Words by Rupal Rathore

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg: COUNTERING THE INSECT APOCALYPSE

Are we capable of imagining the world from the perspective of another species? How does that species experience our shared surroundings? Is it also through the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch? Is it possible for us to re-school ourselves and to instead learn from Nature, to design for, say, insects instead of humans, realising in the process that there are aspects that may commonly appeal to both? We must learn anew! Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg raises some such fundamental questions in her living artwork – an inter-species garden within Kensington Gardens at the Serpentine Galleries in London.

To those of us who spend the weekend with our hands sunk into moist earth, planting new cuttings or pulling out weeds, it may sound absurd to reference an algorithm that designs gardens. But what if we were to create our garden following a planting scheme that benefits a diversity of pollinators instead of ourselves? Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg's artwork, Pollinator Pathmaker, is about devising gardens that address biodiversity principles and technology, to prioritise the needs and tastes of pollinators over our own.

"I wanted to make art *for* pollinators, not *about* them," says the UK-based artist. Her work explores the intersection between artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, conservation, biodiversity, and evolution. "Pollinator Pathmaker is an ambitious art-led campaign to make living artworks for other species to enjoy."

Pollinator Pathmaker is an online platform. It invites people to enter a set of values (plot size, soil type, location, etc.) and then generates a planting design that would serve the maximum number of pollinator species in that situation. The associated algorithm was developed together with string-theory physicist Przemek Witaszczyk. Prior to the website producing a three-dimensional rendering of the resulting garden that shows a combination of plants painted in iPad watercolours by the artist herself, the algorithm allows the user an opportunity to pause and think. It does so by letting the person select the number of plant species, the pattern in which they are arranged (bold patterns attract a wide range of pollinators, while intricate patterns include more flowers visited by specific pollinators), and asking if they prefer to have more 'patches' or 'paths' (some pollinators memorise routes from flower to flower and others explore more randomly).

For the 'Back to Earth' exhibition at London's Serpentine Galleries, artists were called upon to respond to the climate crisis. Ginsberg's piece, her second Pollinator Pathmaker Edition Garden, draws attention to the alarming decline in the population of bees, butterflies, and other pollinators around the world that are essential to the ecosystem. It is estimated that some 75 percent of flowering plants need pollinators to reproduce, including many crops that are harvested and consumed by humans. With the steady loss of natural habitats and the use of insecticides in agriculture, pollinators are in trouble, and so are we.

"We're fucking up this planet, and I'm not hopeful that we will stop," said Ginsberg. The artist has engaged with issues of biodiversity and loss in several earlier works, including: Resurrecting the Sublime, The Wilding of Mars, The Substitute, and Machine Auguries. Her PhD work, completed five years ago at London's Royal College of Art (RCA), was titled 'Better' and revolved around the questions of-*what is better, better for whom*, and *who decides*. It investigated how designers and technologists imagine and implement their own visions of a better future, all too often for the benefit of a certain set of people and not for the well-being of all beings.

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With Pollinator Pathmaker, Ginsberg has adopted a more hands-on, participatory approach – to prove the point that designing only for humans may not always be the *better* option. She experiments with keeping the feeling of empathy central to her project, where the garden is tended and cared for by us while the insects become (quite literally) the prime consumer of this living artwork. Instead of choosing

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to display art in the confines of a gallery, which may induce powerful emotions but does not necessarily call people to action, Ginsberg is "inspiring hope and agency". Pollinator Pathmaker encourages everyone, whether a beginner or a highly experienced gardener, to participate in creating the world's largest "climate-positive artwork". Every garden that is planted using the freely available algorithm, regardless of it being in a private backyard, at a school, or in the grounds of museums and galleries, would cater to pollinator preferences rather than our own. "The planting is focused on encouraging interaction between plants and pollinators," says Ginsberg, suggesting a radical shift in design strategy by taking the attention away from ourselves. "It's those mutualistic, interspecies interactions that are most interesting to me; observing a fly circumnavigating an allium, seeing a bumblebee's tail peeking out from a foxglove, or watching a butterfly's proboscis delve into a giant hyssop bloom," she enthuses.

