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LETTER: TO LOIS

WEINBERGER

Portrait 69

Austrian artist Lois Weinberger was a defender of the uncultivated, the wild side of plant life that he thought should never be ripped from the environment or from our memories. In his artworks, he constructed an abundance of gardens, always with an eye to their continued existence, in this world or the next. Following his death in April of this year, curator *Philippe Van Cauteren*, penned a letter to his dearly departed friend.

Lois and I first met in 2001. The curator Jan Hoet had invited him to take part in the Sonsbeek “Locus FOCUS” show, an international sculpture exhibition in the Dutch city of Arnhem. At irregular intervals since 1949, artists have been invited to Park Sonsbeek to make work in situ: a little like Documenta, only Sonsbeek was six years ahead of them. So Lois and I first met in a park. An unusual location for an artist who has made us think differently about nature. But every location – not excluding man-made natural environments like parks – is a place for the artist as a fieldworker/archaeologist to go looking for original uncontrolled forms between heaven and earth. “They don’t have hands with which to shape the world, yet it would be hard to find more capable agents when it comes to the construction of forms. Plants are not only the most subtle artisans of our cosmos, they have also opened up the world of forms. They are also the species that has made the world itself a site of infinite figuration.” I read this in the brilliant book *The Life of Plants* (2016) by Emanuele Coccia, which inspires one to look at vegetative life with different eyes. My first thought when I read the book was: What would Lois think of this? Has Lois read the book? I know for certain that, according to Lois, only by approaching things in a free and radical way, is there a possibility of hope and development. And that is what he would have wished this homage to be: unorthodox. In the art world, however, it is not customary to do away with conventional politeness and acquired codes. But Lois was not one to lose sleep over the art world; for him it was only an environment that enabled him to do his research, exploring uncommon directions. In any case, the form of this text may already point in another direction, without indicating which. By the way, calling him Lois and not Lois Weinberger is my prerogative, because, for several reasons, I can confidently declare him a *compagnon de route* (fellow traveler). Since our co-operation on an exhibition at S.M.A.K. – the museum of contemporary art in Ghent, Belgium, of which I am the director – in 2005, Lois was almost always present at the museum’s activities, and in my thoughts. Of course he was most prominent in the presentations of the important ensemble of his works from the S.M.A.K. collection, but also as a catalyst for divergent ways of thinking with respect to museums and their ways of working. The last time we collaborated was for his contribution to the Kathmandu Triennial in 2017, as part of the exhibition “My City, My Studio

/ My City, My Life”. Anti-hierarchical and peripheral are two adjectives that keep cropping up. Lois was somebody who crumbled preconceived knowledge and pretensions between his fingers like he would a clod of earth. Lois was an artist who did not make works of art, but who developed a way of thinking and acting that was both political and poetic. Just think of one of his contributions to Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017: *Ruderal Society: Excavating a Garden*. In the late eighteenth-century baroque Karlsauelandschaft garden in Kassel, he made a hundred-metre-long “scar”. From a neatly shorn lawn, a strip a hundred metres long, 1.3 metres wide by 20 centimetres deep, was removed to free the earth and soil underneath. No aesthetic or romantic motif was behind this operation, nor is there any art-historical reference that can serve as a framework. Lois just wanted to dismantle – discreetly, soberly, and directly – a human undertaking: the landscaped park. The irrepressible tendency to keep nature in check, to destroy it, and rid it of the impure and the useless reaches a climax in the rationality of these green spaces. As Lois said on the occasion of his exhibition at the FRAC Franche-Comté in Besançon, France: “You have never seen real gardens / only their miserable remnants on the surface / the real gardens are underneath.” In Kassel, like an archaeologist excavating a site, Lois scraped a layer of presumed civilisation off of that human desire to think up a park like a paradise. The park is given back to the invisible, the marginal, the useless, to the ugly even. The unwanted piece of nature could proliferate to its heart’s content during the duration of the exhibition. *Ruderal Society: Excavating a Garden*, could well be the pendant of the work *What is Beyond Plants is at One with Them*, realised for Documenta 10 in 1997. Over a stretch of a hundred metres, neophytes from south and southeast Europe were planted in the railway track of a disused platform of the Hauptbahnhof (now Kulturbahnhof) in Kassel. Exotic plants were carefully arranged among the native ones already there. In a preparatory drawing from 1997 I read “Immigrants, Railway Track, Kassel,” together with an inventory of fauna from the Balkans, Ukraine, Greece, Spain, and Syria. And suddenly I am reminded of a painful image that went viral on 3 March 2020. The president of the European Commission Ursula van der Leyen, chairman of the Council of Europe Charles Michel, and the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis looking



