

Maria Thereza Alves

SECRET GARDENS

Rahel Aima on Maria Thereza Alves's *Seeds of Change*

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Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: A Floating Ballast Seed Garden*, 2012–16, barge, plants, soil, wood.
Installation view, Bristol, UK, 2015. From *Seeds of Change*, 1999–. Photo: Maria Thereza Alves.

THE FUNNY THING about ships is that you have to weigh them down to keep them afloat. Historically, stones, soil, sand, wood, and bricks placed inside a ship's hull have provided this weight. At the end of a voyage, the ballast is dumped, to be repurposed as building materials or to settle as soil. It becomes a pedological archive: A portion of the ground beneath Manhattan's FDR Drive is built from the rubble of British buildings demolished during World War II; the area came to be known as Bristol Basin. Meanwhile, Liverpoolian stones that were a by-product of the transatlantic cotton and tobacco trades make up Savannah, Georgia's iconic cobblestone streets. Sometimes, ballast creates new terrain, too, as is the case on Lilla Norge, an island off the eastern coast of central Sweden that blooms with Norwegian flowers found nowhere else in the area.

Ballast similarly anchors Maria Thereza Alves's project *Seeds of Change*, 1999–. Like people, seeds can unexpectedly find themselves far from their homelands. They travel in the bellies of animals and amid ballast in the hulls of ships before being discarded as waste on new shores. These seeds can lie dormant for hundreds of years before a chance upheaval exposes them to light, causing them to sprout. Seeds are patient, after all: In 2005, Israeli researchers were able to germinate a two-thousand-year-old date-palm seed; the resulting plant was subsequently dubbed the “Methuselah” tree. Seeds, like colonized populations, bear buried within them the capacity to endure despite the most oppressive of surroundings. In 2012, a team of Russian scientists announced that they had successfully grown a flower from a thirty-two-thousand-year-old squirrel cache of seeds buried in Siberian permafrost. They failed to germinate the seeds but were able to extract cells from their placentas and grow new flowers. The next year, the flowers—which were identical to one another but had narrower petals than the same species of flower today—produced seeds of their own.

Like the best time travelers, seeds are storytellers. Since 1999, Alves has been using these inadvertent hitchhikers to unspool violent histories of colonialism, transnational commerce, migration, and resource extraction. After researching a city's ballast sites, she takes soil samples, germinates whatever seeds they contain, and consults scientists and archives to identify the flora, later displaying them in gardens. Previous iterations of the project took place in the European port cities of Marseille in France; and Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, and Bristol, in England; and on Reposaari, a small island that was once Finland's largest port.

In each location, Alves reverse-engineers horticultural history to question what it means to be indigenous to a land. Consider the species Japanese knotweed and kudzu. Both were initially introduced to Europe and North America from Japan as ornamental garden plants, which is to say, as plants that can be controlled and contained. Today, they are billed as invasive alien hordes, kudzu in particular, which has gained the moniker "the vine that ate the South." Parallels between this extension of xenophobia to foreign-origin plants and the present-day rise of nativist sentiment are clear, if sometimes overdetermined. For example, in Bristol, where Alves planted her garden on a floating river barge, the selection of flora included rocket and marigold. Both plants are beloved for being quintessentially English, and are semiotically loaded as such, but they are also relatively recent products of the shipping trade—the marigold is, in fact, native to the Americas.

A YEAR AFTER winning the biennial Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, Alves transposed her project to the Americas. The resulting multiyear installation, *Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization*, has displayed flora propagated from ballast seeds in several locations, first as a living installation at the Aronson

Galleries at the New School (which sponsors the List Center Prize) in New York this past November, followed by iterations at Manhattan's High Line, and at Pioneer Works and the Weeksville Heritage Center, both in Brooklyn. Just as the movement of ballast stones is not unidirectional, this New York chapter of her project briefly traveled to Michel Rein in Paris in February and March before returning to the city this spring.

This time, Alves's process differed, because many of New York's ballast sites—Red Hook, Inwood Park, and the Gowanus Canal, among them—had been built up and were inaccessible. Instead, she turned to historical records to identify four hundred plants from seven sites. Working with students and faculty from the New School and children from Pioneer Works' community youth program, she grew seeds from these plants last summer. At the New School, the plants sprouted in plywood boxes alongside some rather lovely botanical sketches of tumbling saltbush, perennial wall-rocket, annual mercury, and common vervain, all so-called indicator plants that signal the presence of ballast. Watercolor maps plotted local ballast sites



(including Bristol Basin), and a cerulean-washed diagram of ship arrivals used snaking arrows to identify the sources of the city's ballast: elsewhere in the United States and Europe, but also Cape Verde, Cuba, Haiti, Barbados, and Brazil. A map of the Long Island coast makes the role of the slave trade explicit: As Alves's neat print explains, smugglers used to stealthily unload their enslaved cargo there so as to avoid paying city tariffs.

