

## The oldest tree in New York

There is a small park in lower Manhattan that is fenced off to the public. Through the wire fence one can make out a rectangle of unkempt vegetation- trees, grasses and bushes thriving among rocks and stones. The lot measures 25 x 40 feet and is an artwork called Time Landscape by Alan Sonfist. Inaugurated in 1978, the work represents what the island of Manhattan might have looked like before it was settled by the Europeans in the 1500's. There is nothing spectacular about the trees and plants growing here; what is remarkable is the extent to which this miniature landscape contrasts with the world on the outside of the fence- the urban setting of New York where most traces of woodlands, marshes and groves have all but disappeared. Like a cabinet display in a museum, the piece evokes a certain nostalgia; and as I grapple to define exactly what I pine for in the past, I am overwhelmed by the more immediate sensation of standing in the middle of a vast monument; a monument in constant flux to celebrate the ceaseless toil of human hands putting one brick on top of another in efforts to shape to our desire the lands we settle. I demote my feeling of nostalgia to the rank of artificial sensation- since, in my limited experience, no woodland ever covered this part of lower Manhattan. What I can (and do) feel nostalgic about is rather a certain café a few blocks down and the printing facility I used to patronize across the street, both gone in the 20 years since I lived here. There is a sister concept to nostalgia, a neologism coined by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht called solastalgia. The term is defined as defines this as "the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment". ( Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solastalgia>, accessed on Jan 8<sup>th</sup> 2015). Reluctant to apply a decidedly anthropocentric concept to a tree, I still get curious to what extent, if any, one would be able to sense a certain solastalgia in the vicinity of a tree that has had the opportunity to witness the radical transformation of New York over the centuries.

New York's oldest tree is a Tulip Poplar in the easternmost part of Queens, some 18 miles from Sonfist's art work. The Queens Giant, or Alley Pond Giant as it is also called, is a 133 feet tall poplar with an estimated age of 450 years. The tree would have been a sapling when the Dutch first arrived, and is likely the oldest living thing in New York. It sits in a sunken grove within definite earshot of two major highways- the 6-lane LIE and Cross Island Parkway. The top of the tree is reportedly visible to motorists traveling west on the LIE. Since the passing of time when measured in decades and centuries tends to enter the realm of the abstract, I decide to ride my bike from Houston and West Broadway to Alley Pond Park in Queens, to get a lay of this land once dominated by groves of beech, cedars, cherry trees and witch hazel. There is also a notion of pilgrimage at play. I want the hours on the bike in order to prepare myself and take a series of consecutive deep breaths – and get realigned for this meeting with a representative of time measured out in centuries. Tree-time is sequential and on-going; a flow which in so many ways differs from the pulse of this city with its fierce devotion to the opportune moment; to that which is Flash! Fresh! and to the *kairos* of existence. (Brief note on realigning my spirit while driving or on a bike: It has been a much-coveted idea of mine to go on a road trip when faced with an emotional dilemma to sort things out...Turns out I can't think of much else than driving when I am on the road. Taking a walk works better.)

At the outset of this project, I had an idea to explore ideas of resilience and sustainability against a backdrop of ancient trees. My premise was this: If a tree had managed to survive for extended periods of time, surely there must be something in the immediate environment that still works; something beyond soil and climate conditions. I wanted to see the context, to get a feel for the site of the tree itself and establish some kind of idea of what that something might be. The idea to designate certain areas as off-limits to human settlement, exploitation and harvesting is by no means a modern-day invention, but it turns out that most trees that have been identified as extremely old reside within the confines of man-made compounds. The vast spectrum of parks and wildlife sanctuaries provide distinctively varied on-site conditions for old trees. One common denominator is the question of continued resilience and health in an age of rapidly escalating environmental upheaval.