Photo © Studio Weinberger

Ruderal Society Area II, 2004–
Studio Mirror Factory, Lower Austria



Photo: Johannes Stoll © Belvedere

Wild Cube, 1991/2011
Rib steel, spontaneous vegetation, 12 x 4 x 4 m
21er Haus Belvedere Vienna



Ruderal Society Area II, 2004–
Studio Mirror Factory,
Lower Austria

Photo © Studio Weinberger

“You have never seen real gardens /
only their miserable remnants on the surface /
the real gardens are underneath.”



Tree Celebration, July–September 1977
 Cherry tree, plastic bags, and tarps
 Photo, 70 x 50 cm, edition of 5

Photo: Friedl Rusch © Studio Weinberger



Photo: Rainer Fuchs © Studio Weinberger

Ruderal Society – Excavating a Garden, 2017
 Broken open turf, spontaneous vegetation
 Documenta 14, Karlsruhe, Kassel



Hiriya Dump – Present Time Space, 1998, Tel Aviv

through the window of a military helicopter, to see with their own eyes how a European tragedy of impotence was playing itself out on the Greek peninsula, how hundreds of thousands of people – whom we call refugees – are being dehumanised at the gates of the old Europe. And what does this have to do with Weinberger, you may ask. Lois saw himself as a fieldworker who gave back terrain to nature and its soil. He managed, by looking carefully at the spontaneous and horizontal nature of marginal vegetation (weeds), to weave a new, artistic way of thinking that would lead to a renewed vision of nature in relation to, among other things, migration, urbanism, human relations, control, and politics. Versus our society with its systems and technocracy, Lois came up with a parallel proposal, inspired by the vegetative world, as a mutation of the common, as an alternative for a culturally and politically calcified way of thinking. By letting things go and not intervening in

certain areas of the urban fabric, the artist/field-worker opened up forms of freedom, possibilities for dealing with things that are foreign to us. With the work *Wild Cube* (1998), Lois guaranteed the freedom of the foreign by making a steel cage nestled somewhere in an urban environment. Lois realised the work near the new social sciences building of the University of Innsbruck. Within the thirty-seven-metre-long beam structure of reinforced steel is a space where plants and weeds, native and non-native, grow rampant and unchecked. Every human interference has been made impossible by building a cage in which nature can go its own way. This is a very rare example of the notions of a cage and imprisonment guaranteeing freedom. “It is a work against the aesthetics of the pure and the true, against the ordering forces,” according to the artist himself. Or maybe it is an answer to the ignorance of a society that often looks at things in a cognitive, quantitative, and

positivist way. But Lois would not be Lois if he did not consider ambivalence part of his practice. He was not looking for the pure, the unadulterated, the idealistic, but rather for the contaminated, the invisible, the warped, the marginal, the unchecked. Growth without human intervention was his radically engaged answer to the capitalist logic of maximalisation and exploitation. Or to quote Lois once more: “A place / where the living / visibly shows itself above the controlling / where the impossibility of an annihilation / time and again flourishes from its counterpart, from the conceivable consequences of the non-sterile / into that bold future.” This is the last paragraph from “In the Geography of Deer and Mole”, written by Lois for the publication accompanying the exhibition “Debris Field – Erkundungen im Abgelebten” (Debris Field – Investigations into the Past) at the Tinguely Museum, Basel, in 2019. At around the same time the artist put this text on a wall

