



S4:E1: A FERAL COMMONS...

Tairone Bastien in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

[00:00:00]

Io Makandal: Hi, my name is Io Makandal and I'm an artist based in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the precinct that I'm working in is the Victoria Yards precinct, along the Jukskei River.

[00:00:14]

Muhannad Shono: My name is Muhannad Shono, I'm an artist from Saudi Arabia and my intervention in this commission is going to happen at Alserkal Avenue in Dubai.

[00:00:24]

Camille Chedda: My name is Camille Chedda, and my project is based in Kingston, Jamaica, at a place called Parade Gardens.

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THEME MUSIC

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Stephanie Fortunato: Hello and welcome to a new season of The Three Bells, a podcast brought to you by AEA Consulting and the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world at those busy and sometimes feral intersections of cultural and urban life.

I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato, Director of Special Projects for GCDN.

I'm speaking to you from the ancestral land of the Narragansett, Pokanoket, Nipmuc, and other Indigenous peoples on which Rhode Island is located. I recognise their enduring connection to this place, and I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here, and to all First Nations people on the many lands on which we are listening today.

A quick note about the conversation you're about to hear:

This one will be a little wilder than our traditional podcast format. We've woven together sound recordings captured over about six months' time to tell you the ongoing story of A Feral Commons, the global co-commissioning initiative led by Alserkal Advisory in collaboration with GCDN, and cultural districts in Kingston, Jamaica, and Johannesburg, South Africa, supported by GCDN members UAP.



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Stephanie Fortunato: We had access to archival interviews with each of the participating artists shortly after they had been commissioned, and we thought it was important for you to hear directly from these artists. But my guest today is Tairone Bastien, someone I've had the pleasure to get to know over the past 18 months through their curatorial practice.

Tairone Bastien is an independent curator based in Toronto and an assistant professor at Ontario College of Art and Design University. As the curator of A Feral Commons, Tairone is working with artists across three continents to inspire new narratives of possibility by asking questions, ultimately creating public art that is both responsible and accountable to all beings.

Hello, Tairone!

[00:02:29]

Tairone Bastien: Hello~

[00:02:30]

Stephanie Fortunato: Thank you so much for joining us today on The Three Bells.

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Tairone Bastien: Thank you for having me. And thanks for that land acknowledgement.

I do also want to acknowledge the land that I'm recording from and I'm, of course, recording from Tkaronto, which is today known as the city of Toronto. And I want to acknowledge that this is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, and the Chippewa, and the Haudenosaunees, and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I do love the way this podcast gives us an opportunity to get to know the places where we're all located a little bit better. And it's such a great opportunity to get to know each other better too. You know, we've been working on A Feral Commons for the past couple of months, but I'd love to get started asking you about your career and, and the pathway that took you all the way to the UAE and back to Toronto again.

I know you co-curated the inaugural Toronto Biennial of Art in 2019 and again in 2022, and you spent a little time in UAE building a curatorial programme with Alserkal Avenue. Tell me, how did you get into curating?

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Tairone Bastien: Well, you know, I feel like... It really stems from my background and kind of how I made sense of the world as a young person. I'm a person of mixed backgrounds – so my mother is from the Philippines and immigrated to Canada from there. And my father is of settler French Canadian descent.



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Tairone Bastien: And I always, kind of lived between two worlds. I feel like I grew up always feeling like an outsider and someone who was kind of on the outside looking in. And that kind of experience growing up, you're kind of always looking for others who sort of feel the same way you do or see the world the way you do.

And I found that in art, I found that when I went to galleries, I was looking at sort of people who are taking risks and sitting on the outside, looking in and making sense of the world. And I really, I really just kind of fell in love with art making and the process of putting on exhibitions and sort of, the conversations that were taking place in the art world, were taking – you know, I felt, weren't really taking place anywhere else at that time.

And I think it also played into my intense curiosity. I feel like that has sort of been my superpower all along, which is this sort of just intense curiosity about the world. And I feel like I'm always someone who is looking to be in a place where they are out of place and feeling uncomfortable and feeling sort of that desire to know and to always learn.

