

MONTHLY

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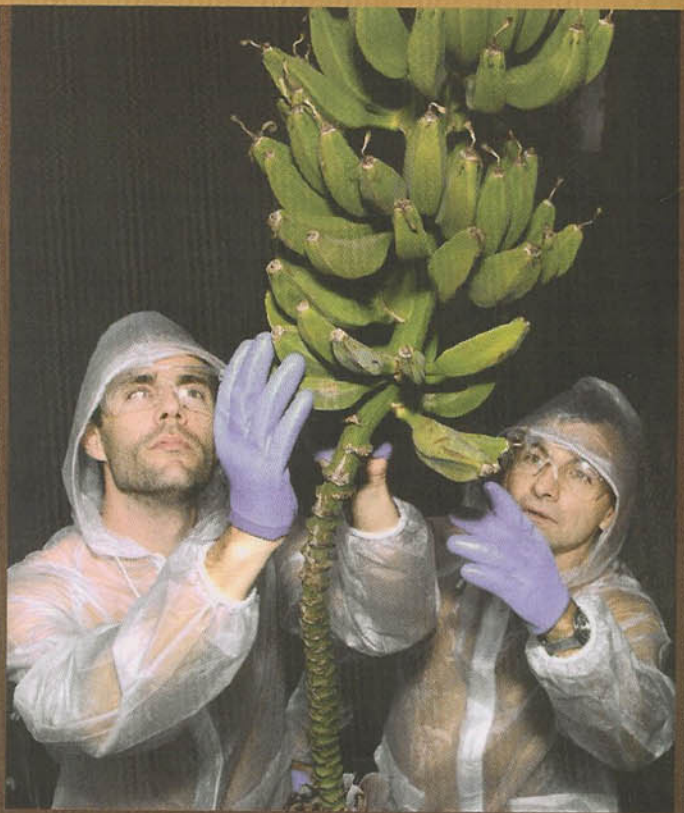
## FINDING THE FRUIT OF THE CITY: The Fallen Fruit art collective

When you walk through your neighborhood and see a smashed overripe plum on the sidewalk, oozing and staining the cement, maybe even attracting buzzing flies, are you really thinking: "art?" Well, you should be, at least according to Austin Young, Matias Viegener and David Burns, the Silver Lake-based art collective known as Fallen Fruit.

Fallen Fruit's manifesto confronts today's overflowing consumer society, where resources like fruit rot and go to waste. They also investigate neighborhoods, by mapping and foraging for publicly available edibles, engaging and informing the community. What's dropped onto the ground or hangs over public property shouldn't necessarily be overlooked.

The trio's collaboration has evolved from its inception as a project for Echo Park's Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, where the artists probed a social issue and then proposed a solution. At the root of Fallen Fruit is an examination of the homeless in Silver Lake, specifically those on the streets in a triangle created by the artists' residences. As David Burns explains, "It has taken off ever since and transformed itself over time to be really publicly engaged with public fruit jams, nocturnal forages and other public activities with citizens we don't know, which we just love."

Think of the nocturnal fruit forage like trick-or-treating for fruit: a group, sometimes as large as 200 people, roams the hills and streets of Silver Lake at dusk, flashlights in hand, searching for fruit. While it's hard to believe there is that much public fruit ripe for the picking, the threesome has mapped the area extensively, noting loquats, lemons, those sticky plums, grapes and much more.



BY KATHY A. McDONALD



Several of Fallen Fruit's photos and maps recently appeared in the group show "Citizen Artists Making Emphatic Arguments," at Santa Monica's 18<sup>th</sup> Street Arts Center. Clayton Campbell, 18<sup>th</sup> Street's artistic director, describes the group as part of "a green generation that is seeking to engage the general population in ecologically sound thinking, developing new strategies towards concepts of production and distribution, and new experimentation with visual forms of social commentary that cannot be easily dismissed as conventional political art."

As "Citizen Artists" and activists, Fallen Fruit adopted these principles: "Think about who has fruit and other resources, and who doesn't. Functional landscaping: ask cities to plant fruit trees in parks, parking lots and on streets. Fresh fruit is a human right." Although Fallen Fruit argues for a better world, they do it with a playful, humorous spirit.

