



Beatriz da Costa in Los Angeles

A bird flies by



Photo: Ofstudio, Yubo Dong

Beatriz da Costa " (Un)disciplinary tactics", installation view Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 2024



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Art

Save to Pocket

Beatriz da Costa fitted pigeons with transmitters to alert people to air pollution and surveillance, and designed healing gardens to combat cancer. The artist's dedicated work can now be discovered in LA

A stuffed pigeon stands on a pedestal in the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. The work looks like an exhibit in a natural history museum. If it weren't for the small backpack with a transmitter

strapped to the back of the shimmering gray bird with the shiny button eyes.

The silent animal is a work of art. It is reminiscent of the "PigeonBlog" project, with which Beatriz da Costa conducted research into air pollution in Los Angeles between 2006 and 2008. Friends of the artist modeled the object after the real birds that the artist had buzzing around the Californian metropolis at the time.

The exhibition platform Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) has contributed the extensive oeuvre of da Costa, who died early in 2012, an exciting mix of biology, art and mechanical engineering, to [the Getty Foundation's mega exhibition project "Pacific Standard Time \(PST\)"](#) this fall. In this project, 70 museums in Southern California are showing exhibitions and other coordinated programs in a joint venture. The show, curated by Daniela Lieja Quintanar with Ana Briz, which is being presented at the Municipal Gallery of Los Angeles, embodies the motto of the gigantic PST series like few other exhibitions: "Art & Science Collide" - the collision of art and science.

Swings and cellos take on a life of their own

Born in Berlin in 1974 as the daughter of a German architect and an Indian engineer, Beatriz da Costa studied art in Aix-en-Provence from 1996 after graduating from high school in Hamburg and attending various summer academies. In 1988, at the age of 14, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a malignant tumor of the lymphatic system. The cancer would accompany her throughout her life - and had a decisive influence on her artistic work.

One of her university teachers in France was the sculptor Christian Soucaret. In his biosolar installations, the eco-artist combined mechanics, electronics and computer science. The echo of this influence can be seen in Los Angeles in da Costa's work "Swing": a motorized swing that is placed over a small patch of grass and simulates the movement of a person using it. In 2000, at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, da Costa co-founded the group Technology and Art (TnA), an interdisciplinary, technology-oriented group of women artists.

Her thesis was called "Cello," a robotic sound installation that tunes itself and plays various sequences of simple musical themes. In 2003, she became a professor of computer science at Irvine University in California.

Art as "Bioterrorism"

But Da Costa was no mere technofreak. Her artistic work developed at the time of the "Human Genome Project", which attempted to decode the human genome in the early 2000s, at the time of David Garcia and Geert Lovink's manifesto "The ABC of Tactical Media" - and precisely when US President George W. Bush massively expanded the authorities' surveillance powers after 9/11 with the "US Patriot Act".

The critical dimension of their artistic research was evident in their collaboration with the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). The famous collective of five media-critical artists was founded in 1987 by Steve Kurtz and Dorian Burr. In joint public actions with portable laboratories in the early 2000s, da Costa and CAE drew attention to the health risks and environmental consequences of genetically manipulated organisms.

The authorities soon prosecuted this form of aesthetically motivated civil disobedience as "bioterrorism". A lawsuit against Kurtz, who was arrested in 2004, was only dismissed in 2008. The same form of warning, but also of empowerment of the general public, not just a critical one, was the motive behind da Costa's "PigeonBlog" - her best known work. The project was inspired by Julius Neubronner.

The air is worse for poor people

The German pharmacist and inventor had his carrier pigeon photography patented in 1908. It was unsuccessfully tested for military purposes during World War I. Models can still be seen today in the German Historical Museum in Munich. Da Costa envisioned a conversion of Neubronner's idea "for civilian and activist applications," as can be read [on her website](#).

The "PigeonBlog" not only provided data on general air pollution in the city on the Pacific Ocean, but also differentiated emissions according to social criteria. Low-income districts of the metropolis were more frequently affected. The data was transmitted in real time. Anyone with internet access could access it; the technology is based on DIY technology and interested parties could replicate it for their own purposes at any time via open access.

In addition to these clearly socially critical concerns, da Costa's own illness was always a driving force behind her work, especially in the art themes of health, wellness and *care*, which are booming again today. In 2010, the artist was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic breast cancer, which ultimately cost her her life in New York at the age of 38.

A Garden for People with Cancer

This final struggle produced a series of works that were brought together in a series called "The Cost of Life" (2009–12), which Da Costa worked on until her death. The most impressive is the work "Life Garden," reconstructed in Los Angeles, an indoor healing garden that grows herbs and plants known to help people with cancer.

"Life Garden" contains up to 53 different varieties, from mushrooms and herbs to fruits and vegetables. Signs explain the name, origin, effect on cancer and ways of consuming them. For her work "The Delicious Apothecary", da Costa even wrote an anti-cancer cookbook and gave anti-cancer cooking workshops.

It is part of the artist's tragedy that even the "Anti-Cancer Survival Kit", another work in the series, could no longer help her. The mixed-media installation, recreated by friends based on da Costa's plans, consisted of wooden cooking spoons, cutting boards and a wooden box containing seed packets for oregano, parsley and fennel, a notebook, Himalayan salt, black Lindt chocolate and a USB drive.

Empowering the Public

Da Costa developed the "kit" in collaboration with a group of artists and researchers who all had a personal interest in cancer. They wanted to share alternative and collective research with the public. The work is a symbolic and practical attempt to overcome the social problem of the disease with a new form of solidarity.

Da Costa's work, on view for the first time in Los Angeles in this breadth and in its historical development, is a kind of "artistic research" *avant la lettre*. The presentation helps to trace the

gradual development of an exciting precursor to what has now become an independent field of art, including public funding programs.

Essentially, da Costa was interested in a kind of lay science, "citizen science" for everyday life. In her 2004 essay "[Amateur Science, A Threat After All?](#)" she writes sentences that are even more relevant than they were during her lifetime in times when ecology and economics, science and fake news are threatening and seemingly indistinguishable from one another: "A skilled, autodidactic public can help ensure that scientific policy and initiatives remain in the democratic process and are not just in the hands of specialists and investors."

Beatriz da Costa "(Un)disciplinary tactics", [Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery](#), until January 5, 2025.

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