At the Weeksville Heritage Center, which occupies the site of one of the country's first free black communities, the ballast plants grow in soil enclosed by wattles—chubby, sausage-like straw barriers used for erosion, sediment, and stormwater control. Their growth nonetheless bespeaks a kind of liberatory ability to endure and to thrive. Later this summer, Pioneer Works will host walks around the neighboring Red Hook area, where participants can expect to see a kind of Ophelia's litany of the shipping trade: jimsonweed from Mexico, perhaps, or Asiatic dayflower hailing from East and Southeast Asia, and of course the aforementioned Japanese knotweed.



Left: View of Maria Thereza Alves's "Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization," 2017, Aronson Galleries, New School, New York. Photo: David Sundberg. Above: Maria Thereza Alves, *Verbascum Nigrum*, 2007, ink on paper, 16½ × 11¾". From *Seeds of Change*, 1999-. Right: Maria Thereza Alves, *A Ballast Flora Garden: High Line*, 2018, straw wattles, plywood, plastic liner, soil, seeds. Installation view, High Line, New York. Photo: Timothy Schenk.



Alves is by no means the only artist to focus on seeds in her work. In recent years, Pia Rönicke, Jumana Manna, Michael John Whelan, and Andreas Siekmann and Alice Creischer, among so many others, have made work inspired by the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a massive seed bank located on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen. The vault was the subject of Yongwoo Lee and Hans Ulrich Obrist's 2017 exhibition "Seeds of Time," and the island now hosts an artist residency, Artica Svalbard. Meanwhile, protests against the biotechnology company Monsanto, and other industrial corporations' forced displacements of indigenous communities in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, germinated another seed-bank work—Amar Kanwar's *The Sovereign Forest*, 2011–15, a project made in collaboration with activist Sudhir Pattnaik and filmmaker Sherna Dastur, which debuted at Documenta 13 in 2012. Further iterations have traveled to India, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Austria, Singapore, and Sweden.

Kanwar's contribution to the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012 centered on a set of sumptuous video works that pay quiet testament to Odishan workers and their land-rights struggles. Kanwar is known for his lush cinematography, and particularly lovely were videos projected onto open books of handmade paper, which seemed to collapse the skeuomorphic distance between page and screen. Yet most affecting was the installation *272 Varieties of Indigenous Organic Rice Seeds*, 2012, which displayed the titular seeds in shallow spotlit, wall-mounted shallow boxes. Their colors ranged from taupe to coffee, and some were husked and others not, but together they were dizzying in their sheer plurality. They left an indelible impression, furnishing a metaphor that feels increasingly poignant as a different kind of monoculture—that of Hindutva, or Hindu fundamentalism—asphyxiates the country.

YEARS AGO, I remember looking down at a Manhattan sidewalk and noticing a spray-painted stencil that read, SMILE. YOU LIVE ON AN ISLAND. We're surrounded by water and might cross a river several times a day, but this fact, like New York's shipping past, is easy to forget. Not so on the High Line, where both water views and the memory of a freight depot are inescapable. The park currently features the second installment of Alves's project, part of "Agora," a group show organized by Cecilia Alemani and Melanie Kress. Like ballast flora, the installation seems to have arrived there by accident. As at Weeksville, wattles enclose some soil, some hyperlocal ballast flora. On a hillside, wattles evoke topographical contour lines; here, the effect is more akin to the animal waste that carries seeds. Yet plants, like immigrants, just want to put down roots and flourish, and, over time, these seeds have, too.

This iteration of the project underwhelms compared to the other sites. But it becomes interesting when one considers the park's history. The defunct railroad was slated for demolition, yet thanks in large part to photographer Joel Sternfeld's documentation of its luxuriant wildscape in 2000 in 2001—the greenery came up from seeds spilled from cross-continental trains in a kind of locomotive analogue to ballast flora—it is now an impeccably manicured, ersatz-wilderness park. To walk the High Line today is to experience a profound sense of loss for Sternfeld's feral garden, and for an older time when Manhattan was Mannahatta. It shows us history like layers of soil. It is here that *Seeds of Change* feels truly decolonial, in its potential to go beyond awareness and education and refract the landscape into disparate pasts. After all, as much as Alves' sprouting plants bring to mind New York's industrial history, they also invoke the ghostly ecology of the pre-colonial period that shipping and transport infrastructure effaced. The remarkable Welikia Project from the Wildlife Conservation Society charts the peoples, plants, and wildlife of the city in 1609, when Dutch settlement started. It suggests that the site of Alves's project might have been home to red maples, American hornbeam, starved panic grass, prairie fleabane, and white wood aster, some of which would later be displaced by ballast flora.

Hung with wall text on an adjacent fence is a map of ballast sites. In the middle distance is the bedbug-like carapace of Thomas Heatherwick's *Vessel*, 2018, the public-art centerpiece of the multibillion-dollar Hudson Yards redevelopment project. It looms over the rail yards like a ship nobody is happy to see on the horizon, and suddenly the wattles feel like they're guarding against more than soil erosion. It's easy to forget, too, that Wall Street's foundations sit atop a historical African burial ground, while the city around it is built on land stolen from the Lenape people—the original native New Yorkers. But the seeds remember. □

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