



Falling for an Idea

Micah Donovan

A precipice

Richard Brautigan's oranges from Osaka, imagined into existence in a short piece of writing for the sole enjoyment of their possibility, are a poetic stretch, a meditation on the inconceivable. A torrential inversion of reality transforms an industrial city without orchards—more densely populated than Tokyo in the 1960's—through the simple, sensuous fabrication of fruit. What could be more revolutionary than the planting of an idea?

Figments of the imagination, Brautigan's oranges bypass bureaucracies and market forces, re-imagining the city. Like dirt—miraculous and mundane—ideas are a medium for conception: Osaka reconceived. Soft edged, pleasant, the thought of oranges cuts through millions of tons of cement to what lies beneath.

Imaginations of the unimaginable find an analogue in the strangeness of dirt. Incredibly complex, each tablespoon of soil contains within it a cosmos. Composed of minerals, microbial rhizomes, organisms, plants, liquids, and vapours, the living space of soil ranges from a few centimeters to a few meters in thickness, covering the planet like a skin. It breathes, perspires, and transpires.

A living horizon assumed to be vast and endless is but a bubble, delicately balanced by the mass beneath, and the vacuum outside. Every bit of dirt is derived from helium, hydrogen, and the supernova furnaces that transform stars into planets, planets into beings. From some comes all.

The step

A child draws a thin line: a horizon that delineates nothing from everything. The drawing, a first step into language, finds its stride in physical descriptions of places we inhabit, turning into cities. Ed Ruscha gas stations, a horizontal landscape, so normal they disappear until painted, photographed or stepped upon, as in the case of the moon. With this latest step of language, we've situated ourselves in opposition to nature. We no longer live in the dirt but on it. We have created vertical space, with dirt in the basement. Greek tragedy would have us admire our vertical relationship with dirt, entirely essential to the inevitable fall: dirt as our end (having mistakenly thought ourselves above it all).

The distance

If technology is what we do, as Ursula Franklin suggests, it is inextricably connected to culture. The production and consumption of oil, as a primary action of our culture, has largely separated us from land, literally as well as figuratively, from vehicles to fertilizers. We bypass dirt in favour of oil. Our addictions to agency and instantaneity have led us to see our shadow above the ground.

For many, dirt exists between the edge of the sidewalk and the road. Dirt is a scar, showing itself from a construction site. A disconnect that starts in language extends to a rupture within the landscape. The more we distance ourselves from the shore, the more we risk not returning.

Randomness

In my artistic practice, I introduce dirt into non-dirt spaces and I want to introduce humans into dirt spaces. I want to break down the specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge and space. I received a text three days ago that read: "in the grow tubes, a crop of fluorescent yellow mushrooms are flourishing". To have introduced unidentified fluorescent yellow mushrooms into an office space is a minor accomplishment. I would love if next, someone sent me a text about bugs. All these things that are not supposed to exist in an office space, I think we need to reintroduce them to an office space.

I am inspired by Wendell Berry who, in a letter to Wes Jackson in 1982, wrote:

