

Learning from Fungi: A Review of Terrain Biennial

BY RYAN FAZIO | OCTOBER 18, 2023



Serena JV Elston, "Abjecting MCM." Love Blooms Here Plaza, 3601 West Douglas, Chicago/Photo: Courtesy Terrain Biennial

Terrain Biennial 2023 is a month-long public art exhibition that takes place in yards, porches, even rooftops throughout Chicago and across the globe. This celebration of public art and the connections it fosters traces its roots to the Oak Park porch of the late artist, teacher and community catalyst Sabina Ott. This year's exhibition kicked off with a collaborative block party alongside the Chicago Sukkah Design Festival. The event brought together community members of all ages at James Stone Freedom Square in the North Lawndale neighborhood, fostering a vibrant atmosphere filled with dance, song, screen-printing, and even a cake-walk to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot and the sixth iteration of the Terrain Biennial.



Gina Lee Robbins, "Soft Network," 5752 North Milwaukee, Chicago/Photo: Sara Peak Convery, courtesy Terrain Biennial

This year's theme, "mycelium connection," is an amalgam of the previous year's themes. In 2021, artists created works inspired by the prompt of keeping in touch; while in 2019, the theme asked artists to reflect on the terrain and topology of their environments. Now, emerging from the depths of the lockdown years and with climate change at the forefront of our minds, artists have produced works that delve into the connections among humans and our environment. As a networked public art project, Terrain Biennial is uniquely positioned to explore the theme of mycelium connections. Seen and unseen networks of the program link artists to one another, to the public, and engage them with deep ecological commitments around the world, encapsulating the organization's ethos.



Eva Neuharth "Tree's Drawing." 3335 West Douglas, Chicago/Photo: courtesy Terrain Biennial

The Terrain Biennial has grown deeper into the heart of the city also expanding its reach across the United States with locations California, Kentucky and Connecticut, to name a few. The project has extended its reach into more international locations as well, with multiple artists participating across India while other international locations include Tanzania, Taiwan, Canada and Wales. A comprehensive map of the event locations can be explored [here](#).

In Chicago, artists have responded to the theme in creative ways. Red Line Services Institute, a local arts and homelessness-focused nonprofit, took a process-driven approach with a collaboratively painted mural led by artist Samantha Caldera. Serena JV Elston's piece "Abjecting MCM" at the Love Blooms Here Plaza at 3601 West Douglas took a more literal approach. Expanding on Elston's existing practice with fungi, they cultivated mushrooms to cover an MCM-style lounge chair. Just down the street at 3335 West Douglas, the artist Eva Neuharth's "Tree's Drawing" also incorporates natural elements. "Tree's Drawing" is a time-based work where drawing utensils affixed to branches create marks across the papers placed below. In Oak Park, Jacqueline Weaver, in collaboration with Michael Cunningham, Alexander Morgan and Katherine Sifers, created "Future Forests" which offers the passerby seeds, plants and seedlings of elm and maple trees as an extension of care between plants and humans.

Surprise and an element of discovery are integral to the event. The idea of stumbling upon an installation in your neighborhood gives the experience a whimsical and delightful feel. Personally, I was delighted to discover unexpected connections in the use of common materials. The use of plants as materials was one such connection, but I also found the use of single-use plastics to be particularly apt. Gina Lee Robbins' "Soft Network," a web of dark wool strung up to support yarn-wrapped plastic waste turned variously dangling forms, hangs in the

windows of 5752 North Milwaukee. Bryan Northup's installation "Webs We Weave—Trails We Leave," displayed at 5555 North Sheridan at the Edgewater Beach Apartments and in Oak Park, also makes use of single-use plastics to draw attention to the impact of plastics on the environment. Similarly, "Our Lady of Perpetual Plastic" by Ann Marie Greenberg, located at 842 Fair Oaks, Oak Park, employs forever plastics to create a faux stained-glass installation.

With its vast multiple locations, this expansive Biennial weaves a rich tapestry of connections, both visible and hidden, familiar and newly discovered.

Terrain Biennial is on view at multiple national and international locations through November 15.