

Martin Roth

In May 2017 I cultivated a piece of land in Midtown Manhattan nurtured by tweets

You can smell the space before you even enter – an aromatic mix of damp earth, sweet clay and the heady flush of lavender. Inside, three orderly rows of lavender shrubs line the soil now covering the basement floor. The surrounding walls have been plastered over with the image of a verdant forest, sunshine spilling through the treetops and onto the leaves of the lower-hanging branches. On first take, the scenario almost recalls a visualization exercise: *Imagine you are in a forest, sunlight streaming through the trees, lavender-scented breezes drifting through the air...*

And yet, the physical experience of this space is not as meditative as its description may imply. The aggressive perfection of the trees is not a testament to natural harmony, but rather a digitally-printed, “Enchanted Forest”-themed wallpaper, found online. Instead of birdsong, one is serenaded by the faint hum of fluorescent lights, whose brightness seems to dim and deepen at random. The total effect is less an immersion into the woods, and more a sojourn in a doomsday bunker of the One-Percent. Any calm this environment induces is innately tinged by suspicion of its circumstances.

This installation is not the first time artist Martin Roth has played off the clash of natural and artificial. His practice has consistently pushed at the various interdependencies that make up one’s habitat, calling into question the idea of a “natural environment” through a mutual contamination of organic and artificial elements. (For example, for one piece, the artist set his pet goldfish “free” into the pond in the Metropolitan Museum’s Japanese garden, while in another, he gave over his studio practice to caring for a flock of ducklings.) While the artist’s acknowledgment of environmental complexities might strike a parallel to popular discourse around art in the Anthropocene era, the latter conversation tends to privilege the human viewpoint; Roth, on the other hand, has built up a body of work that introduces interspecies perspectives as a way to reflect critically on our own. Crucially, the artist does not require these perspectives to take on the same forms as human communications. Rather, he encourages his audiences to experiment with new methods of listening (in one instance setting up a “concert” of cornstalks to catch the otherwise inaudible interchanges between plants.)

For this installation at the Austrian Cultural Forum, Roth enlists lavender plants as translators, or even alchemists, capable of transforming the anxiety of their surrounding context into something potentially soothing. In keeping with the artist’s glib, slightly self-deprecating style of naming his works, *In May 2017 I cultivated a piece of land in Midtown Manhattan nurtured by tweets* sets out multiple tensions within its title alone. For starters, the “piece of land” in question is no empty field, ripe for sowing, but rather the subterranean gallery space of a Midtown skyscraper. However sweet its scent, the lavender is expressly not here of its own volition. Lavender is a plant that craves full sun; it struggles to survive in the shadows of skyscrapers (just as it could never thrive in the dappled shade of a forest, no matter how enchanted.) In this installation, however, the plants must make due with the row of fluorescent bulbs, somberly substituting for sunshine.

This brings us to the second tension within the title: the idea that anything – let alone a living organism – might be “nurtured” by “tweets.” If the latter term first came into usage as a pallid attempt to transliterate the unique sweetness of birdsong into a human language, we are now living in a moment where a “tweet” sooner connotes the ever-encroaching sphere of social media and the instant gratification of its communication networks, which spread faster and more furiously than any bird’s squawk. For this installation, Roth has rigged the lighting system with an algorithm that matches the intensity of the light to the activity of a handful of Twitter streams, specifically selected for their influence and impact. In moments of frenetic activity, the fluorescents burn brighter, pumping light to the sun-starved lavender plants. Conversely – at least in theory – if there were moments of little to no activity on the selected accounts, the viewer might find themselves alone in the dark, with only the scent of lavender. The source of these manipulations remains invisible, with no mention of the actual Twitter streams within the space itself.

In effect, what Roth offers us is something half-refuge, half-bunker, in which any available solace is powered by the sources of our anxiety. In this sense, the construction of the space echoes popular narratives of self-care, which are propelled by the very same capitalist mechanisms that produced the need for retreat. True to his methods, however, Roth introduces one last nuance. Twitter, as a means of communication, is predicated on speed. A tweet, by its very nature, signals urgency, if not emergency. Lavender, on the other hand, blooms on its own time – if it blooms at all. By filtering these online communications through the natural processes of the lavender plants, Roth slows down the speed of transmission. If our constant communications cannot be escaped, at least they can be forced into a more “natural” temporality – a scenario worth visualizing.

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