

Debra Werblud

# DROPPING SEEDS

proposal for an itinerant installation

## PREMISE

Dropping Seeds is a reflection on genocide and its recurrence, on the interconnectedness of historic and current events; on the legacies of atrocities seeded in our lives that stoke acts of inhumanity.

Is it only when acts are such that language is nullified, geography is too vast, populations are broken, that questions are insistent?

“Does evil live in all of us, regardless of blood or kin, like a viper waiting in the hollow of a fir tree? Should we step lightly around the perimeter of every fir tree? Do we carry hollows, and in them this thing, expectant?”

Micheline Aharonian Marcom, *Three Apples from Heaven*, 2001

We are story-tellers, as lured by our own false narratives as those of others. What spurs vigilance and moral courage when the lie is noxious? What can neutralize deep strata of poison; what can assuage incipient violence, the rage lying in shallow burial? Before the devastation.

“Human imagination is the key to empathy, which leads us to acts of compassion. Imagination is also the foundation of curiosity, which leads us to acts of discovery. This, in turn, changes what is possible. Human imagination might also lead us to break the cycles of self-deception and their devastating consequences if, and only if, we find the humility to admit responsibility for them.”

Christine Cynn, co-director of the documentary *The Act of Killing*, 2013







“... in times like these, to have you listen at all, it’s necessary to talk about trees.” <sup>1</sup>

Adrienne Rich, *What Kind of Times are These*, 1991

## THE INSTALLATION

Dropping Seeds embeds its visitor within a cavity. Imagery of roots and branches printed on free-hanging rolls of mulberry paper defines and delimits the space. It is a place of transition, a cocoon, a hollow with ‘this thing, expectant’ - both prodigy of coming into being and anamnesis of erasure. Responsive to movement, the sheets shift, lift and fall in slow deep breaths.

As an itinerant installation, the number, scale and composition of the scrolls may be varied, disposed according to the needs of diverse venues. or events.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE IMAGERY

### Timelessness and Continuity in the White Mulberry and the Strangler Fig

Moraceae, known as the mulberry or fig family, includes 5 tribes with 40 genera of c. 1000 species. Two of the tribes stand out for their ecological and symbolic significance: the Moreae and the Ficaea.

Among the Moreae, the genus *Morus* includes c. 16 recognized species known as the mulberry tree. Wild plants are propagated by root shoots and seed dispersal by birds and other wildlife who eat its fruit. The name for the mulberry in Chinese is sang, meaning blood, ‘the mother of energy’ that nourishes life. To the ancient Chinese, the mulberry was a Tree of Life and believed to have powers against dark forces. The tree’s root bark was called the Herb of Immortality for its healing properties.

Five thousand years ago, the Chinese observed that silkworm larvae feed exclusively on mulberry leaves secreted as a continuous filament of silk spun round the larva’s body to form its cocoon. The domestication of the silkworm for silk extraction, or sericulture, depended on cultivation of the silkworm or white mulberry, the *Morus alba*. Cocoon-reeling led to textile fabrication; pattern, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery; productivity to trade. By the 3rd century BCE, silk fabric was traded outside China as a commodity. But the guarded secret of commercial silk production went no further than India, Korea, and Japan until the 6th C. when seeds and silkworm eggs were smuggled from Asia through Persia to

Byzantium. The Byzantine Empire maintained a monopoly on silk in Europe until the Second Crusade and the conquest of tree seeds, moth pupae, machinery and skilled hands. By the Middle Ages, the white mulberry was naturalized from Europe through Central Asia.

In areas of North and South Americas, South Africa and Australia, *Morus alba* is a colonial legacy categorized as an invasive alien weed. Where cultivated, the plant is valued as livestock fodder, fuel, timber, dye, medicine, shade, and used in erosion control, wasteland reclamation, and soil improvement. In Africa, South America, and Central, South and Southeast Asia, international programs support white mulberry cultivation for sericulture initiatives as strategies for safeguarding rural areas, developing Cottage Industry; employing and empowering women, as in India or post-genocide Rwanda. In Central Europe and Transcaucasia, where farms were confiscated, heritage destroyed and lands depleted, programs to reintroduce *Morus alba* and sericulture aim to restore not only commercial viability but cultural identity.