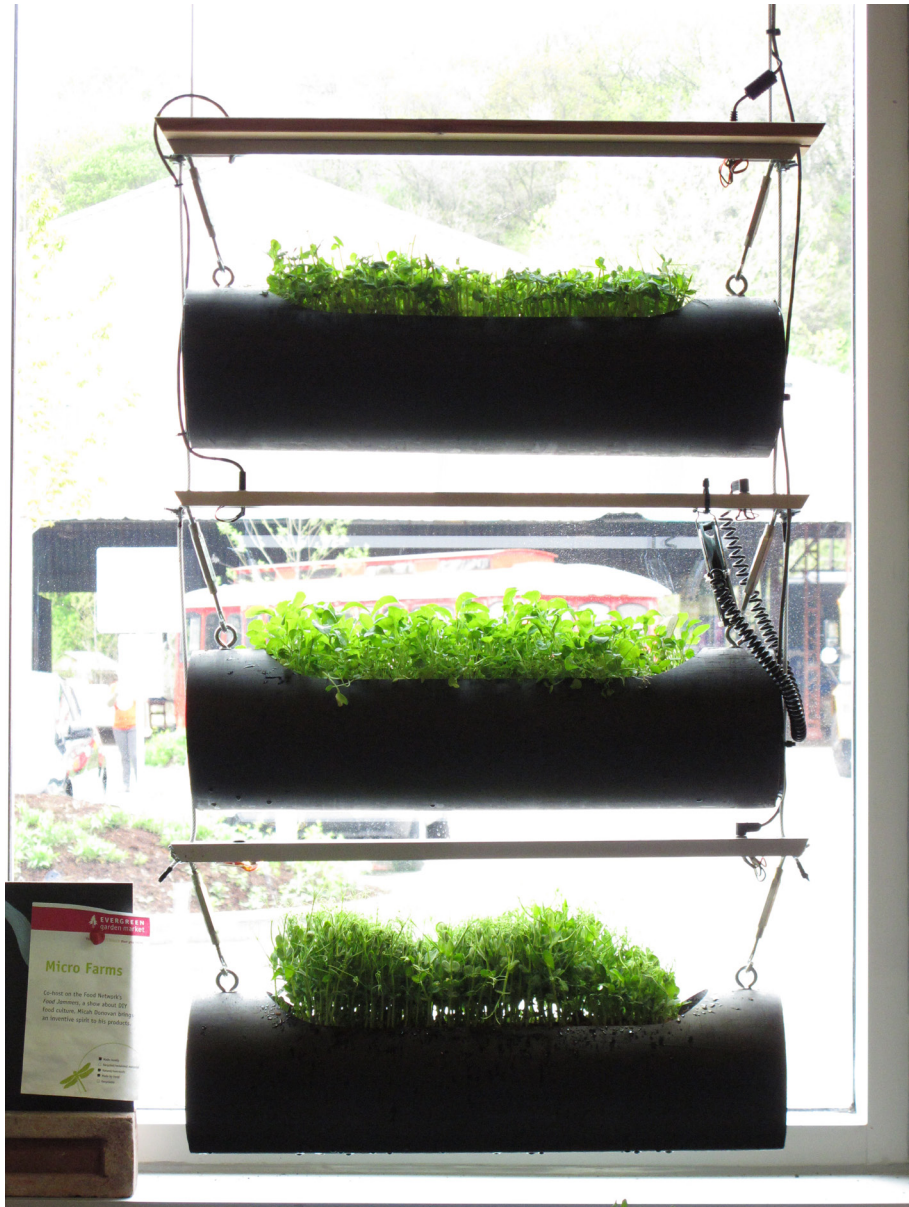
I want to try to complete the thought about "randomness" that I was working on when we talked the other day. The Hans Jenny paragraph that started me off is the last on page 21 of *The Soil Resource*:

'Raindrops that pass in random fashion through an imaginary plane above the forest canopy are intercepted by leaves and twigs and channeled into distinctive vert space patterns of through-drip, crown-drip and stem flow. The soil surface, as receiver, transmits the "rain message" downward, but as the subsoils lack a power source to mold a flow design, the water tends to leave the ecosystem as it entered it, in randomized fashion.'

My question is: Does "random" in this (or any) context describe a verifiable condition or a limit of perception?

My answer is: It describes a limit of perception. This is, of course, not a scientist's answer, but it may be that anybody's answer would be unscientific. My answer is based on the belief that pattern is verifiable by limited information, whereas the information required to verify randomness is unlimited. As I think you said when we talked, what is perceived as random within a given limit may be seen as a part of a pattern within a wider limit.

If this is so, then Dr. Jenny, for accuracy's sake, should have said that rainwater moves from mystery through pattern back into mystery.





To call the unknown “random” is to plant the flag by which to colonize and exploit the known. (A result that our friend Dr. Jenny, of course, did not propose and would not condone.)

To call the unknown by its right name, “mystery,” is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be damaged or destroyed and, with it, the smaller patterns.[1]

Randomness at best is simply under-explaining. Berry understands there is something very structured that is larger than us; most scientific discoveries are about finding patterns that already exist, but that tap into new forms of perception. People don’t invent things, they don’t necessarily make new relationships happen, they make new languages to understand the relationships that are there. In learning how to perceive differently, through conceptual orientations as well as through new instruments, we make new ways of perceiving possible.

What becomes important in the present moment is to embrace our non-understanding of dirt, our being with dirt, as a poetic gesture. Maybe the only tool we have to conceive of things larger than ourselves, like dirt, is the poetic. The poetic allows for a perception of the world that is about cyclical regeneration, rather than privileging notions of individual creation, author, inventor, or genius. We are conceivers of ideas, in that the medium for conception already exists in the world. Ideas can be created from their own destruction. And then it all starts all over again. From three elements ten billion years ago we now have more than a hundred. The way we conceive is the way the world is born.

References:

[1] Jackson, Wes. "Toward An Ignorance-Based World View (LR81)."
The Land Report Number 81 (Spring 2005): 43 pars.
www.landinstitute.org/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/10/03/42c0db19e37f4

Image:

Grow tubes, reception: Evergreen reception area where employees can grow food in the office under LED light, or in the window. Evergreen Brick Works, Toronto 2011.

Micah Donovan is an artist working with food, water, and technology in partnership with Evergreen Brick Works, the YMCA, and Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab. A graduate of Kansas City Art Institute and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, he coordinated art-garden-play programs at Bloorview, co-creative produced television series for Discovery Science and Food Network Canada and is a member of the Radical Education Research Collective.