



ART ENTANGLED

Grafting the Past to the Future

By Heather Kaplow

Though raised on a Pennsylvanian farm, Syracuse-based artist Sam Van Aken was unfamiliar with fruit cultivation when he started working with trees as an art medium. Van Aken's most recent artwork, *Open Orchard*, is a distributed, site-specific fruit orchard, part of which exists as a long-term art installation on public parkland on Governor's Island in New York City, and the rest of which is scattered around the boroughs of the city, echoing the planting patterns of generations of immigrants that brought plants and seeds with them to New York from their respective homelands.

The part of the orchard that is on the island is in an idyllic location, cascading down a gentle slope overlooking New York Harbor. Getting it there was a long journey, beginning in 2014. "I had been shopping around for a place where I could plant one hundred trees in New York City, and people would kind of pat me on the back and say 'good luck!'"

Van Aken's lucky break came when he was introduced to curator Shane Brennan, who had just become Director of

Public Programs on Governors Island. Brennan responded to the idea immediately, but it was such a drawn-out process that Brennan moved on before *Open Orchard* was realized. Even finding the right location on the island took several years.

The final location was determined by topography. "Fruit trees like to be on raised hills," Van Aken explains, "so the cold can run off." But the location ends up also being very resonant with *Open Orchard's* theme of fruit cultivation as a portrait of the people who have migrated to and lived in New York. "I still pinch myself, because I can't believe that the orchard is there," he admits. "There's a view when you come from the back part over the hill, and you look down the road, and you see Ellis Island, and the whole project sort of comes together."

The 102 trees on the island will be matched by a roughly equal number planted around New York City, through a collaboration with NYC Parks' community gardening program, Green Thumb (some of these are already in place, others are in a nursery on Governor's Island, in various stages of grafting). Each tree will bear four or five varieties of fruit (apple or stone fruit),

all of which are native to or have been historically cultivated in New York.

“There are over 100 varieties [of fruit] that originated in New York,” explains Van Aken. Only about two dozen of these are still actively (i.e., commercially) cultivated, but Van Aken was amazed by how much detail he could find about what has grown in New York over the past three hundred years. “I tracked varieties down to intersections, street corners, and farms. And then I took that historical map of New York City, laid it on top of a current one, and realized that I could place these varieties back into the places they originated from. We’re currently in the process of doing that. I think today, we’ve distributed about fifty trees.”

Van Aken worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), accessing their germplasm collection to work with varieties that have ceased to exist outside of their archive. “With a fruit tree, you can’t [just] store it as a seed, right? So they keep a living sample going. For apples, they store samples in Geneva, New York. For pears, in Corvallis, Oregon. For stone fruit I go to [University of California,] Davis. They’ll keep a living example in each of these locations, but then they’ll also maintain it as tissue culture.”

Trees matched with community gardens get paired with local caretakers, and Van Aken also offers comprehensive grafting workshops and tree-care training materials through Green Thumb as part of the long-term plan for maintaining the off-island part of the orchard. “It’s been amazing, distributing trees to people. If you’re ever feeling low, just give somebody a tree. I get pictures from the community gardens with five people holding a potted tree and they’re just beaming and I’m like, ‘I’m doing something right,’ you know?”

The fruit in *Open Orchard* spans from pre-contact (pre-colonial) times until about WWII, and includes many fruit varieties that hadn’t been accessible for 150–200 years. The newest fruit variety in the orchard is the Stanley plum, developed in Geneva, New York in 1938. “The oldest European variety” says Van Aken, “is the Damson plum.

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That’s believed to date back to Damascus [11 BCE] and was brought into Europe, where it became naturalized and then brought here.... But, the beach plum, that’s been in New York for 10,000 years!” In fact, it may have always been on Governor’s Island. “Verrazano [1524] and Hudson [1609] both mentioned it when they sailed into New York Harbor. It’s kind of crazy to think that the shoreline of New York was completely lined with these plums that would blossom in white in the spring. It’s a far cry from what it [the shoreline] is now.”

