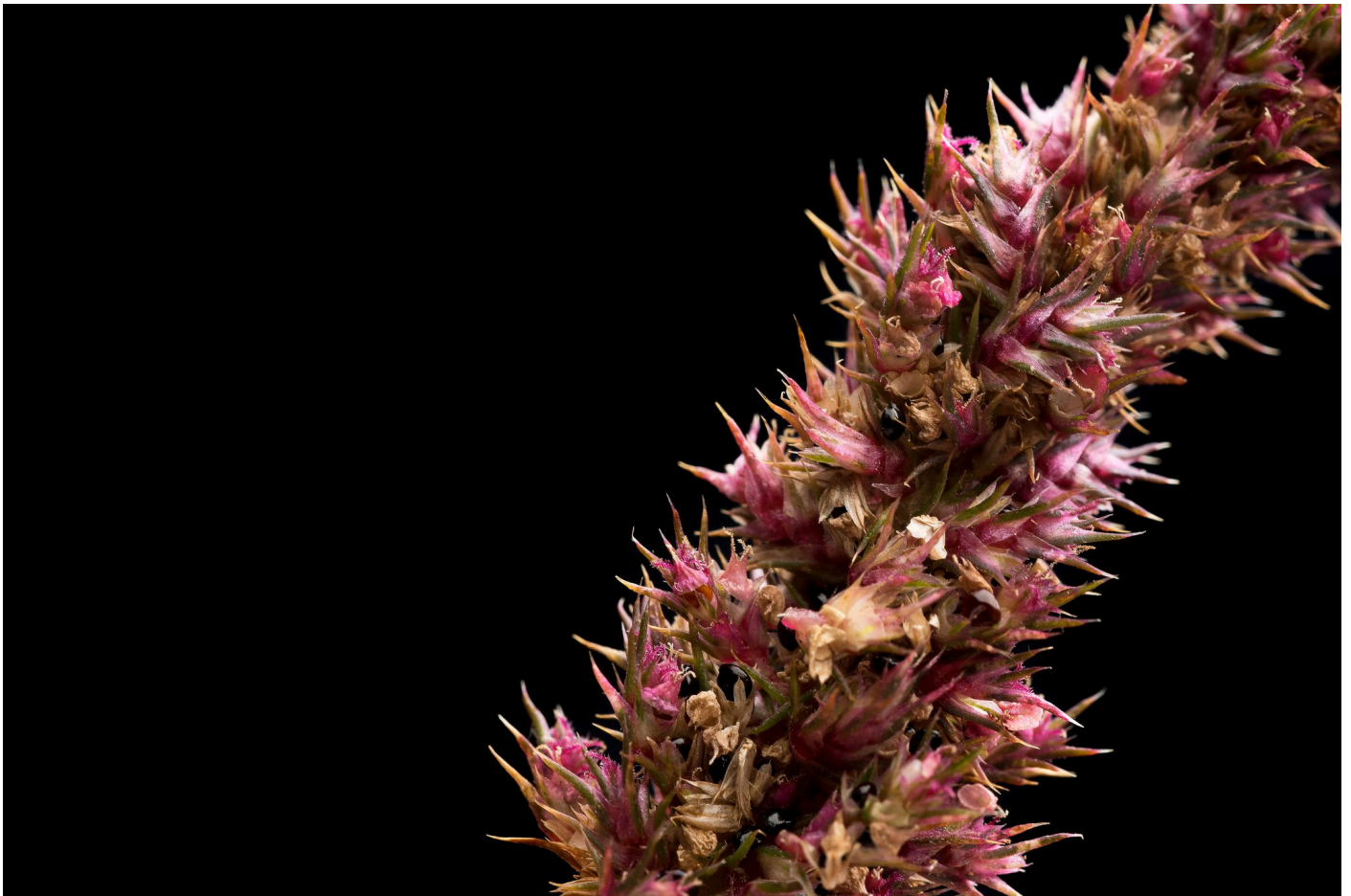


A Seed Artist Germinates History

An exhibition using plants brought to New York in ships' ballast illuminates the city's hidden past using stinging nettle, milk thistle and amaranth.

