Fritz Haeg. This fall, Haeg will team up with the Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND) public art initiative to produce a project about wildflowers called “Wildflowering L.A.” Haeg plans to distribute seeds for private wildflower gardens made viewable to the public. He will also create a large-format map in which gardeners can share their clippings and donate seeds to next year’s iteration. “What I like about Fritz’s project is it’s ongoing and self-perpetuating,” says Shamim M. Momin, co-founder of LAND and former curator for the Whitney Biennial. “And it collects people together, so that all these disparate points in L.A. have relationships to others, originating from their own personal private wildflower garden.”

Haeg has worked consistently with themes of community and nature for years now. In his project “Edible Estates,” he worked with families to convert their front lawns into vegetable gardens. Haeg helped find homes for displaced animals in his next venture, “Animal Estates.” At the 2008 Whitney Biennial, he designed a beaver pond, an eagle’s nest and other homes for animals native to Manhattan—creatures that lost their natural habitats to city development. Haeg’s recent work, “Domestic Integrities,” is what he calls a “human” project: The artist travels to different institutions with a rug, and he invites people to bring items that can be woven into the rug so as to expand it. In May, Haeg traveled to his hometown of Minneapolis for a residency at the Walker Art Center, which will include several of his projects.

Recently I met with Haeg in his home, a geodesic dome surrounded by a garden in the hills of Glassell Park, Los Angeles, to discuss the wildflower project.

How did you get interested in wildflowers?

Last year, when I moved back to L.A. from Italy—I was living in Italy for a year—I reclaimed my garden. I had to start over. The Theodore Payne foundation specializes in native plants here, so I went to get their native wildflower mixes, which I’d done before, but in this case I did it on a larger scale. It was such an amazing experience watching them grow through the winter. There was a six-foot-high meadow on my roof after four or five months. A lot of my activity around gardens lately has been with productive gardens that are feeding people, and there was something delightful about doing a garden that was so much about the place and the season, and about beauty. Because flowers come and go. Just enjoy it for the moment. If they don’t get watered, they really don’t last through the summer, but they recede. They come back every season, and they’re just so much about marking time. That also coincided with a desire to spend more time in L.A. and wanting to do a project here.





Tell me about the logistics of the project

The project will be called "Wildflowering L.A." and it will start in the fall of 2013 with two consecutive weekends where we go to a few different spots throughout L.A. County and set up a temporary headquarters for the project. We will have experts from the Theodore Payne Foundation who will meet people. People can come in with pictures of plots of land around their house that they'd like to plant

wildflower mixes in. And then, we'll give them a prescription of a wildflower mix that would be right for their property, taking into consideration slope, or shade, or if it's near the sea, or there's even mixes just for pet tortoises or butterflies or hummingbirds. The piece of land has to be visible from the street or to the public, and then they will get a street sign that will give information about the project and what they've planted, so people know what's

going on. Hopefully there will be 100 sites around L.A. where people are doing this. At some point in the winter, we'll produce a map showing where they all are, and you'll be able to drive around and see them. The hope is that there'll be these really dramatic sites emerging across the county showing these different varieties of native wildflowers growing.

You'll have the map, but are you also aiming for a stumble-upon element, too, where you'll just drive by and you'll see it?

Yeah, exactly. And these aren't the kind of wildflowers that you just let a piece of land sit and go back to nature. It takes an enormous amount of tending and care to allow these things to grow.

So, the people who are going to become involved with it are going to have to really be on top of it?

You have to tend it. You have to get rid of the weeds. You have to water it if there's not enough rains coming. Weeds are probably the biggest problem: invasives and things like that.

A hundred places throughout L.A. that's such a big area.

It'll be L.A. County, so it's quite big, and very diverse. You have hills and mountains and high deserts and beaches.

Can you tell me a little bit about your history with gardening?

The real interest in gardening and plants in my work really emerged in college when I was 22. I was doing pretty ambitious installations with plants in the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon. That was a yearlong project that I did. Already I was working with edible plants.

How did that develop?

I had a really great teacher—Laurie Palmer—who's an artist in Chicago. She does a collective there called Haha. It was just this great class, and it was a very permissive, open environment. Sometimes that's all it takes, this demonstration that something's possible. After school, I lived in Italy on a farm for a year, and then I moved to New York. During that entire period, that initial step toward that kind of work stopped. I was painting and doing architecture



in very conventional ways. All of a sudden, it came exploding back when I moved to L.A. Within days of moving to my apartment in Silver Lake, I bought tons of gardening books. I went deeper into debt every day just buying plants. It was the happiest time of my life, just hands in the dirt, out in the sun, with dogs running around. I went to bed surrounded by gardening books. Then I started a community garden at Art Center with my students there. Some of my classes there took on these issues, and then at CalArts. But it wasn't until 2005 that it became a formal art project commissioned by an art institution.

I've been noticing a movement toward nature and plants in art. I'm wondering if you feel that?

Yeah. I see it in students. I see it in young artists. Because the kind of students that approach me are already interested in that, maybe I don't have a good sense of proportion. But I get the sense when I travel that younger generations of artists are really paying attention to how we're living today in general. I think that's true in general mainstream culture.

All the work that I've been drawn to and all the work that I do, at the core of it—it's always changing, it's always alive and it's hard to control: movement and dance and gardens and wildlife and gatherings of human beings and educational environments.