A tree within the confines of a city park may enjoy a slightly lower degree of legislative protection than does a tree in a national park. To the layman visitor, however, this is a mote point. It is clear from the moment you step into the park from the street that whatever grows here cannot be cut down and brought home for decoration or firewood. But human impact can affect a tree by sheer proximity, and I was curious how a NYC park would compare to the home of Old Tjikko, a 10,000-year old spruce on a desolate mountaintop in Sweden I visited earlier this year. On the face of it, Old Tjikko would seem the more vulnerable of the two, as it probably would take all of two minutes to chop it down with a handsaw. However, the combination of growing in a remote location and a consensus (on part of Park officials, scientists and local guides) to keep the tree's exact location on a need-to-know basis is working to the tree's advantage. So far, this relative secrecy has provided enough of a deterrent for random acts of vandalism. The Queens Giant, on the other hand, is reachable by NYC transit system and appears as an icon on my smartphone's map when I type in the name of the park. There is even an informational plaque on the fence surrounding it. (Or at least there was when I looked online. When I got to the actual site, the plaque had been removed— much in the spirit of a city where everything that is not hot-riveted to something inordinately big and heavy eventually will be pried loose and carried off.)

A little while ago, I gave a brief outline of the what's and why's of my work to an acquaintance. He asked me to what extent I would factor in elements of chance, randomness- and by extension, sheer luck, if that term can be applied to the survival of an individual tree. I replied that my work had no immediate scientific pretensions and that elements of luck and randomness were allowed the same dignity as soil conditions, climate specifics and human interference. Afterwards, I found reason to re-examine this stance: True, I am not a scientist, and neither equipped nor qualified to discuss soil conditions in depth; on the other hand, my choice to visit a specific tree owes more to instinct than chance, and being a visual artist, I am somewhat biased in my processing of information. I think what he was getting at was this: How do we know that this is the oldest tree in New York? How do we know that the 10,000-year old spruce in Sweden is the oldest tree on that mountaintop? How do we know that there might not still be trees, plants and even animals that by far surpass the longevities that we currently have on record? The answer is, of course, we don't, and indeed there might. Which is an idea I find rather comforting. I would much rather think of the world as a place not-yet-wholly-explored than a finite rendering readily available at the touch of my keypad. The flip side of my devotion to greyzones is how my feelings about climate change and environmental issues fall into a similar, but more sinister category of information that leaves much to the imagination. The discourse on climate change is a realm where the map has become largely illegible and redundant, with white patches overlapping areas of infinite complexity. I sometimes wish for an instantly googlable route through this territory, only to realize that what I really need is a level of acceptance of the situation at hand. My work with old trees helps me gain a slightly more sober perspective on the present, with all its need for attention to concepts of sustainability and resilience over longer periods of time.

Riding a bike from the center to the outskirts of a large urban area such as New York is an exhausting experience. There is a constant barrage of sensory stimuli and information to be processed in order to stay in lane, to get where one is going and to avoid getting run over. In other words, much like riding a bike in any larger city. (Bike lanes were a pretty much unheard of concept when I first moved to NYC in the late 80's. Today, there is a rather well-developed network of bike paths that criss cross Manhattan; a network that slowly dissolves the further one gets from the island.) The shift from high-density Manhattan to the lower buildings and capita per square-foot neighborhoods in Brooklyn takes place roughly midway across the blue Manhattan Bridge. From that point on, I navigate a string of environments that alternate between the residential, the commercial, the light industrial and the sacred: From the civic centers of Downtown Brooklyn, to the quaint residential streets of Cobble Hill and Carroll Gardens, onwards across the lethally contaminated Gowanus Canal (on the shores of which a newly erected Whole Foods megastore resides, all galore with revolving solar panels and wind turbines); uphill to affluent Prospect park, where I get lost on the park's meandering bike paths, out in the street again in Prospect /Lefferts Gardens where I

take a wrong turn and get my directions confused all the way into south Flatlands. I double back up to Brownsville where a commercial strip is a-swinging to the most unexpected twang of Texas country and western, and continue along the perimeter of the cemeteries of Cypress Hills, with its endless rows of anonymous white crosses that parade green lawns until they come to a stop at clusters of ornate monuments and crypts in granite and stone. Finally, in need of a rest and a place to eat, I stop under the elevated subway tracks on Jamaica Avenue in Woodhaven.

