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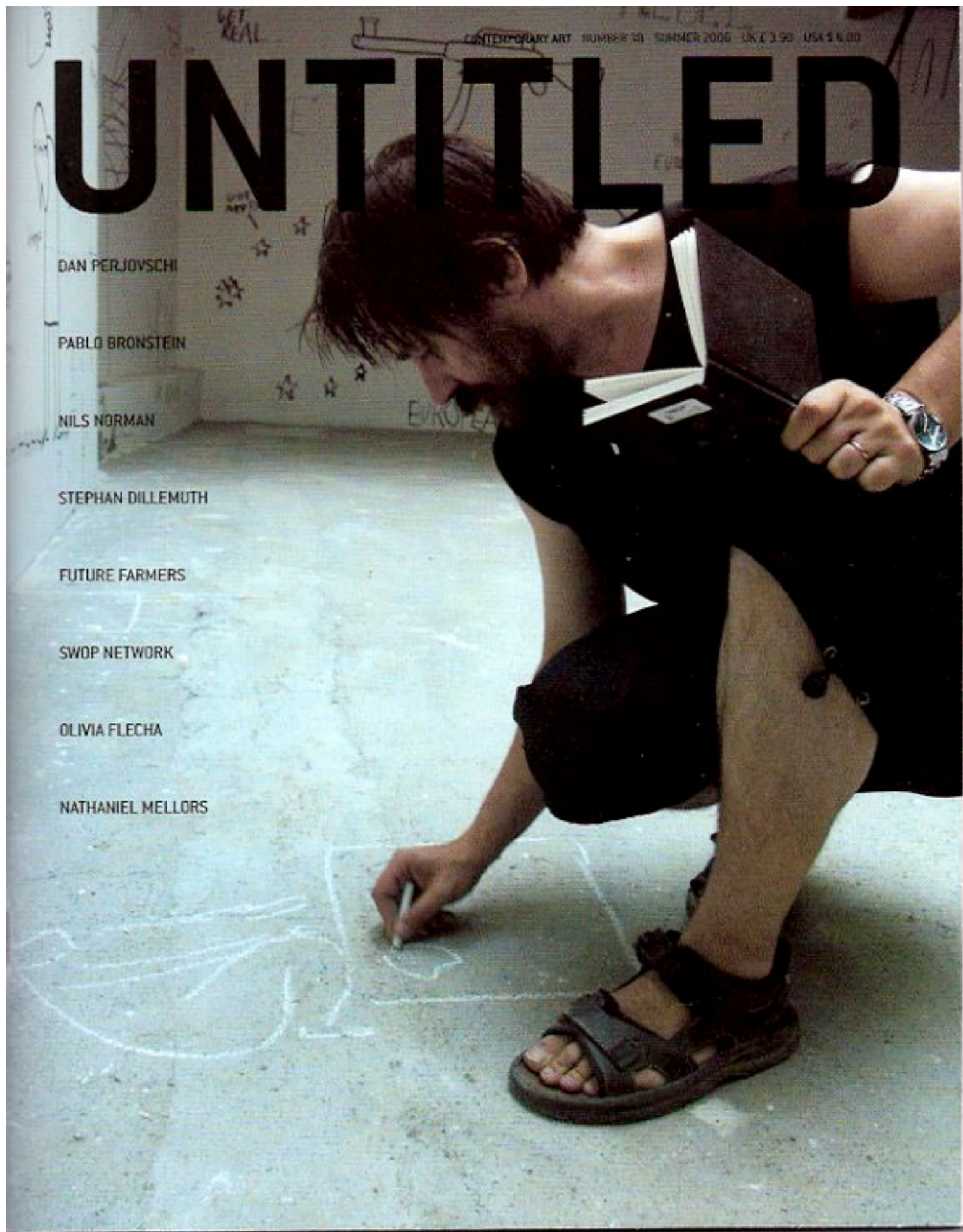
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FUTURE FARMERS

SWOP NETWORK

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NO. 38 SUMMER 2006

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Cover: Dan Perjovschi, *Sans Papier et Sans Titre*, wall drawing 2005. 'I Still Believe in Miracles', Convent de Cordeliers, ARC, Musée D'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Marc Damage
Inside Cover: Courtesy Future Farmers

ECOLOGY 2.0

"You don't need a Ph.D. in linguistics", write Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "to see that there's something funny about the concept of 'the environment'. If the concept includes humans, everything is 'environmental', and it has little use other than being a poor synonym to 'everything'. If the concept excludes humans, it is scientifically specious (not to mention politically suicidal)."¹ Like Shellenberger and Nordhaus (authors of the incendiary 2004 report 'The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World'), the overlapping collaborative groups Free Soil and Futurefarmers approach their art-facing community of activism and design with a similar innate suspicion that a literal-minded approach to antiquated concepts of 'the environment' and 'nature' isn't up to comprehending the ecological, political, social and economic emergencies of our time. With a trust in the openness of art, and the problem-solving tool of design, their practices aim to act as a trigger for 'cultivating consciousness'.