And so I never feel like I'm coming from a place of being an expert. I feel like I'm always coming at this from a place of learning. And so I feel like when I have followed my path as a curator, I've always just followed my curiosity. And that took me first to New York, you know, my early career was developed there. And I was really looking for outsiders, and I found that within the performance art world. So I actually began as a performance art curator, working with artists who weren't really working within the institutions at that time.

I think nowadays you see performance art a lot in museums and galleries. And at the time, you know, this is the early 2000s, um, it was just starting to bubble up. And I really wanted to be at that, you know, on the ground floor of that, and really work with artists through that process of legitimation and getting themselves recognised by the wider art world.

So that's, that's sort of where I began, and that curiosity eventually took me beyond North America because I also really felt like, you know, New York likes to think that it's the centre of the world. And in fact, it's of course not, right? It's on the periphery of so many other worlds.

And I really wanted to again, see the world from the outside. And so that, I began by looking at the work of Hassan Sharif, who is the person who brought, you know, conceptual art, performance art to the gulf and was really curious about what conceptual art looks like from that perspective.

And that's sort of how, well, one of the reasons why I ended up in the gulf, sort of wanting to work with artists that I wasn't seeing in places like New York. And when I found Alserkal – or they found me, we found each other. When we got together, you know, they were looking for someone to start a kind of non-profit arm of the organisation – which was to kind of really just support artists through the commissioning of artwork through the establishment of a kind of residency and opportunities for artists in the region.



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Tairone Bastien: And so I kind of just dug in and sort of started off with doing those things for them. And it was really exciting to kind of see that, that take off.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, I want to follow your curiosity a little bit further because I know one of the underlying themes that I've seen in some of your curatorial projects is about the relationship between the human and non-human in our world. And I know that that's a major point of A Feral Commons that was inspired in part at least, by American anthropologist Anna Tsing and the Feral Atlas.

So I wondered if you could just follow your curiosity a little bit, tell us what you found inspiring about the Feral Atlas.

[00:07:43]

Tairone Bastien: You know, so to follow that thread of curiosity, and also sort of looking at things from the perspective of the outsider – I mean, in some ways the ultimate outsider is, are the non-human or the more than human beings that exist on our periphery, right?

So if we think about this idea of the worlds that we create, we often create them, we always create them for the human and in human-centred ways. And, and you know when we're thinking about where we're at in the world, and of course, there's the million dollar word, the Anthropocene, that gets thrown around a lot.

But this notion of anthropogenic climate change is very real. And I think that, you know, we are creating a world in which we are at the centre and all of this other sort of stuff is at the periphery. And that is actually what is doing us in I feel, you know, sort of not understanding the deep connections that we have with the natural world and that support us.

I mean, you know, all of this conversation about, you know, traveling to the moon or setting up colonies on Mars. I think you know, what hubris this is, right? Because we basically have to recreate everything from the air that we breathe, to the food that we eat on these different planets.

We're not created by those planets. We're created by this one, and we're deeply embedded within it. And so when I was thinking about what kinds of projects I wanted to pursue sort of after the biennial – and the biennial itself, the Toronto Biennial, which you had mentioned had certainly a lot of the kind of environmental and the more than human aspects and concerns were embedded within that.

You know, I wanted to continue this thread and sort of think through what is public art, right? Like when we think about public art today, we're often thinking about artwork that is or at least traditionally, we were thinking about artwork that in some ways services a human community, that sometimes commemorates things within, you know, the things within that community or within the history of that community, or which beautifies a location, draws people to that location.



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Tairone Bastien: Those are kind of the drivers, I think, for a lot of public art. But I wanted to rethink that and think, well, what would we create if we were thinking about not just the human, but what if we were thinking about the more than human?

What kinds of spaces or a public art would we want to make? And how would we approach it differently, right? So, I mean, public art – if you think about it, you know, it sucks up a lot of money, it sucks up a lot of energy, it sucks up a lot of material and sort of directs it to something that is ultimately useless, right? If we think about, you know, what public art does. Sure, you know, it can beautify a place and it can feel symbolic.