White mulberries planted in 2015 are bound to 5000 years of cultivating forage for one species, the silkworm, and for one purpose, to exploit its cocoon.

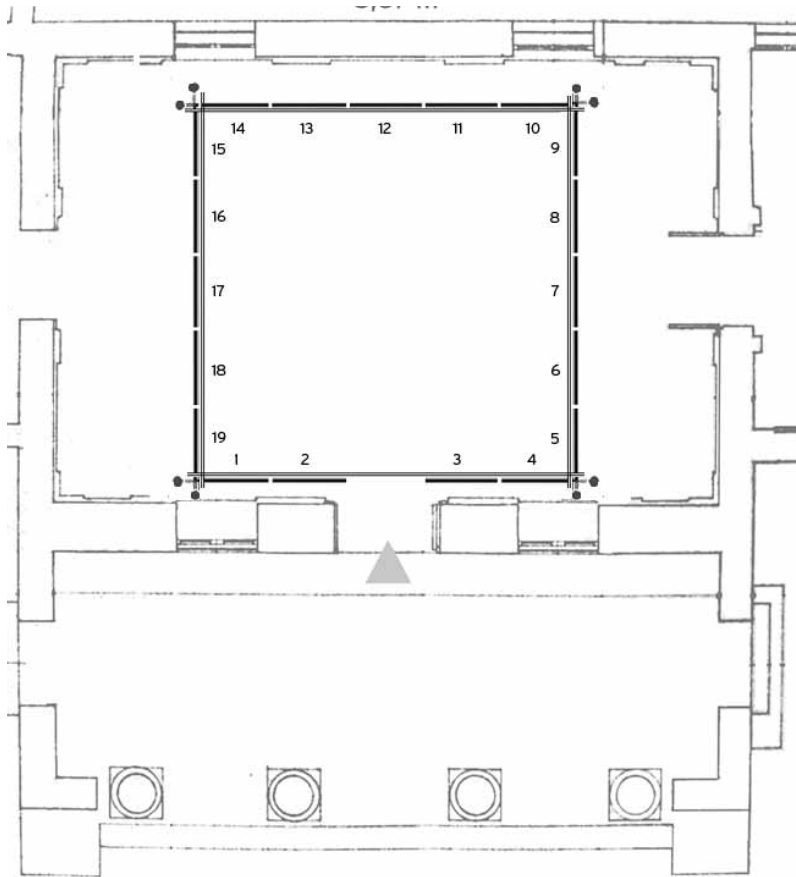
In the tribe Ficaea, the *Ficus* is a genus of some 850 species, including trees, shrubs, and vines. Known as fig trees, *Ficus* are native to the tropics and sub-tropics and, to some extent, temperate zones. They are united by a unique pollination system using wasp species, each linked to a specific species of fig. Figs transplanted to new areas will go sterile in absence of its pollinating wasp. In the tropical rainforests of Asia, as many as 70 different species can coexist. Common figs were among the first plant species bred for agriculture in the Middle East around 11,000 years ago. The sacred fig bears religious significance in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism; and symbolic meaning in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Globally, over 1200 vertebrate species feed on *Ficus* fruit.

The strangler fig is a common name for a number of species all with the same characteristic adaptation. In the dense vegetation of a rainforest, where competition for sunlight is keen, the strangler fig is hemiepiphyte. Seeds eaten then dropped by a bird or a monkey attach to a host tree. As they send down aerial roots, these wrap around the host's trunk. The roots grow into the soil and develop into branches, grafting to one another to create a dense latticework case. Deprived of sunlight and nutrients, the host dies and decomposes, returning nutrients to the soil, leaving a hollow cavity. Within this cavity, small animals find food and refuge.





Loggia del Temanza  
Gardens of Palazzo Zenobio  
Venice, Italy  
7 - 30 September, 2017



plan of installation



## COMPONENTS

**Dropping Seeds** is composed of 19 rolls of pigment prints on Awagami Kozo, a mulberry paper from the *Morus papyrifera*, hung between tautly strung steel cables.

Each scroll measures 1,00m (3.3') by 3,80m (12.5').

Assembled, they enclose a 25m<sup>2</sup> (272 sq') space in groupings of 5 scrolls on three sides and two sets of 2 scrolls flanking the entrance.

