

ART CITIES:Paris-Maria Thereza Alves



Maria Thereza Alves' long-term project "Seeds of Change" started in 2002 and studies settler colonialism, slavery, global migration, and commodification through the lens of displaced plants in ballast, the waste material historically used to balance sailing ships in maritime trade. Dumped in ports at the end of passages as the ships took on more freight, ballast often carried seeds collected from its place of origin that remained in the soil for hundreds of years before germinating and growing.

By Efi Michalarou

Photo: Michel Rein Gallery Archive

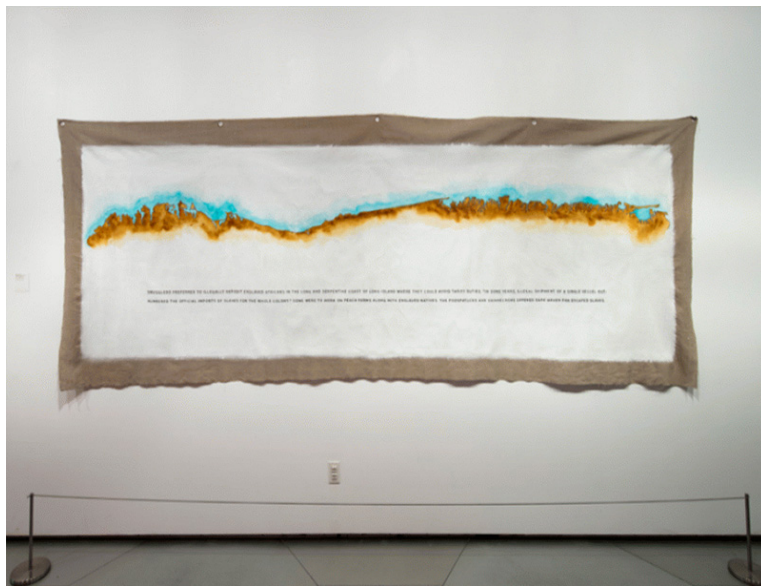
Scientifically these plants are categorized as “ballast flora” for no other reason than that they come from elsewhere, in this sense the plants are metaphors for today’s undocumented immigrants. The ballast plants speak specifically to the forced displacement of lands and peoples through the transatlantic slave trade, but in Alves’ project they also literally and metaphorically hold open a space at the intersection of art and science to challenge and think expansively about our social, cultural and political history and possible futures. **“Seeds of Change”** has been presented in several European port cities: Dunkirk, Marseille, Liverpool, and Bristol among them and in New York. **“Seeds of Change: New York – A Botany Colonization”** after New York is on presentation at Michel Rein Gallery in Paris. The **“Seeds of Change: New York -A Botany of Colonization”** is conceived as an ongoing collaboration between experts, students, and local communities through a network of partner sites around the New York area: The High Line in Chelsea, Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Weeksville Heritage Center in Crown Heights, and The New School in Greenwich Village. In the spring of 2017 approximately four hundred individual plants selected from thirty-eight species were propagated at Pioneer Works and The New School. This cultivation and dispersal organically tie together each site’s distinct history of trade and the distribution of people, plants and goods. **Pioneer Works** near the banks of the East River in Brooklyn is literally built on ballast: in the 1851, an Irish immigrant, William Beard, purchased land and gained permission to build the Erie Basin, originally marsh land below the Brooklyn Docks where ships from around the world would dock. Beard invited ships to dump their ballast at the Basin to shore up the space producing a landmass that is largely made of ballast soil and populated by ballast flora. **Weeksville Heritage Center** is testimony to a community founded by African American freedmen, located between Bedford Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Brownsville, Brooklyn. After abolition purchasing land became a means for freed African Americans to gain economic and political

freedom. Weeksville was established by stevedore James Weeks and others in 1838 to accomplish this. By the mid-1800's Weeksville was providing for a community of five hundred people with their own newspaper, school, orphanage, housing and, perhaps most importantly, \$250 worth of property owned by every non-white man. The **High Line** is a public-private partnership park in Chelsea that was opened to the public in 2009 on elevated train tracks. Here, the story of ballast dispersal shifts from the ports to the Western frontier of this country. As goods arrived at the city's ports, carrying seeds with them, they were loaded onto the trains that had traveled on what is now The High Line, themselves the carrier of seeds from the West and now transporting "non-native" seeds across the United States on their undercarriage. Using paint, text, and imagery the artist evokes an alternative way of knowing, by layering the stories plants tell as witnesses in the anthropocentric histories of trade and migration. The traces these plants leave, as annuals and perennials, create a map of colonialization that is deeply embedded yet often invisible in the landscape of New York City. Selected for their presence in sites around the New York area, the ballast flora in the exhibition sets up a key for the map of the city's sites of colonization. In the shape-shifting cultural, economic and social environments of New York, Seeds of Change holds open physical and temporal spaces for thinking with the plants about the reasons that these landscapes are constructs we all actively co-produce.

Info: Michel Rein Gallery, 42 rue de Turenne, Paris,
Duration: 10/2-31/3/18, Days & Hours: Tue-Sat 11:00-
19:00, <http://michelrein.com>



Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York – A Botany Colonization, Exhibition view at Michel Rein Gallery, 2018, Courtesy the artist and Michel Rein-Paris/Brussels, © Florian Kleinfenn



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