It can sort of be a mnemonic device and sort of spark memory and spark, inspire people, but ultimately, when we think about it environmentally, it's useless. It just sits there. It doesn't engage with the ecologies of the location – in its building and its making doesn't often take the site and its surrounding sort of, you know, ecologies into account.

And so I wanted to kind of rethink that. And so that's sort of where A Feral Commons developed from. And of course, and you mentioned Anna Tsing and I mean, I've been following the work of Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway and sort of this whole school of kind of American anthropology that I think is really helping us reframe the terms upon which we think about the human place in the world. Um, and to think about these sort of interspecies collaborations and the ways in which we actually are very much reliant upon the things that we, you know, the beings that we often don't think about and consider. And Anna, with her book, you know, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, and then with this new project that she did with a group of other scholars and artists, a *Feral Atlas*, has proposed, you know, or they propose this idea of a reconsideration of the feral.

And I guess when we hear the term feral. We are often, it often has a lot of negative connotations right? It often engenders notions of wildness or of something that is not supposed to be in the place that it is, that needs to be controlled, that's sort of overtaking a particular place that is unwanted.

And it's a reconsideration of the feral in terms of thinking about it in a way that understands the feral as being independent of human desire, of human interest, of human control.

[00:12:21]

Stephanie Fortunato: Independent or interdependent?

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Tairone Bastien: Well, good point. Yes, definitely interdependent, but acting as independent actors within that interdependency. Right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Um, they have agency.

Tairone Bastien: The feral is the thing that escapes that domestication. And so, when we think about that that escape, right, or that ferality of that plant or animal or whatever it is, if we retune ourselves to understanding that that is an independent actor.



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Tairone Bastien: That they are actually making choices that we don't understand, that are sometimes not in our best interest, but to appreciate that those interests and those desires are part of what it means to live in an interdependent environment.

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MUSIC BREAK

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Stephanie Fortunato: I think that's maybe why, too, the work like a Feral Atlas or even A Feral Commons as we're exploring here, it has to be this reframing and reconsideration, has to be interdisciplinary.

I think artists do have a particular point of view and a particular role, leadership role, to play within this larger conversation of reframing and reconsidering human's relationship with the world around us and with the more than human.

How do you see that? How do you see the artist's relationship and how they can uniquely contribute to this larger conversation?

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Tairone Bastien: Well, I mean, I do feel that artists have an ability to, you know, because they're so visually literate, because they're so capable of creating imaginaries, world, storytelling, that they have an ability to reach us in ways that I think science on its own, can't. At least, to the general public.

I feel that art draws people in, and directs us towards things that are in a way, difficult to understand or to grasp. I mean, even what we're talking about in terms of the more than human and thinking about, you know, the agency of plants and animals. I mean, I think that in some ways, for some, these are difficult concepts to kind of wrap your head around and artists can find sort of beautiful, elegant, poetic ways of just showing us how that is possible.

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Stephanie Fortunato: On that point, we have a couple of clips from the artists who are participating in this project and their response to the question: "What does the feral commons mean to you?" as you posed it to them. So we're just going to take a listen here for a second.

[00:15:02]

Io Makandal: So, firstly, I really love the term. What it means to me is, because I do think I, I work a lot with the commons in mind.

And I kind of see the spaces that I work in with, you know, these liminal, urban ecologies is in some ways the feral commons. And you know, the way that I understand feral, is that it's in relation to the more than human. As humans, I feel like we need to become more feral, we need to become more wild and defiant of this kind of heavy structure that we've put ourselves in, you know, at this point in the world.



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Io Makandal: And I think what feral means in relation to this project is: collaborating with the more than human, to really consider those elements in the project – whether it's materially or, you know, in the environment on the site.