I want to bring a cake to the tree, thinking that it would be nice to designate this day as the tree's birthday, thus in a way formalizing my visit. I arranged an impromptu birthday celebration off-site for Old Tjikko earlier this fall, in conjunction with the opening of an exhibition with works that featured the tree. The guests at the opening sang to the tree, and a local baker generously provided a blueberry marzipan and cream cake for the celebration much to the enjoyment of the participants. I am thinking that a locally made cake would be appropriate for this occasion, and look around for a bakery. There is one right by the subway entrance, and a sign on the window assures me of the establishment's local credentials: "Anyone wearing a ski mask or hoodie on these premises will be considered trespassing". Seems reasonable enough, as I have just read another sign posted at the cemetery a few blocks down the road that informed me I was not allowed to bring a handgun (or any other firearm) into the dead folks' resting place. I end up getting a square piece of cake that looks like tiramisu topped with maroon and yellow fruit. It is perfect: colorful, eclectic and easy to transport in a tidy styrofoam container.

The last couple of miles bring me into areas of increasingly suburban character. The borough of Queens is about to merge into the extensive sprawl of Long Island. There is a sudden proliferation of well-manicured gardens with glimpses of heavily trafficked freeways through carefully trimmed hedges. Old men on their front lawns raking up leaves in neat piles. Perfectly aligned recycling containers. A yellow school bus stops to let off students at a Catholic school. A few blocks further on another school bus caters to an Orthodox Jewish community. I have lost count of the churches, tabernacles, synagogues and mosques that I have seen along the way. The majority of them have a well-kept outer appearance and bear witness of active congregations that make up an important part of the motley fabric that is New York. The sacred is thriving next to the profane.

I leave my bike chained to a railing along an overpass. Below, the incessant flow of cars and trucks on the Long Island Expressway. The descent into the grove where the tree grows takes a mere 5 minutes, and although the roar of the traffic is somewhat muted by the lush vegetation in this remote corner of the park, it is still present enough to erase any notion of a place enjoying special protection. There is absolutely nothing sacred about this place. The few pieces of litter along the pathway above the grove show signs of age and wear; this part of the park is obviously a less-oft frequented area. Alley Pond was designated a city park in 1929, in response to the rapid growth and development of the city. The giant poplar fell within the park's boundaries with few feet to spare; perhaps owing more to luck than careful planning. As I make my way down through dense thickets of thorny bushes and tangled-up creepers, I keep looking for the right tree. A broken chain-link fence surrounding a massive trunk indicates the end of my journey; as I look up and skyward, I can just about make out the outline of the tree's crown, shooting up improbably high from its base at the bottom of this bowl. For a moment, the sound of cars and trucks seems to subside. I unpack my bags and get up close to the foot of the tree, holding out the cake in a gesture of offering. I take a bite of the ridiculously sweet pastry myself, and start singing happy birthday in English to the tree. I realize how in-comprehensive this intrinsically human custom must be to a tree, but it gives me a sense of being *here*, in the presence of a 450-year old poplar, however indifferent the tree might be to my offering. In order not to seem rude and wholly ignorant of what a tree might need or want, I decide to conclude the ritual by taking a pee on the trunk, thinking that it's the least I can do on a hot October day like this.

I sit down on a stump of rotten wood near the tree. Colorful little mushrooms thrive on the decomposing matter; a

colony of ants nearby make their own highways across the terrain. I fail to imagine the racket of the wildlife at home here in the grove some 400 years ago, but I can vividly depict the succession of conflicts and flags that have since swayed through these lands. The tree has outlived every single person buried in the cemeteries I passed on my way here. It has been witness to change and transformation on a local scale over centuries, and has surely come to feel the effects of the shift in climate on a global scale. Owing to good fortune, circumstance and the inherent capacity for longevity of the *Liriodendron tulipifera* species, the Queens Giant seems to be doing quite well. No hint of remorse, depression or weakening of the spirit; the massive trunk looks securely anchored in the soil by its log-size roots; high above the majestic crown funnels light down to the darker reaches. The sum of events, human interference and climate conditions that have come to pass for centuries here must have been largely beneficial to the tree. As I get up and brush off pieces of damp organic matter from the seat of my pants, I decide to come back to the tree on my next visit to the city. This time I will bring my 13-year old kid here, whose age prevents any deeper forays into the realms of nostalgia and/or solastalgia, but whose perspective on the city he lives in could benefit from a cordial visit to a 450-year old denizen of the Big Apple. We will bring cookies and milk.