

FEATURE

Kristýna and Marek Milde

“Lost Connections”

by Sarah Crown

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The work by the Brooklyn based artist duo Kristýna and Marek Milde has taken many twists over the past years and developed from individual practices into collaborative projects that appear often as extensive, site-specific, and interactive environments for exploration and experience. Like a hike through the mountains, their art practice involves a well thought-out navigation through our environment that offers new perspectives and views on what we humans might have forgotten in our anthropocene era.

Hiking and other aspects of exploring nature are important parts of the lives of Kristýna and Marek Milde, and they consider it a parallel practice to guide their art projects. Growing up in Prague, Czech Republic, in proximity to open landscapes and wooded areas, the Mildes experienced a culture heavily involved in implementing nature for practical purposes, including holistic medicine. In the theory of Sacred Geometry, there is the principle of interconnectedness that explores the relationship between our singular selves and the universe. Nature offers patterns, designs, and structures from the most minuscule particles to the expressions of life discernible by the human eye to the greater cosmos. Contemporary life, however, and its demanding productivity is moving us away from this bound. These pivotal concepts fascinated the Mildes, and their move to New York City only strengthened their interest in examining themes of a culture so heavily engrossed in alienating nature. Their works and projects aim to confront the dilemma of two different worlds: nature with its openness and its accessibility and the spatial limitations of our urban environment that have been determined by calculated architectural constructions. The contemporary human, the “Homo-Interiorus”, is born in and spends most of his or her life in a squared space, separated from the metaphysical principles of the inseparable oneness of nature.

Those who experience Mildes’ projects are encouraged to revisit the relationship of everyday reality to nature to reveal the lost connection of our culture with the environmental context. Like any introspective hike, we start underground with a closer look at the exploration of the roots of trees and bushes. The trees grow an underground net and communicate with each other over many acres of land, invisible and silent to any visitor and independent of what goes on aboveground. The visual of this alone perfectly encapsulates the image of our contemporary internet. *In-Tree-Net* is a site-specific installation made out of trees and branches mounted on the walls and ceilings of a building realized on various locations such as in Prague (*Karlin Studios, 2012*). Trees and industrial elements merge in the austerity of the bare environment and create a confusing experience to the viewer who is not sure whether he is seeing pipes and wires of engineering systems or limbs and branches of plants. The installation represents the ecosystem of the woods and, at the same time, parallels to the lymphatic system of our bodies. Where architecture usually attempts to cover any functional structures, here, they are revealed to remind us of the underlying dependencies between humanity and nature.

Our walk takes us further up the hill to a plateau where flowers and small bushes are growing. Flowers have long standing traditions across every culture, and their shape, color, and smell carry symbols and meanings that compose a visual language all on its own. Yet, due to our metropolitan lifestyle, and especially that of the younger generation, we have become ignorant to wildflowers’ functionality, and we are slowly becoming more and more desensitized to them. This persisting dilemma inspired Mildes’ latest and ongoing work *Gone Wild (2016)*, initiated at the Queens Museum, New York, exhibition *Chance Ecologies*. The central idea was to utilize uncultivated local plants and wildflowers considered to be “weeds”, foraged weekly by the

artists from the post-industrial sites around the Flushing River area, in place of their cultivated counterparts. The flower bouquets created by the artists were used as situationist interventions given away to various community members to be used for their celebratory moments, documented photographically and reframed in the Museum within a fictional domestic situation. Furthermore using wild flowers, Mildes created an installation in the form of a florist street stand, which served as a platform to their workshop on wildflower bouquets making, where participants were encouraged to create their own arrangements. In return, they were asked to share an image of the bouquets being used as home displays or gifts. The Mildes saw this work as a way to invite participants to reconnect to the forgotten knowledge about flowers, and the seasonal cycle of nature especially in this day and age as the earth system processes continue to be heavily altered by the human species.

Scholars of the anthropocene era still argue the exact dates, but it is undeniable that a new geological epoch has begun since we have been able to recognize the impacts on the planet as a whole. What distinguishes the human species from previous earth inhabitants is the idea that we are the first ones able to recognize and acknowledge this fact (2). This phenomenon is the driving force of the works by Mildes. By acknowledging that the change in our relationship to our environment directly affects the environment itself, their projects offer small steps to a better understanding and provide alternatives to our alienated way of living. “We cannot connect to the huge issues but to the small ones that surround us,” says Marek Milde. “Architecture has a deep effect on how people behave and think. Just think about it. We are born in a cubical: we live, we eat, we sleep in square spaces, and we ultimately get buried in a squared coffin. This creates a square mentality, not relational, only functional. Our constructed world, defined by designed buildings and artificial structures, is, conceptually, functioning very well. But on the energetic and emotional level, it is severely lacking. The need to ‘reconnect’, mentally and physically, has never been so urgent for humanity than it is today, and with our projects, we want to offer such a possibility.”

Stepping up the last mile to the top of the mountain, we reach the peak from where we can see the landscape and the city from high above. We are offered a completely different perspective, and the aerial view permits us to examine the broad influence humanity has on planet Earth and also reminds us of the invisible forces and energies that are at work in our ecosystem. Here, we have no fear of ingesting pollution, as we do in city parks or urban squares, but instead are able to breathe in fresh air and the smell of nature at its purest form. But eventually, we will feel the difference once we return to the cement jungle of industrialization, which continues to produce a constructed landscape of artificial smells and blurs the distinction between the natural and artificial. Non-artificial smells and a mapping of our own homes is offered by *Cabinet of Smells (2015)*, a project that explores the idea of what the smell of a home might be if it was made of personal objects. It engages the concept of domesticity and human influence on nature. The project, a laboratory station, distills the scents of various mankind products, such as old books, socks, debris, etc. to produce a perfume that will represent the origin and identity of the owner. This project highlights the heavy influence of the capitalistic industry on our perception of smell and addresses the completely engineered reality of artificial scent present virtually in all products and goods. *Cabinet of Smells* makes us aware of its effects on our lives and how much we have moved away from organic living and the harmony with our natural and very personal environment. By engaging the visitors to revisit the idea of what the actual smell of a home is, it offers an examination of our own products and, at the same time, a critical view on the often useless and pollutive byproducts of our society. The way humans treat the planet is a one-way action: it is not reversible, and nature will carry indelible marks for a long time but the process of distilling our own products functions as a ritual that permits us to re-establish those lost connections. While Mildes work reframes modern lifestyle and everyday rituals it is an “archeological” exploration into cultural memes that is also visionary; imagining a future, where the lost environmental connection could be re-established through awareness and active engagement fostering integrity of culture and nature.

Bibliography:

(1) Randall Carlson, Sacred Geometry, Reality Sandwich, http://realitysandwich.com/163944/meaning_sacred_geometry/

(2) Joseph Stromberg, What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?, The Smithsonian Magazine <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/>