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Muhannad Shono: Feral is necessary. Feral is nature. There is no restriction of the natural. Whether that is of natural life, of human natural desires to create, to imagine, to live differently, to be independent, to be collective, to manifest new ways of thinking and of the imagination. There is no place for attempts to restrict the growth of ideas and the free flow of change. Feral for me is creative rebellion and acts of creative resistance.

So A Feral Commons was very interesting and echoes themes in my work because I'm quite concerned with individual action and ways of thinking that will result in this duplication and multiplication and coagulation of ideas that become doctrine, that become rigid understandings of narratives and ways of thinking.

And what's interesting about the proposition of the project – but also the outcome we're going after is, here we can show how individual action can result in something communal, something collective, something that has a true impact if we allow ourselves to observe and listen.

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Camille Chedda: I get the idea of the commons being like a space of gathering and then feral. Initially, it was kind of throwing me off. I mean, I get it in terms of this wildness and this lack of domestication or, I mean, when you go into my space, you get the sense of, okay, this is what feral means. It's how the plant life has just kind of literally just grown on top of everything and it, it didn't take it very long to happen because there was new junk in the space.

And, within maybe a week, you saw the vine kind of covering them. So, I get this gross, the idea of this gross, that, has to do with feral. But, at the same time, I was kind of conflicted about it because of the connotation of the word, having to do with undomesticated, maybe even savage.

So thinking about the word in the location and having this kind of back and forth with the community, it's kind of, I don't know if I have to broach it with a kind of sensitivity because of the idea about, you know, we are in the third world – what does feral mean in the context of the people who live here and live in the community, and also the fact that the police is kind of barricading or has to be in the space to control crime.

So, yeah, I guess I'm kind of going back and forth between this historical idea of who we are in this country, in Caribbean, and what that word might mean, but I know it's also applicable to this growth of this land, or this environment that's there.

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Stephanie Fortunato: So, I think we hear in that the ways in which artists are thinking about getting into this thematic, and I wondered about your own artist selection process, how that influences the artists that you've invited to participate in this project.



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Stephanie Fortunato: I should say there are three artworks on three continents, and I hope that you'll share a little bit about the artists who have been selected to work on this project.

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Tairone Bastien: Absolutely. It was really important that we work with local artists in each location. And to do that, I really needed local intelligence and partners and collaborators who could help at least bring a short list of artists together that would fit the thematic that would already be in this space.

I think it was really important that we not commission an artist who isn't already thinking along these lines because, you know, that can sometimes be the case and I don't think that does anybody any favours because I feel like what we're doing is so invested in research and in sort of a deep thinking and a rethinking of the terms of public art that, you know, we wanted somebody who was going to be thinking alongside us and sort of guiding us through their work and through their practice.

The way I wanted us to approach these works was as research, right. As a getting to know and understand both the ecologies of a place. But, and when I think, when I talk about ecologies, I'm talking about the mix of the natural world and the infrastructures that exist that humans have brought to that space.

You know, all of these sort of interactions between the human and the more than human, and the built environment and the natural environment are things that we, I wanted to sort of think about with the artists.

And so anyways that became a key determining factor.

But it was also really important to work with artists that um, well, could, could take on such a big challenge, right? I mean I think that, um, it's really important finding-

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Stephanie Fortunato: These are three very distinct geographies, right?

Tairone Bastien: Exactly.

Stephanie Fortunato: These are very unique socio-politically, and yeah the climates, yeah, so how are you working with that?

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Tairone Bastien: The three projects are very different. Each artist fully embedded or invested within the communities that they're operating within. So when we're thinking about the work in Kingston – and this is the work commissioned by Kingston Creative in Kingston, Jamaica.

The artist that we selected to work with is named Camille Chedda.



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Tairone Bastien: And Camille is someone who is a practicing artist living in Jamaica, teaches at the art college in Kingston and is someone who has really sort of been thinking about community, and maybe not so much the ecologies in terms of the natural environment.

I feel like that actually, this is sort of a project that is bringing that or weaving that into her practice. But really thinking about the impact of development and of the, sort of the politics of life in Kingston, in Jamaica, and across the Caribbean more broadly.