Take Free Soil's *F.R.U.I.T.* (2005), presented at 'Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art', organised by the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, one of a spate of recent stateside exhibitions dealing with the ecological imperative in recent practice.² Standing for Fruit Route InTeface, (or Following Routes Using Itinerant Technologies, or Fruit Reveals Unexpected Instant Truths, et. al.) the *F.R.U.I.T.* project delved into the year-round journeys taken by the humble orange from tree to supermarket shelf and the knock-on social and ecological penalties incurred. Alongside the project's website and campaign, 'The Right to Know!', the group produced quirky paper fruit wrappers which doubled as fact sheets about food miles and alternatives in urban gardening which could be downloaded and disseminated "through the food chain by

piggybacking on oranges". The initiative's gallery presence—an internet terminal with a mirror of the website, digital prints, and a chic 'local market' stall with wrapped surrogate oranges—was the project's hardware.

As well as acting as a resource and reading-area for the project, *F.R.U.I.T.*'s website—likewise other internet content for Free Soil and Futurefarmer projects—hosts a game-cum-chatroom. The 'demonstration' features protester/gardener/radical-flower-pot-person avatars that one can adopt and sloganeer within a collective sit-in outside a 'city hall'. Such reprisals of a preceding generations strategies through distributed play, though still operating within a framework of progressivism, is typical of Free Soil's acknowledgement of the heritage of direct action. And Free Soil is certainly not afraid to embrace the sense that, to borrow a slogan from a Pablo León de la Barra-curated exhibition, 'to be political it has to look nice'. Amy Franceschini, the founder of Futurefarmer's San Francisco-based design studio in 1995 and one of the four core members of Free Soil, which has been operating since 2004, comes from a new media design background. Her Futurefarmers commercial work with collaborator Josh On, which has included designs and consultancy for the likes of AT+T, Nokia and MTV, rode out the dot com boom and bust of the 1990s to settle into a programme of art projects, steady client work (and an international artist-in-residence programme) with a friendly, seductive graphic identity of goggle-eyed avatars and leafy lettering, brocade-like organic elements and busy butterflies and birds. This accessible design language functions equally as kooky animated mobile phone graphics, for example, and as an interface between art projects that promote sustainability and positive change and a broad internet-savvy public. Of course the values that apply to Futurefarmer's commercial design work and its art-led practices and the public projects under the banner of Free Soil aren't exclusive to each. In fact, the coexistence of these streams of work and the deliberately porous host of websites, projects, slogans, workshops, blogs, campaigns, surveys and people more-or-less under the umbrella of Futurefarmers and Free Soil (itself a collaboration between members based in the US, Denmark, Belgium and Australia), seems to rely at least in part on the frisson between the 'profit' and the 'not-for-profit', '.com' and '.org', the 'capitalist' and the 'anticapitalist' genesis of the activities which comprise them. The necessity of charting this ethical terrain—with its attendant associations of guilt assuagement—is perhaps as much a symptom of the 'social turn' in

art practice as it is the 'sustainability turn' in environmentalism. Futurefarmer's ongoing *Gardening Superfund Sites* initiative (2005–) is particularly pertinent in this respect as it focuses on the local and historical particulars of the global technology that allows the group to function, namely the computer industry.

Despite the widespread perception that digital technology is a somehow lab-coat-white, 'clean' industry, the facts couldn't be further from the truth. The area known as Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of California, as Futurefarmer's *Gardening Superfund Sites* project explores, contains the highest concentration of contaminated lands designated by the US Environmental Protection Agency as cause for special action. Research into these twenty-nine sites currently involves a native seed planting workshop and 'biodegradable parachute workshop' taking place this spring with the aim of providing increased provision for butterflies at the sites, and the development of a biodiesel bus tour in the summer. The projects unearth a global narrative of e-waste and the highly toxic chemicals used in the production of computer components. Moreover California's undistinguished ecological history, from the devastating effects of the Gold Rush and mining economies of the late 1800s through to the orchard and cannery industries that followed, demonstrates that the exploitation of natural resources and immigrant workers are certainly not new phenomena.