Written by ANNIE CORREAL; Photographs by KARSTEN MORAN OCT. 31, 2017



Amaranth, which grows wild in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is among the plants introduced to New York via ships' ballast long ago. It will be included in "Seeds of Change," an exploration by the artist MariaThereza Alves of how plants were carried around the world. Photographs by Karsten Moran for The New York Times

About 140 years ago, a botanist named Addison Brown noticed an unfamiliar red-tendriled plant growing around Red Hook, Brooklyn. Trade had lately picked up, he told readers of the *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club* in 1879, and as ships arrived, they dumped thousands of tons of ballast — earth and stones used to stabilize ships — that carried seeds from far-off lands. The red plant, among several new species growing along Gowanus Creek, was *Amaranthus crispus*, native to South America.

“Amaranth,” said Marisa Prefer, a gardener leading a group through the same neighborhood last week, picking up a stalk of the crumbly plant, which was spilling out from a crack in the sidewalk like a Medusa head. “These wild urban plants can survive in the craziest circumstances.”

This year, a few dozen New Yorkers have been learning about and growing plant species that were inadvertently brought to the city in ship ballast as part of “Seeds of Change,” an ongoing exploration of the phenomenon by the artist Maria Thereza Alves. Ms. Alves, whose exhibition on local ballast plants opens on Friday at the galleries of the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at the New School, is the most recent winner of the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics. She has spent nearly two decades uncovering long-buried colonial histories using ballast seeds, which can lie dormant in the soil for hundreds of years, only to sprout in the right conditions.



Marisa Prefer, the resident gardener at Pioneer Works, lifting the leaf of a stinging nettle.



Lindsay Benedict, who teaches at the New School, holding a sprig of Virginia pepperweed.



Lindsay Benedict wiping the hand of Simone, her 2-year-old daughter, as they repotted plants at Pioneer Works.



New School students and faculty replanted seedlings grown in dorm rooms and offices on campus.

Born in Brazil, Ms. Alves has explored several European and British port cities, creating a floating garden using seeds native to Africa and North America found in the soil of Bristol, England; documenting exotic plants from Asia and elsewhere that turned up in people's yards in Reposari, Finland. "I liked the idea that these plants were witnesses to things we would never understand, to paths of trade that we no longer have information about," Ms. Alves said in a telephone interview. "They are living there in our midst and saying 'hi.'"

This is Ms. Alves's first look at ballast seeds brought to the Americas. The exhibition, "Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York — A Botany of Colonization," will include examples of local ballast flora, watercolor maps, and drawings and texts by the artist exploring two centuries of maritime trade, including the slave trade.

The director of the Vera List Center and one of the judges for the prize, Carin Kuoni, said the project had struck the judges as an original way to track history — and as a powerful comment on contemporary political reality. "What struck us as pertinent when looking at Maria Thereza's project was its focus on migration and forced migration," she said.



Ballast plants including smartweed sprouting from the sidewalk at Sullivan and Van Brunt Streets in Red Hook.

Sitting in a coffee shop near the New School in Greenwich Village, Ms. Kuoni held a large satchel on her lap. As she spoke, she reached inside and took out a plastic planting tray and put it on the table next to her latte. Minuscule white insects fluttered up, and the people at the next table glanced over.

“Mugwort,” she said, smiling down at a few tiny leaves.

She took out another plant. “Stinging nettle.”

After learning about ballast plants, she said, her perspective on her adopted city — she is Swiss-born — shifted. “You look down at weeds in the street and say: “That’s incredibly sweet. I wonder what history is trying to tell me.”



Ballast plants including mugwort, top center with pointy leaves, grow from cracks in the sidewalk on King Street in Red Hook.