Originally commissioned by the Eden Project in Cornwall, the subsequent public edition of Pollinator Pathmaker was for the Serpentine, with support from the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation and Google Arts & Culture. This latest garden was planted in April and the one at Eden opened in May 2021. The next edition is planned for the Light Art Space (LAS) garden in Berlin, which will enable the expansion of the palette of plants into a new region and allow more people to join in.

While the garden at Eden is planted across the steep slopes of an old pit, looking like a multicoloured advert for incoming pollinators, the planting scheme at the Serpentine, as generated by the algorithm, is more fragmented. The patterning of the flower bed zones meets and diffuses at places, allowing for the mixing of plant and insect species. Both public gardens are markedly different from each other in their details and yet follow the same underlying principle of attracting a wide range of pollinators. “It is an experiment, not a solution to the pollinator crisis,” emphasises Ginsberg. “I want people to think about how art can transform us from consumers to caretakers.”

A total of 4471 plants from 62 different species are divided into 11 meandering flower beds arranged along the 227-metre North Flower Walk. These plants will support a variety of moths, hoverflies, wasps, bees, beetles and more throughout the changing seasons, as they continue to grow over the next two years. The 500 square-metre garden has a bold and contrasting colour palette – deep blues, fuchsias, and lilacs are spread across interlinking, patterned paths and intricately planted patches.

The planting at the Serpentine was carried out by the Royal Parks, the Serpentine curators, and the artist and her team. Even though Ginsberg had hoped it would be done by students and volunteers, to encourage a sense of stewardship and belonging, insurance issues made that difficult to implement in the given timeframe. “This is something I want to focus on solving for our next public garden edition,” Ginsberg told DAMN°. “However, the Royal Parks has a burgeoning volunteer scheme, so sign-up and ask to help maintain the garden!”

Ginsberg has her own DIY edition of Pollinator Pathmaker at home. As an amateur gardener, she used the algorithm to produce a planting design for a 3m x 5m bed in her backyard. Learning to care for the garden has been a slow yet transformative undertaking for the artist, and unlike a conventional garden, this is not attributed to deriving pure aesthetic pleasure.

“While I find the mass of flowers beautiful to look at, it is definitely extremely strange! Some plants are juxtaposed in combinations which I find visually jarring,” she says. “The real joy comes from seeing the garden being absolutely inundated with insects.”

Pollinator Pathmaker certainly qualifies as an alternate approach to designing a garden. While the resulting gardens may or may not be aesthetically pleasing to humans, they can still be appreciated.

daisyginsberg.com *pollinator.art* *serpentinegalleries.org*

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Ginsberg urges us not only to think about gardens from the pollinators’ perspective, but to also question whether they can be artworks unto themselves. “Can we value the natural world to the same extent that we value things created by humans?” she asks. Closely watching the processes of Nature, and observing things growing is a subtle form of interaction with the natural world – something that can be as moving as a provocative piece of art. Pollinator Pathmaker acts as a bridge between us and other beings, providing access to an experience that induces compassion and humility– a lesson we must all re-learn from time to time.

In spite of this highly personal way of engaging with the artwork, Ginsberg stresses the significance of creating public editions of Pollinator Pathmaker, because of their bigger scale. More gardens, especially those planted in the vicinity of one another, would support a larger pollinator network. Nevertheless, the DIY models stretch to 15m x 15m, a generous amount of forage for pollinators. Next in line for Ginsberg is to seek funding to extend a scientific study begun at Eden with Exeter University, to study whether Pollinator Pathmaker indeed attracts a greater diversity of pollinators than conventional gardens or wildflower meadows.

Re-education requires us to give up the usual degree of control, as well as let go of our expectations associated with that particular activity. With Pollinator Pathmaker, we are asked to surrender to the cyclic order of the natural world, and simply be the facilitator of the project. It is perhaps through this process that varied learnings emerge, bringing one closer not only to their garden but also to one’s own self. “Of course, the intention is to generate awareness and offer the opportunity to experience the work in a public space,” says Ginsberg, “but I also hope to inspire visitors to create their own gardens.” <

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Image spread 1:
Pollinator Pathmaker, digital rendering of Serpentine Edition Garden (detail), 2022
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Courtesy of the artist
Images spread 2 and 3:
Pollinator Pathmaker planting for Serpentine edition. North Flower Walk, Kensington Gardens / May, 2022
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