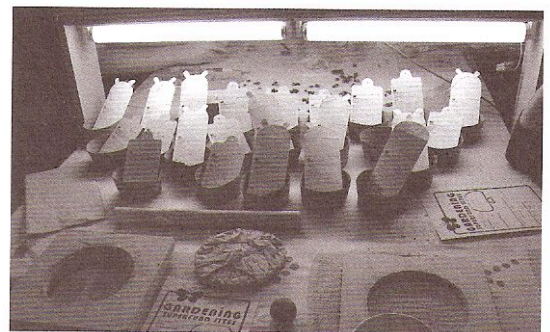
In common with all of Free Soil and Futurefarmers' projects, the Superfund project has an unabashedly activist social agenda doused with liberal use of humour and play that balances politics with formal innovation. Futurefarmer's *Homeland Security Blanket* (2002) is a prototype for a set of five networked blankets, each wirelessly responding to the US department of Homeland Security's much derided colour-coded system of security threat levels. The blankets have indicator lights and variable heating system that indicates to the user the current alert status and comforts them accordingly. The *DIY Algae/Hydrogen Bioreactor* (2004), a collaboration with Jonathan Meuser of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, equally makes a sculptural form from political psychology—here America's declared addiction to oil—in the shape of an alternative homemade fuel unit. Even more clear in its activist intentions was the action *The Human Knot* (2003). As Futurefarmers website describes, "one month after the United States invaded Iraq, Futurefarmers put out a public call for people to come to the Marin

Headlands to join in a human knot. A human knot starts out with a group of people holding hands in a big circle. People are then asked to get tangled and twisted up without letting go of each others hands. This creates a giant knot of humans wriggling around try to get undone. It becomes quite uncomfortable and demands focus, cooperation and organisation. This knot took almost 33 minutes to untie, but through a peaceful cooperation of all participants, the knot resumed to a circle of people joined by the hands."

As Claire Bishop has discussed in these pages and elsewhere, the proliferation of engaged, collaborative or socially ameliorative practices in recent years, confuses a tradition of the disruptive spirit of the avant-garde, and how we are to assess a project's worth as art.³ A work with applaudable social values, encumbered by guilt about making the 'correct' ethical choice, may yet remain a flatfooted or at best elusive aesthetic success. (Incidentally, the 1957 US Supreme Court definition of obscenity as material with 'no redeeming social value' would condemn many artists as pornographers.) One might reason, yet hardly address the quandary, that an organisation such as Free Soil use art as a discourse amongst others in comprising a practice that is not only aesthetically facing—a similar position, perhaps, to the London-based collective Platform—and so moreover has to negotiate the pitfalls of environmental-social 'Kumbaya'-ism. As Free Soilers Franceschini and Nis Rømer themselves have written, "art does not have to have one aim and that helps us avoid clichéd activist positions. This openness possibility allows for more mobility without constraints of 'right' and 'wrong'. We share a common growing concern about a world that is on the verge of an environmental, military, and economic crises. We are compelled to engage with this reality."⁴

In the realm of collaborative practice, Futurefarmer's and Free Soil's strategic and programmatic 'avant-garde' seems hidden in plain sight. Beyond the tech-head self-reflexivity of so-called 'net art', there is the emerging usability of on-line collaboration in which they exist ("ideally we try and work as a distributed brain", they have written), and the very aesthetic of the accessible, freewheeling interface that they elaborate on: "creating a visual language in our projects is essential", Free Soil have explained, "in a way, it is a sort of domestication of the museum".⁵ Accordingly, the proliferation of so-called 'Web 2.0' behaviours such as social software (Free Soil take their name from offers on the Bay Area-born website Craigslist), blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, and so on, the exemplary collaborative framework that's the open source movement, and the bloom of web application 'mashups' all adumbrate the integrated experience of Free Soil and Futurefarmers: channels where art and community, design and technology, ethics and learning are live on air.

www.futurefarmers.com
www.free-soil.org



Courtesy of Futurefarmers



Courtesy of Futurefarmers

1. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordaus, 'Death Warmed Over', *The American Prospect*, October 2005 (v16, no10), p. 30
2. Free Soil also featured in 'Groundworks: Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art' organised by Grant Kester at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, 2005
3. see Bishop's interview with Oda Projesi in *Untitled*, spring 2005 and 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006.
4. in *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*, ed. Stephanie Smith, SMART Museum of Art, Chicago, 2005, p. 46.
5. *ibid.* p. 46, 51