And I feel like her work, because it's a project that's taking place in a park, which has fallen into disuse. You know, it was sort of locked to the public, sort of people weren't really given access. The plants uh, had sort of overtaken, there was a lot of junk had been thrown in the park. But that park was actually designed for a community that sits adjacent to it, and that community wasn't accessing it.

And so this, her work is really invested in bringing that community back to the park and sort of providing a kind of invitation. And also not only that, but also places of rest and places that actually are necessary for that community to thrive.

[00:23:23]

Stephanie Fortunato: That's great. We do have a clip of Camille telling that story.

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Camille Chedda: Right, so when I initially went to the space, I just took pictures of plants that were in the space and just did a Google image search of what this plant is.

And it told me that this was the Antigonon Leptopus plant, and it's also popularly known as Mexican Creeper. So based on that Google information, it also said that it's good bee food, basically.

But then I was talking to my mother about this project and was saying to her that I would be interested in potentially doing this apiary. And she's a farmer, she has an apiary, so I was trying to get her feedback on what she thought about it, but she was kind of like, okay, I don't know what this plant is that you're talking about, but the next time you go to the site, if you see bees circling the plant, then it's definitely good for the bees.

And that's what I did. I went to the site and there are tons of bees everywhere on the plant. But then yeah after that, I showed her a video of the bees kind of circling and she's like, oh, rice and peas bush. Okay. Yeah, of course. I mean, even driving around Kingston, you see the plant on these vines and you're going to see bees circling it. I mean, I think, yeah I've been talking to members of the community. because I also didn't want to be very imposing in their space because I'm not from the community. I'm not even from Kingston originally.

So how do I feel about going into this space and making some sort of change? So the conversations are very important to be had. There is a mural nearby the community, actually the same gully that is behind the park like one street over, and I think that's also a product of the Kingston creative initiatives to insert murals into downtown Kingston.



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Camille Chedda: And in the park itself, there's, I don't want to say they're murals, but they're small paintings honouring the heights man from the community.

And then there is the metal work that was done by Joseph Manning that is metalwork that you will see in Kingston, but I feel like it's taken to another level in terms of some of the patterns that he's created with the metalwork and the painting on the surface of the metalwork.

And there's also this thing that they've said is a Christmas tree. It's a metal Christmas tree in the park, that they use to decorate for Christmas celebrations. Those are the things around the space that I would say are insertions of art. Also across the street too, people used to just dump their garbage in that particular space across the road.

So then they beautified the space. They made, you know, like this little bench and seating area, they painted a mural. So the garbage stopped there, but then the garbage moved across the street onto where I'm currently working. So, I feel like people may think that art and murals are just beautification projects and, I hope that this project is gonna really show that art is, it's not just that we're gonna paint the metal bright colours and that's gonna mean that that's the art. I feel like, they will be a part of the art. They will learn new ways of appreciating the space that they work in, that they live in.

And yeah, I'm hoping that this project will expand that knowledge of what is art, and how to take care of the space by thinking about the space as an extension of yourself almost.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Let's move on to Johannesburg and the work of Io Makandal. How does this installation for A Feral Commons fit in with Io's body of work?

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Tairone Bastien: So of the artists, I would say that Io is someone who was really invested in working with plants in ways that allowed those plants to be collaborators, and co-creators of the work. Io also, over the course of the last five years, has been working alongside an organisation called Water for the Future, which is an NGO based in Johannesburg that is looking to revitalise the banks of the Jukskei River. And the Jukskei is one of the very few rivers in Johannesburg.

It is an extremely polluted waterway, and in many places throughout the city, it is completely cut off from its environmental surroundings. And so in the area that she's working in right now, it's basically a culvert – which means that the waterway has been straightened. There, you know, it has cement walls on both sides that run about four metres down. And it's completely cut it off from the riparian zone alongside it.

And the rivers are not just the water, right?

Rivers are sort of collaborative beings. They exist in deep connection with the animals and plants along their banks to support the health of the river, to support the quality of the water, to take up the excess water when it floods.