Amaranth on Sullivan Street in Red Hook.



Smartweed flourishing on the sidewalk at Sullivan and Van Brunt Streets in Red Hook.

Ms. Alves, who lives in Berlin, visited New York twice to do research. The first thing she learned, she said, was how little of New York was actually New York. “New York was hilly and swampy, and they decided to drain it and make it more linear,” she said. Low-lying areas and marshland were commonly filled in with refuse, ashes, sand — and ballast from around the world. Ballast was brought from ports by boat to Harlem and elsewhere.

Solid ballast was largely replaced by water ballast in the early 20th century, but ships continued to bring ballast into New York until after World War II. After delivering goods and arms to bombed-out English cities during the war, ships sailed back filled with rubble. “There was nothing else,” Ms. Alves said. Bristol Basin, a patch of land under the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive in the Kips Bay neighborhood in Manhattan, is made from “stones, bricks and rubble from the bombed city of Bristol.”

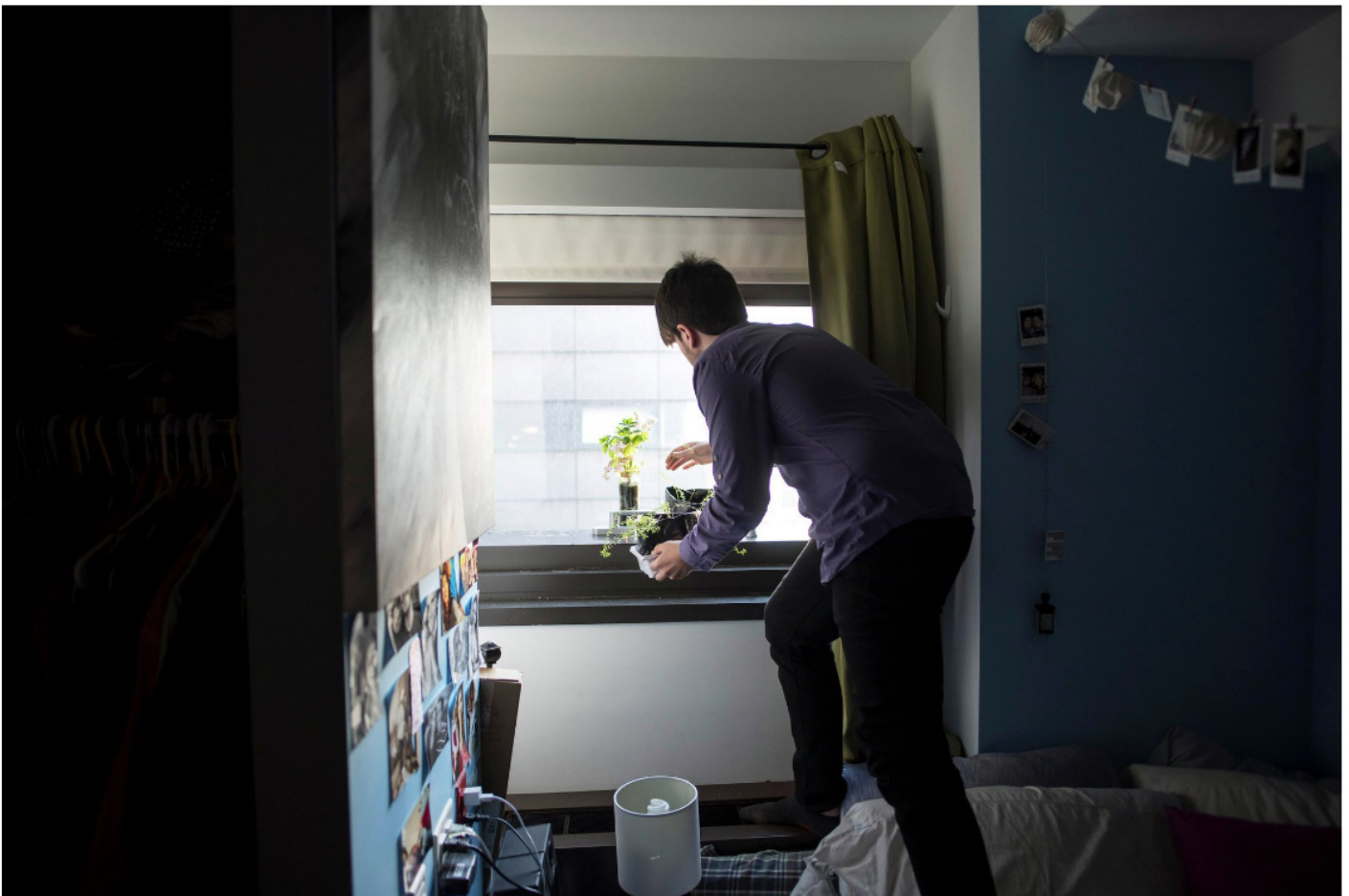


Bindweed, with its white flower, on King Street in Red Hook.

In other cities, Ms. Alves took soil directly from ballast sites and germinated the seeds. In New York, many ballast sites had been paved or built over, so she turned to historical records, including the list of ballast plants identified by Mr. Brown. With the help of a graduate research fellow at the Vera List Center, Michael Castrovilla, she came up with a list of more than 400 species found on seven sites.

Marisa Prefer, the resident gardener at Pioneer Works, a cultural center in Red Hook, worked with the show's curators, Ms. Kuoni and Amanda Parmer, winnowing down the list to some 40 species that were still abundant in the city. New School students, faculty and staff, and children enrolled in a free summer program at the Miccio Center in Red Hook, were invited to grow them from seeds.

Recently, the growers gathered at Pioneer Works and in the courtyard of a New School building for their final planting parties, where they would transfer their plants from flimsy containers to the black plastic bags in which they will be exhibited.