Take their seasonal infused vodkas, created in editions of six flavors from rose, per Austin Young, to Silver Lake's own loquat. A number of galleries, such as Bonelli Contemporary downtown, have shown these neighborhood infusions. And it's definitely art. Austin Young explains, "We're pouring and drinking in a gallery; it feels like art and tastes like art too." This drinkable art has the same characteristics as more conventional pieces: it's only available in a gallery setting, it's displayed as an object and it's available to the public by sampling. But it's not poured by a bartender; a docent purposefully dispenses it.

Viegener says the docent is given specific parameters. "If someone tries to rush them like they're the bartender, they're to stop them completely and say 'I'm the docent.'"

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In this way, Fallen Fruit inverts the process of urban socialization by bringing the neighborhood to the people. This creates moments where people engage with strangers in fresh ways.

Their public and free fruit jams are tremendous examples of their engaging philosophy—popular happenings where theory and practice bond. More than 200 people actively participated on a sunny and warm August Sunday for the group's third public fruit jam at Machine Project in Echo Park. Inside, the gallery/performance space buzzed with conversation as folks cut their fruit, then cooperatively cooked it up into jelly. Many embraced Fallen Fruit's maxims, foraging on the street for public fruit; others bought in the bounty from the local farmers' markets; some just went to Ralphs.

There was a sticky sincerity and simple beauty to the rich social exchange. As Burns explains, "The atmosphere of jamming is so incredibly great. People feel compelled to tell fruit-related from their childhood, their family history, and grandparents," he

says. Indeed—the novelty of making jam outside on Alvarado brought out stories of grandma's kitchen and future plans for giving jam as holiday gifts.

Machine Project's director Mark Allen relishes the fruit jamming sessions that pack his compact storefront space: "It's a project we love: the framework is set up and whoever comes takes over—there's too many people to be in control." Jam combinations ranged from sedate peach and cherry to the wild: red and yellow pepper with chilies and raspberries. The mix of participants included young moms, Silver Lake denizens and USC types. The enthusiasm was palpable. "People like to do things together," notes Allen. "The way people come out and make jam together speaks to the accessibility of the idea." A forthcoming public fruit jam in San Francisco is being coordinated with Future Farmers.

"We like art that changes people's perspectives," says Young. "In our projects, we're trying to bring forth ideas that can make changes." The mapping and nocturnal fruit forages highlight Los Angeles' agrarian origins—

Hollywood was once bean fields and orchards—and the climate that supports such varied produce. In September, in association with Pink Cloud, there will be a forage around the Venice canals, part of an "eco art" project.

The group has previously been to Santa Fe, New Mexico—lovely apricots—and scored a spot in the new media arts festival, ARS Electronica, in Austria at the end of the summer. The theme of this year's ARS event is intellectual property: Whose property is an idea? An intriguing question that fits with Fallen Fruit's belief in not only sharing food but also ideas.

Recently, in association with art activists Islands of L.A.'s "National Parks" project, the group planted tomatoes (once colorfully described as love apples) on 12 traffic islands. The plants suffered several indignities. For example, city workers tore them out, though they did eventually put them in pots and even helped replant them. A night of salsa (eating and dancing) commemorated the adventure on August 17 at Farmlab.

These latter-day gardeners of Eden are intent on sharing their knowledge

with the next generation too: an upcoming project in Pasadena sponsored by the Armory Center of the Arts combines Fallen Fruit and middle school students, who will build their own dream garden. Moreover, the exploration of fruit continues to intrigue. Burns and Viegner both find the objective and personal in the history of fruit propagation, which is a history of colonization and conquest. "All fruit we have now is a collaboration: it's been hybridized and selected," explains Viegner. Most of California's output, from the orange to almond to the ubiquitous palm—originated somewhere else. The apple tree for instance, has been carried worldwide from the hills of Kazakhstan.

"We look at cities, we look at social relations, we look at problems of the city and social relations and private vs. public," says Viegner, summarizing Fallen Fruit's mandate. He adds, "What's consistent is that we use fruit as a lens to look at the world. Fruit's our thing." NA

[www.fallenfruit.org](http://www.fallenfruit.org)