The number, scale and composition of the scrolls may be varied, disposed according to the needs of diverse venues or events.

The cables are positioned at a height of approximately 3,50m (11.5') from the floor.

The entire exhibition is packed, stored and transported in tubes.



## CONTACTS

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## DEBRA WERBLUD

A multimedia, interdisciplinary visual artist.

Debra's work ranges from installation to social practice art. The themes she broaches reflect a study of persistent social and moral issues, an urge to highlight overlooked continuities and patterns, suggest affinities, uncover potential alliances.

Her installations stage transitional states that aim to elicit from the visitor recognition in another moral reality. Imagery is drawn; phenomena are drawn from nature. By embedding the viewer within the imagery as part of a process, the 'event' might be felt; representation might shift into reflection; barriers might become porous passageways to a state of becoming.

The media and production processes, the incorporation of a site's features emphasize the interplay between perspective, scale, physicality, context. Each composition is comprised of unique, variable components; their assemblage, even partial, aims to conjure a sensory experience that will spur the imagination to further inquiry.

Early studies in sculpture, archaeology, anthropology and environmental design as well as experience in participatory design also underpin a practice that includes concept design and development for institutions and industries in collaboration with technicians, scientists, scholars, poets, planners and architects.

Each project is conceived as a vehicle for accessing the unfamiliar, for triggering then nurturing processes of interdependence.

in collaboration with

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**CENTRO STUDI E DOCUMENTAZIONE DELLA CULTURA ARMENA**

MINAS LOURIAN, director | Corte Zappa, D.D. 1602, 30123 Venezia

### **What Kind of Times Are These**

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill  
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows  
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted  
who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't  
be fooled  
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,  
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,  
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods  
meeting the unmarked strip of light—  
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:  
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

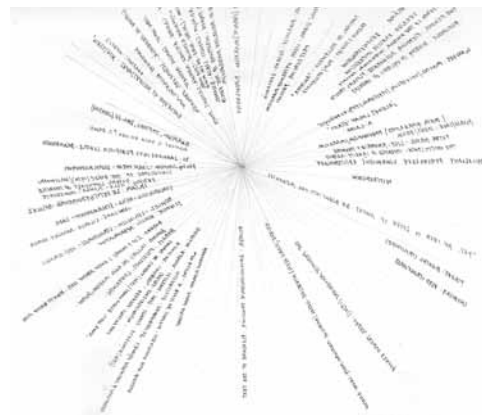
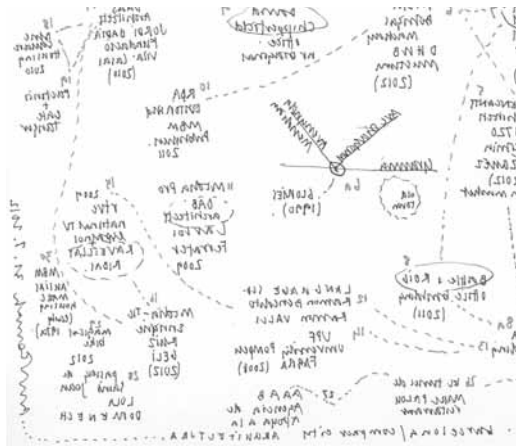
And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you  
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these  
to have you listen at all, it's necessary  
to talk about trees.

Adrienne Rich  
in *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995*  
W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1995

full transcript on-line with reading: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/181516>

forthcoming, proposal for a collateral research project:

**SEEDING THE CENTURY** a web based interactive multimedia resource connecting genocides of the 20th C.  
concept and design | **Roger Connah and Debra Werblud**



studies for mapping diagrams. © Roger Connah

**ROGER CONNAH** | [connahroger@gmail.com](mailto:connahroger@gmail.com) | <http://www.mazy-heron.net>

A cross-disciplinary scholar, writer, critic and professor at the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, Carleton University, Canada. Connah has taught, curated exhibitions, and produced books and films in Canada, Finland, Sweden, India, Pakistan and the USA. His recent publications include: *Writing Architecture*, *How Architecture Got Its Hump*, *Welcome to the Hotel Architecture* (all MIT Press); *The Rest Is Silence* (Oxford). He is co-founder of Heron-Mazy Altered Architecture practice.