[00:28:50]

Tairone Bastien: So the Water for the Future is looking to do a number of things. Well, firstly clean up the refuse that's being dumped in the river, as well as bring in a lot of the plants that would have normally grown along the banks of the river to create a healthier zone or barrier along its sides. And lo has been working with them and developing these sort of very subtle but beautiful art projects along the way.

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Io Makandal: In general, my, my art practice is interested in these kind of liminal spaces that make up the urban ecology.

So the nature that is in relationship to the human environment. And you know, if we can think of nature as this separate thing, or we often define nature as that, as this thing that is separate from us. Whereas in fact, that's an erroneous idea that we are of nature and nature is of us, you know, so we are entangled with these spaces.

So I'm really interested in how, urban ecology is informed by a human relationship and a human relationship is formed by nature. So I think the starting point for this commission and the idea was around the site itself, which is the Jukskei River that runs along the Victoria Yards precinct.

Over the years, I've been quite invested in that site, in that space. So I really wanted to come up with something that engages the river and engages the river as an agent in itself. It is one of the largest waterways in Johannesburg and it's part of the South African watershed, you know, the rivers that flow on the side of the Jukskei river – any kind of stream that springs goes into the Jukskei and then connects to the Crocodile river and then eventually lands up in the Indian ocean in Xai-Xai in Mozambique.

So, you know, when you think of the river in that sense that it springs up in this urban environment and is immediately kind of channelled underground. And then where the site is, where we will be working just nearby there is the Daylight Point – which means it's the first moment that the river sees daylight.

And the concern there is that, because it is largely at that point invisible in the urban fabric and in the kind of urban layout, it's been neglected and, you know, mismanaged, and used as a dumping ground and to dump a lot of waste and a lot of sewage lines even connect to the river and a lot of grey water is being dumped into the river.

So the river is very sick at the moment. So there's a lot of community and civic initiation to repair the river and to rebuild and remember the relationship to the river in this kind of urban environment and the urban context. So there is an organisation that is responsible for a lot of that.

And that's Water for the Future who I will be partnering with to assist me with the site engagement and engaging with the community. And the communities that live nearby and along the site are largely poor community, low income community, and a lot of unemployment, and government housing. So the area is under that kind of economic stress.



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Io Makandal: And, the idea is that with this project and also with what Water for the Future is doing, it always considers the community around and would like to collaborate with the community to help the community to view this water source, this river, as an asset to the space that they're living in. That it can be a space where the community – and particularly the children, where they can enjoy the space as a natural green belt, where they can connect to nature and where they can develop their relationship to nature.

And so with this project, what my hope and my aim is that we can develop aspects of the work with the children so that they can participate in the making of it.

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MUSIC BREAK

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Stephanie Fortunato: And Tairone, that gets to some of the guidelines that you sort of set out for these public art installations as you started to think about what did responsible public art commissioning look like. What are some of the criteria that you were thinking about there?

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Tairone Bastien: Well, certainly you know, as stated, working locally was very important. And when I mean locally, I mean, we literally look what's next door, right? What is within the neighbourhood? What expertise, knowledge, and materials can we access, you know, within a close radius of the project?

And that is in keeping with this notion of ecologies, right? I think that ultimately what these artists are doing are creating works that are going to be integrated into their sites. And so, thinking about the locality of materials is really important.

The other aspect of this, is thinking about work that basically has its ultimate end in mind. So, are these works going to be permanent? I mean, ideally, yes, right? Ideally, there is a permanence to them but within that, can these things also follow a natural life cycle, right? So not, you know, I don't want permanence for permanence sake, because sometimes permanence can be very unsustainable. Right, we think about the cost of preservation, the cost of upkeep, the cost of all of the things that we do, to, to preserve things indefinitely.

And I think what I love about these projects is that in some ways, the degradation of them is part of it.

[00:35:23]

Stephanie Fortunato: I do want to talk about Muhannad Shono's work on Alserkal Avenue and the urban ecologies that, where he has found a place to sort of intervene and the story of the tree.

