

Review of Madelaine Corbin's Work

The immediate visual of a garden in an indoor space is deceptively hopeful at first. However, upon closer inspection this garden feels out of place. Contained in a corner that looks out to Cranbrook grounds is a collection of withering weeds atop a mound of earth. The small terrain transitions to repetitions of segmented phrases and dissipates onto the concrete floor. As I engage with the artwork the sentence slowly emerges: "They did not tell you that you are a mirror [under their feet]." It echoes the political slogans by Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holtzer, and at the same time bears strange resemblance to an epitaph that might be inscribed on someone's grave.

As an audience I feel implicated and uneasy. Who are they? And why am I a mirror to be trampled upon? The artwork does not disassociate itself from the role of plantation as an oppressive tool in the history of colonialism. The weeds occupy the same position as those who are not "they", those who are considered foreign and intrusive and must be removed. Artist Madelaine Corbin informed me that the weeds are an assembly of invasive, noxious and illegal plants under Michigan law, which she uprooted from Detroit and replanted into Cranbrook soils. She intends to make a statement about the displacement of bodies within institutions. The connection between place and ground draws me back to the phrase in brackets [under their feet]. I walk not much on earth, but mostly on concrete and asphalt, the very materials that contribute to the establishment of urban environments that banish and alienate certain bodies, and I am forced to question myself: am I a part of "they" too? Althusser would say that in recognizing ourselves as subjects, individuals contribute to the overarching system in a way that indicate them both as the oppressed and oppressor. The same level of contingency can be found in Corbin's work – the relationship between human and plant, individual and institution, installation and site, artwork and audience is messy and entangled, like the words written in dirt.

I read the sentence again and it leads me to an anecdote my former boss told. He once asked a wealthy client what he enjoyed doing in his spare time. "I like weeding." "Oh you like reading? That's great! What's your favorite book?" "No, I said I like WEEDING", replied the client. Pronunciation is not the only similarity between reading and weeding. Both the identification of words and invasive plants depend on a system of difference and exclusion – "reading" is not "weeding", and the weed is not a desirable plant. Additionally, the artwork provokes discussions on class division, since the act of weeding is often attached to the care and pride of maintaining a middle/upper class home.

So do we have the power to shake or dismantle the oppressive structures? Corbin's work proposes a practice of "positive weeding", in a Foucauldian sense that power would not exist without the possibility of resistance. The mirror might shatter under pressure, but it will cut and wound the feet stepping on it. Corbin is also interested in Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. He writes, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." Two of the examples of the heterotopia Foucault describes are the garden and the cemetery. Both accumulate microcosms and time. Corbin's garden embodies the history of Detroit, especially that of gentrification, since weeds can act as protectors against gentrification. At the same time this garden is temporal, and one wonders how long will the weeds endure? Perhaps by surviving on their own they might gain some agency and autonomy. Let the weeds grow.