of the Uferhallen in Berlin, as a contribution to the exhibition “Eigenbedarf” (2019). The text could very well be the definition of a garden. However, for Lois, a garden could take on many shapes, as long as it represented mobile and portable imperfect vegetative worlds that could serve as a model or prototype. *Garden Corner* (1981), *Garden Corner with Tyre* (1988), *Garden* (1991), *Garden Archive* (1988–1999), *Garden Island* (1999), *Garden of Eden* (2000), *Portable Garden* (1994/2004), *Highway Garden* (2000), and *Gardens of Diversity* (2006) are only a few titles of works that imply the elastic power of the notion of a garden to discuss an inversion of values. In gardens, plants are “improved” and arranged from a utopic desire for perfection, but in the case of Lois a “garden” became an experimental laboratory, whatever its final form would take, in which nature had the final word. Actually, the artist may have preferred to use the notion of nature as little as possible, as it



Lois Weinberger in Hohenau, Lower Austria, 1992

Photo © Studio Weinberger



Garden Archive, 1988–99 (detail)

He visited and studied garbage cans and urban deserts, approaching them with the engagement of a scientist.

Lois was not looking for an idyll, but for the poisonous, cancerous crust hiding beneath the idyllic.



Photo: Dieter Schwerdtle © Studio Weinberger

What is Beyond Plants is at One with Them
Documenta X, 1997
Railway track, neophytes from South and Southeastern Europe, 100 m



Portable Garden, 1994/2000
Plastic bags, medicinal, poisonous, agricultural, and ornamental plants
Installation view, Epiphanie Parkabtei Heverlee, Leuven, Belgium

Photo © Studio Weinberger



Photo © Studio Weinberger

Garden, 1994
Plastic bag, earth, wild plants

almost immediately implies the corrupt improvement of something we are part of, instead of letting it flourish according to its own principles. The notion of “fieldwork” on the other hand shows the artist’s different relationship with the natural environment. The artist visited and studied garbage cans and urban deserts, approaching them with the engagement of a scientist and generating cartographic and photographic works, as well as building blocks for marginalia (objects, readymades, drawings, textual works) from his exploratory walks. Lois was not looking for an idyll, but for the poisonous, cancerous crust hiding beneath the idyllic. At the same time the text can also be read as a guide for his own artistic practice. Lois’s work is characterised by a proliferating multitude of possibilities and media, whose most important “coproducers” are the elements or forms of

nature themselves. The artist finds and adapts, using artistic categories and media to give shape to a way of being, thinking, and living. Lois was a pathfinder who was always blazing new trails. To him art/the art world was an artificial man-made “garden” which he could use to unravel the prevailing pretensions of fabricated theoretical truths leading to a practice in which research is more important than the creation of objects. A final quote from Lois: “The essence of my gardenings is condensed to a single flowerpot / standing outside / and filled with bad soil / in a portable garden / that can be put outside and just forgotten.”

Sint-Truiden, Belgium, 14 August 2020

*Translated from Flemish by
GRETHA BOSMANS*

LOIS WEINBERGER was born in 1947 in Stams, Austria, and died in Vienna in 2020. Major exhibitions of his work have taken place at the Museum Tinguely, Basel; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Garage MU, Paris (all 2019); FRAC Franche-Comté, Besançon, France (2018); Neue Gesellschaft für Bildene Künste, Berlin (2017); and Kunsthalle Mainz (2015). His work has been included in Documenta 10 and 14 (1997 and 2017), the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009), and the São Paulo Biennial (1991). He is represented by Galerie Krinzinger (Vienna), salle principale (Paris), and Corridor Gallery (Antwerp).

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