I was hoping you would tell us the story of the tree.



[00:35:38]

Tairone Bastien: Yes, well, so Muhannad Shono's project for Alserkal Avenue uh, it really stems from a site visit that we did together when we were walking around – first, Alserkal and then the surrounding community.

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Muhannad Shono: And we stumbled upon these little unexpected ecologies under AC units that seemed uh, quite enchanting. Initially, they were invisible, I think, and then they were waiting for us to stumble upon them. And they kind of spoke quite clearly to what this project needed to be.

There was like a moment of realisation, a eureka and understanding that this was something that spoke perfectly to the concept and uh, these discoveries we stumbled upon were unexpected, especially in Al Quoz district where the avenue sits. It's a quite industrial part of town and hyper exaggerates this lack of plant life that is already quite scarce throughout Dubai, because of the climate and the nature of the region that it sits in. The whole area seemed to be quite arid when it came to natural urban life.

So Alserkal Avenue, the cultural district, is quite dense in its urban planning, like we thought it was quite cluttered when we went. And even those attempts to introduce plant life seemed like it was forced upon and competing with vehicle traffic, pedestrian traffic areas to just sit.

So it seemed like it was just not coagulating together into something that felt natural. And when we went for our walkabout around the Al Quoz district or the neighbourhood, the wider neighbourhood, we stumbled upon these AC ecologies that existed outside of, on the outside facade of almost not welcomed in, to the spaces where we dwell and that was echoed in Alserkal Avenue where the inside of the avenue seems like it could not, no longer accommodate anything natural, even if you wanted to. There was a competition on the inside for functional space, activity space, programming space, retail space.

Where was their space for the natural?

So walking around, much like we did, we realised that the outside facade of Alserkal Avenue had these unclaimed plots of land that were not zoned for an urban planning of the wider district. And they were almost like these nomads' land that seemed like they, you know, they spoke to us and we realised that this was the place for something feral to take shape.

And of course there was this unique tree that existed within Alserkal Avenue, which was one of the only examples of a thriving natural plant life that was situated between the old and the new development of Alserkal and uh, seemed to be thriving despite its unintentional existence.

It wasn't planned for, it wasn't part of the urban planning of the avenue. It wasn't part of the planning of the cultural district, yet there it was. And it was behaving in ways that were uncalled for in a way, and it was causing havoc and reaching deep into the piping system, and even breaking through the foundations of nearby warehouses.



[00:39:25]

Muhannad Shono: And the story around the tree and this outcry over it's both the damage it was doing, but also kind of community uprising against the idea of cutting it down and removing it, was also a big story that spoke to this human need for the natural to exist despite its potential disruption of urban space.

[00:39:53]

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, it's so illustrative of why nature is important to cities and, and, you know, why we need to do what we can to make sure that people have access to natural elements, even in the most urban of environments.

What I think is amazing about all of these projects is the way that the artists are really engaging with the vernacular cultural landscapes and the way that these installations will help us to see this historical and social context in new ways. The way it really invites the viewer or the audience to participate in the conversation about sustainability, a really big conversation.

Tairone, I know you've asked the artist this question and so I'm going to put it to you knowing that it's a big question, but:

What do you hope for these projects long term?

How do you hope that these projects will have a transformative impact on our conversation and our relationship with sustainability? And what does that even mean?

[00:40:58]

Tairone Bastien: Ooh, that's a big question.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs)

Tairone Bastien: Um, I feel like these projects will be successful if they have a local impact. So I think first and foremost, these projects have to make sense locally. You know, I'd love it if these, if these projects get adopted by the communities that they're out there to respond to and serve.

So with Camille's project, if the community actually does use the park more and use the space that she's created for gathering commemoration or even just rest and relaxation, like, I think that that would be an really important outcome of this. The same thing for lo's project – if it brings, if it invites conversation about these questions and these concerns and supports the work of Water for the Future. Because of course, Water for the Future, these NGOs, will continue to do this work to try to revitalise the river. And this is sort of just one piece of that puzzle.