“When I was looking at all those [tree] placements for community gardens” Van Aken shares, “I realized I had to work with the Lenape Center on this.” Van Aken cold-emailed The Lenape Center, and they enthusiastically invited him into a few of their own projects—for example, an exhibition that the group curated for the Greenpoint branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, which includes a teaching garden composed of “indigenous fruit trees” cultivated by the Lenape in Manhattan, and meant to build “continuity between ecological past and present.” The Lenape Center helped Van Aken arrange for all of the native tree varieties to be planted in Prospect Park (including beach plum, American plum, black cherry, chokecherry, and American persimmon), and also has a future collaboration with Van Aken in the works.

Open Orchard grew out of Van Aken’s earlier fruit-tree-related work, *Tree of 40 Fruit*, where the artist pushed the orchardist’s practice of grafting to its outer limits. Bearing a title that rings equally biblical and futuristic, Van Aken’s *Tree of 40 Fruit* is a living artwork, with editions spread throughout the world, each producing blossoms and then fruit of 40 different stone fruit varieties.

His motivations for constructing *Tree of 40 Fruit* were among the most traditional artistic drives: he wanted to create something impossible and unexpected—to surprise and delight people when a normal looking tree in their fall/winter environments burst into multi-colored flower in the spring and then a fruit basket in the

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summer. But as is often the case in art making, the process became at least as interesting a project as the outcome. In this case, the process brought up big questions about the sustainability of how fruit and knowledge about fruit gets shared.

Van Aken's efforts to realize *Tree of 40 Fruit* raised the specter of varietal extinction. There were once thousands of varieties of stone fruit in the United States, but because of fruit industrialization, it was difficult for him to find and graft scions from enough different varieties for *Tree of 40 Fruit* to live up to its name. The work thus became an odyssey of archival research and relationship building, and ultimately transformed into a preservation project: purchasers of *Tree of 40 Fruit* don't just own a unique edition of an artwork. They own an entire cultural history—a living collection of beloved fruits brought from one place to another via immigration—along with some responsibility for keeping rare varieties of peaches, plums, apricots, and cherries present in the future.

When searching for fruit varieties for *Tree of 40 Fruit*, Van Aken found himself welcomed at agricultural research stations and the USDA, but also felt keenly aware that his access to these resources was due to his institutional affiliation (Van Aken is an Associate Professor in the School of Art at Syracuse University). *Open Orchard* was conceived to make these rare varieties available again for everyone to pick, taste, and modify. He considered a title for the project based on the notion of orchards as commons in Medieval Europe. Then he learned about a philosophy in the Lenape culture “Where essentially, a tree couldn't be owned. You could only come to be gifted the fruit off of the tree.” *Open Orchard*, with its echo of open-source culture where nothing is proprietary, and anyone can sample and rearrange, clicked into place.

“Culture evolves out of agriculture,” Aken says, “and this idea of sharing is an essential component of that, whether that's seeds or knowledge or technology.” The orchard on Governor's Island has been purposely planted with alternating

rows—apples every other row, stone fruit in between—so that there can be a (free to the public) harvest within a few years, and so that the apples will be at their peak when the stone fruit trees age out of productivity.

But if no one “owns” the trees, who looks out for them? With global warming in mind, irrigation has been installed in *Open Orchard*, even though orchards don't typically have irrigation. Being on a hill puts the orchard above the flood plains, and the orchard is planted with drought-resistant fescue grass. Van Aken and the island's horticultural team have been working closely on the project since he began grafting the trees for it in their greenhouse 2018, and this close relationship is contractually obligated for at least five years.

Van Aken also sees his workshops and community garden tree placements through Green Thumb as part of the orchard's future-proofing process. “Experiencing the fruit is one way of understanding it—aesthetically. But then empowering people through teaching is another way.” Van Aken also describes people becoming excited by reconnecting to their personal histories through caring for their local trees as a strategy for keeping fruit knowledge alive for another generation. Grafting, too, he sees as extremely motivating, almost a mystical experience—a fall graft blossoming in spring still thrills him even though he does about 3,000 grafts a year. “I can talk to people about grafting. I can show them how to graft. I can completely give away all the knowledge. But when that graft takes for that person and they have a thing that they grafted, all of a sudden the mysticism of it comes flooding in.”

When meandering among *Open Orchard's* young trees, imagining them coming into maturity as the view and landscape around them alters due to planned development and unplanned impacts of climate change, it feels as though Van Aken is also grafting in some deeper way—binding forgotten knowledge and biodiversity in place now, to posit a surprising alternative future, branching off from the one we are barreling toward now. 🌿

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