

THE PERSEPHONE PROJECT (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)



The Persephone Project is an eco-art project that connects the public to art and the environment by promoting gardening as a contemporary art practice and by recognizing gardeners as artists. My hope is that this connection will bring personal transformative change to the lives of those who can realize that they are involved in a creative practice through their gardening. My hope is to also bring transformative social-political change as the project breaks down the barriers (class, race, education) between artists and non-artists. And finally, my hope is to effect environmental change as the project promotes a respect for nature as collaborator in the work and in the world. The project takes its name from the Greek goddess Persephone whose return each year from the underworld brings the change of a dark barren world to that of light and growth—to spring.

I do the work in several intersecting spheres of methodology: conceptual, administrative, social/community, and art making. I see the entire project as a conceptual art project. I want to change the way people (particularly those not trained as artists) think about their own creativity and their ability to engage creatively. I intentionally employ art-world terminology when speaking about gardens: They are installations. When I ask the public to share the stories of plants in their garden with a component of the project called “Magic Penny Gardens,” I refer to the stories as narrative and memory. I want to honor, and more importantly I want gardeners to honor, their everyday backyard interactions with the environment and understand the internal creative spark that inspires, so that it may shine—not just in the garden—but also in many aspects of human and earth citizenship.

Discourse is one means that I employ to have an exchange about the place of the garden in post-modern culture. I give regular presentations to diverse groups where I have the opportunity to preach this gospel as well as listen and learn. I also visit many backyard gardens (studio visits) and talk to gardeners, which allows me to witness their approach (methodology), learn where they got their ideas (what informed their practice), and share thoughts (engage in discourse). I think the most significant methodology is developing shared ownership for the project. Because the work is social, it has to be done in a social context. My role as an artist is to be a medium, catalyst, and facilitator. The artist can share a vision (be the medium) and if there is resonance, others will get excited (catalyst). The next step is to invite those with the most enthusiasm into the inner circle of the process. This can take the form of a working group or committee. Now the idea or the project no longer belongs to the artist, but to the community. Continuing to reach out to larger and larger concentric circles of the community, the artist role switches to facilitator—facilitating the community “will” to make the project happen.