Michael Castrovilla, a research assistant for the project, tending to plants in his dorm room.

Mr. Castrovilla, the researcher, had sent students regular emails reminding them to tend to their plants, but not all had flourished. Some of his own had failed to thrive on the windowsill of his room in a Fifth Avenue dorm. “My blinds are often closed,” he said. “But the flax is going crazy.”

The students plopped their ballast plants into bags, adjusting the roots, adding water and soil. Alana Giarrano, an undergraduate, appeared with a box containing milk thistle, St. John’s wort, stinging nettle and a plant with a fuzzy pink shock of a flower, like a tiny mohawk, called dwarf coral, or celosia. It was native to East Africa and grew around Southeast Asia, as well as New York.



New School students and faculty repotting seedlings on campus in preparation for the exhibition.

She has been interested in the project for a couple of reasons, she said. “First, I was interested in the idea of plants and migration and involuntary migration. They’re kind of byproducts that didn’t mean to come over.” Her mother was a refugee from Laos, she said. “Second, I just wanted plants in my room.”

Back in 1879, Mr. Brown had been realistic about the future prospects of plants brought in ballast to the city, predicting that most of them would “perish after a few seasons.” And yet, he predicted, some would survive.



A dwarf coral flower growing along the waterfront in Red Hook.

He was correct. On the waterfront in Red Hook, where Mr. Brown had once watched vessels spreading ballast “without cessation, night and day,” there wasn’t much vegetation to be seen last week. But construction for a new ferry terminal had turned up soil along the water, and a strip between a concrete walkway and a sea wall was overgrown with weeds. “Wow,” Marisa Prefer said, pointing out mugwort, St. John’s wort, lambsquarter and tufts of downy brome — all on Ms. Alves’s list. “Holy moly. That’s cool.” Amid them was even a lone, four-inch tall celosia with its fuzzy pink flower.

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A version of this article appears in print on November 3, 2017, on Page A25 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeds as City History, Carried Across the Sea.

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