

Claire Pentecost
Soil-Erg

Background:

I was invited to participate in dOCUMENTA(13) specifically for a section of the exhibition organized under the idea of the seed. One can look at seeds as a material form of collective knowledge. Seeds constitute the largest, longest running open source system in history, making them an essential part of the human commons.

Because the seed is such a compact, portable package, it is easily commodifiable. I wanted to think beyond the seed. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson wrote: “Darwin proposed a theory of natural selection and evolution in which the unit of survival was either the family line or the species or subspecies or something of the sort. But today it is quite obvious that this is not the unit of survival in the real biological world. The unit of survival is organism plus environment.”

In this view, soil is the other half of seeds, the *organism plus*, the context in which they come alive and reproduce, the locus of their survival and the determination of their potential. Soil is another part of the commons we have all inherited but it is rapidly being destroyed, eroded, depleted and not replenished.

Is soil commodifiable? If we leave aside the question of real estate for a moment, soil is not in fact convenient to commodify. How have corporations dealt with this? In a move typical of capitalism they have reduced soil to components that can be circulated as products. These include synthetic fertilizers as well as pesticides and herbicides: “inputs” which purportedly replace the labor of maintaining good soil. (Labor must be reduced by technology to increase the profit margin of production.) The significance of genetically modified seeds, the privatized fetish form of the seed, is that they work as part of a package comprised of the seed, the synthetic fertilizer and the herbicide which the seed has been designed to tolerate. GM seeds are actually sowing the entire corporatized system of industrial agriculture. In the end this system destroys healthy soil.

Good soil is alive: structurally and biologically it is a living system. When the soil is maintained in an ecologically sensitive way it not only nurtures plants, it also helps protect against weeds and pests. But it requires a continually evolving, site-specific knowledge as well as sustained labor. Good soil is the result of a sustained practice and a practice that is social as much as it is biological.

Project: consisting in several parts:

1. The center of the installation itself is the proposal of a new system of value based on living soil. To formalize this I have created a series “sculptural” objects from handmade soil, or compost. These represent units of a new currency, the *soil-erg* (provisional name), proposed as a replacement of the petro-dollar. In 1971, when U.S. President Richard Nixon ended trading of gold at a fixed price, formal links between the major world currencies and real commodities were severed. The gold standard was followed by a system of fiat currencies. However, by 1973, Georgetown University economist

Ibrahim Oweiss needed to coin the term "petrodollars" to describe the extraordinary significance of the circuit of capital running between a single commodity--crude oil--and a single currency--the U.S. dollar. While not formally fixed to international monetary values, the price of petroleum is the most determining value in the world economy.

The dollar is an abstraction of value, the ultimate rendering of equivalence enabling all other commodities to be traded and circulated on a global market. Money as we know it has an obliterating function: it lets you forget all the human and nonhuman effort it takes to sustain life.

The important thing about the soil-erg is that it both is and is not an abstraction. Symbolically it refers to a field of value, but that value is of a special nature: it must be produced and maintained in a context. It is completely impractical to circulate it. It is heavy, and because of the loose structure required of good soil, it falls apart. It only makes sense when located in a place. The physical nature of the soil-erg both evokes and denies the possibility of coinage. If currency as we know it is the ultimate deterritorialization, the soil-erg is inherently territorialized.

The forms of the objects themselves, large discs and stacks of ingots, reference the aesthetics of modernist serial abstraction. And yet just as the edifice of modernism is riddled with the cracks of unsustainability, they will eventually be subject to the entropic course of all organic matter.





2. The sculptures are accompanied by a series of 43 drawings in the form of oversized paper bills, but unlike standardized paper currency each one is unique. The drawings are loosely of three categories: those depicting historical figures that have made critical contributions to an ecological understanding of agriculture; those depicting non-human creatures of the soil-food web; and others picturing writers, philosophers, anthropologists, artists, etc., who have broadened and complicated our understanding of ourselves as part of a wider ecological system.

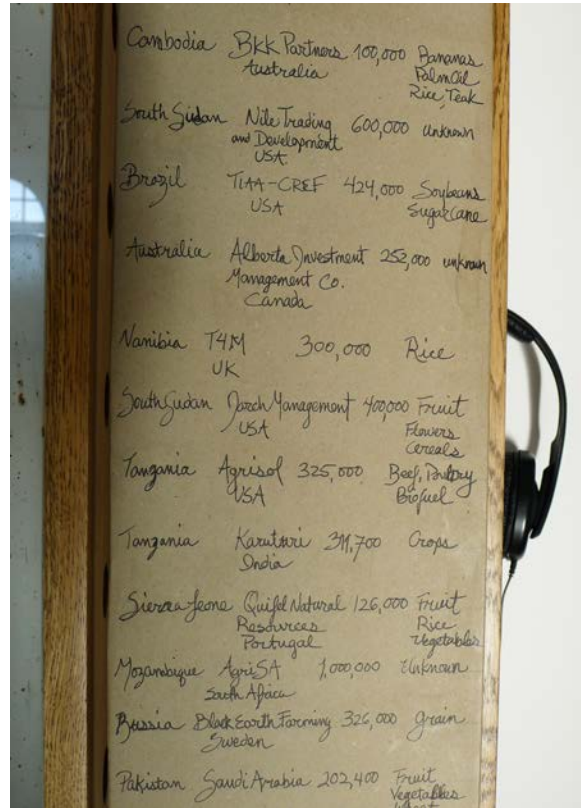




3. For the d(13) installation of the project in the Ottoneum Museum, I borrowed a piece from the museum's collection, the Richelsdorfer Mountain Cabinet, 1783. This constitutes the oldest geological section of Hesse; the upper compartment opens to show the vertical section of the sequence of layers of the Richelsdorfer mountain chain with natural stone material. This geological profile is an incunabulum of the geological research in Hesse in the 18th century. The mountain was originally cut in a search for copper. Stone was extracted for this cabinet by miners of the mountain, and I used the cabinet to reference the age of extraction.

Beside the original cabinet I placed a copy of it. But in the new piece the doors open to reveal a worm composting bed with living worms. The worms were fed kitchen scraps throughout the 100 days of d(13) and in that time were literally making soil. I think of this soil-making machine as a representative of a new era of restoration of the earth's surface.

Written on the inside of the cabinet's doors are the details of just a few of the land deals currently being referred to as "land grabs" in which sovereign nations, corporations and investment funds are buying or leasing huge tracts of arable land in Africa, Asia and South America to grow crops for export. See <http://farmlandgrab.org/> and <http://oaklandinstitute.org>



4. Can soil be distinguished from real estate? If people can make soil from organic waste but they have no land, what are the options for growing food in limited space? To address this question, outside the Ottoneum and in several other sites around Kassel I constructed vertical growing systems. For this part of the project I collaborated with designer and philanthropist Ben Friton of the foundation CanYa Love. These pillar forms are simple and inexpensive and easily adapted to dense urban spaces where people are land-poor.