And then, you know, when it comes to Shono's project, I feel like, what he's uncovered or is considering, is this untapped source of water in the region. This idea of AC ecologies of, you know, a place that is water scarce and is always looking for new sources of water, but is doing it in the most ecologically unsound ways, whether, you know, desalination plants are, you know, are really the main way that you know, freshwater is created or water is created in the region.



<https://www.thethreebells.net/episodes/s4e1>

[00:42:21]

Tairone Bastien: And yet you've got these ACs producing enormous amounts of water, that are, have yet to be untapped. And so, you know, I would hope that, you know, a project like his, leads to more study of this potential. So I think locally that's sort of what I hope for.

In terms of globally, I mean, I'm really interested – and I know the GCDN, you know, and all the partners are interested in, is really thinking about new methods of commissioning. And I think that this process of co-commissioning is very different than what we would normally do in this place.

So when we think about the term co-commission, we often think about you know, multiple organisations and different places, you know, in the world or within a particular region putting money towards a singular project by an artist, that then travels from place to place, right? So six months here, six months there, what have you. And then, you know, that work may end up back at the artist studio or who knows what happens to that work.

And that's fine. But if we think about the ecological impact right, of that kind of work, it's enormous. I mean, just the transportation alone you know, has a huge impact.

And so this co-commission where we're actually sharing knowledge and resources and expertise across these different districts to create localised projects. Projects that are extremely local, and yet share a concept, share an intent, share an ethic. And I think that's really important because it invites, I think, greater collaboration and interest at the same time, doesn't have as bad of an ecological footprint.

[00:44:05]

Stephanie Fortunato: And I know that's where we should leave this, but I do want to acknowledge a little bit about how this project has been complicated by its approach. And I just wonder if you could speak a little bit about the process itself. You know, some of the learnings for yourself and the artists, and certainly the districts and GCDN itself.

The potential, I think working in this way to be really transformative is great, but it's really complicated on the ground to make these projects happen and to coordinate that cohesively.

So if you could speak a little bit about the process and some of the lessons, I think our listeners would probably find that fascinating.

[00:44:45]

Tairone Bastien: Well, I mean, absolutely. You know, we're talking about three very different places in the world with very different dynamics, very different processes. We're talking about public artworks that require a lot of different approvals, right?

You need, you know, city authorities and other authorities to approve things. And sometimes that's difficult just if you're working in one location to, let alone three.



[00:45:13]

Tairone Bastien: And so when you think about timelines, I mean, how do you align three timelines that are, are so dependent on not just the artists and the commissioners, but all of these other partners that are involved and basically have a lot of control over what happens and when things happen.

So I think one of the greatest lessons of this, is adaptability. And I think that we have to learn from feral beings to operate a little bit ferally and to understand, when you're working in this way, you have to give up some of that control. And you have to be able to listen to other people, to understand that your needs, that your drivers aren't the same drivers as others and then to find compromise.

Stephanie Fortunato: Right.

Tairone Bastien: And so adaptability and compromise, I think, are really important. And I'm really happy with how the partners in this have done that, have really sort of listened to each other and are forgiving and understanding of one another's. When somebody runs into an impasse, well, we all have to, you know, absorb the, what that means. We all need to kind of adjust what we do in response to that.

And that's, that's the way ecologies work, right?

[00:46:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: Tairone, thank you so much for being on The Three Bells podcast.

Tairone Bastien: Thank you. Thank you so much. It was uh, it was a joy.

[00:46:32]

THEME MUSIC

Stephanie Fortunato: Special thanks for today's episode to Tairone Bastien and the Three Bells production team, Greg Scarpella and Alyssa Cartwright. To Io, Camille, and Muhannad, who we heard from today, and all of the partners who are involved in the making of A Feral Commons.

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. Our theme music was created by Artwave Studio, who also sound mix our episodes. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our show, help your friends find us by giving us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

For The Three Bells, I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato. Until next time, take good care, make good choices. Onwards.

