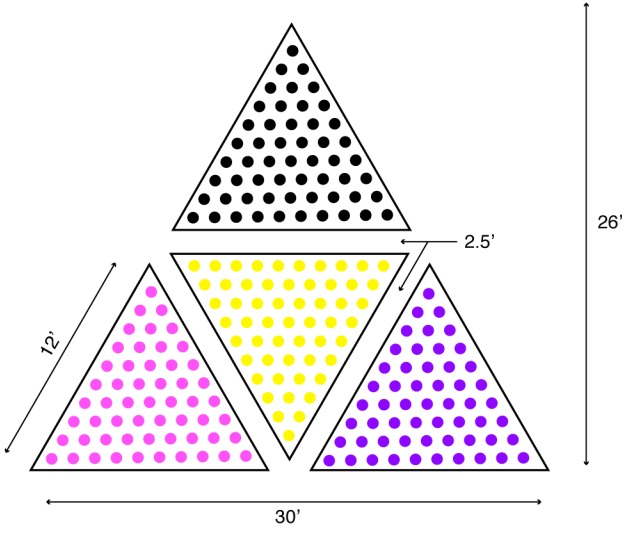

MUTANT CORN
FREEVILLE, NY
2015

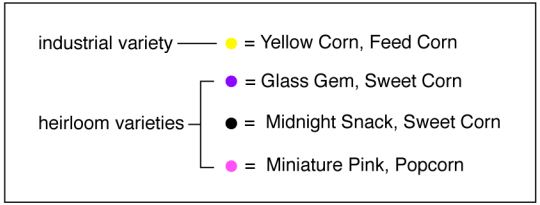
MUTANT CORN

an agricultural art project

a collaboration between Artcodex and the Dacha Project

Freeville, NY; 2015





Mutant Corn is a collaborative agricultural art project between The Dacha Project (Freevile, NY) and ArtCodex (Brooklyn, NY). The project itself is composed of four triangular plots of corn, three planted with colorful heirloom varieties and the center with genetically modified maize (GMM). During the course of the season, we detasseled the center triangle so that the GMM was unable to either cross- or self-pollinate, and could be hybridized by the heirloom varieties instead.

Early on in the development of this project, we were lucky enough to work with corn geneticists, who were able to guide us through the science of breeding corn, while also challenging some of our assumptions about genetic modification. More recently, as we sent out a call for collaborators announcing the start of this project, we met with a concerned neighbor to talk about about inadvertent cross-contamination between our plot and his field. Even while engrossed with the practicalities of planning and constructing the plots, we have had discussions amongst ourselves and helpful volunteers about the reproductive biology of corn, the patenting of seed, the workings of various pesticides and how they function, and as well as radical alternatives to agriculture such as permaculture.

For us, Mutant Corn has been a metaphor, meant to stir up conversation about the politics, genetics and histories about our food. City and country, artist and farmer, scientist and poet, have worked alongside one another to build beds and plant corn, to fertilize and to weed and to water. As we strive towards cultivating the food we want to eat, the community we want to create, and the world we want to leave behind, these are the alliances that will sustain us. Thanks to everyone who participated for making this project happen.

Castanea X

Corn, the killer of continents, is one of the worst enemies of the human future. - J. Russell Smith (1950)

Agriculture today is the single most destructive thing our species does on our planet. - Phillip Rutter (2015)

It can take 500 years to form one inch of soil, and another 3000 years for that soil to accumulate enough organic matter to become fertile. The American "Corn Belt" had an average of at least 18 inches of some of the planet's most nutrient-rich and fertile topsoil, created by thousands of years of fires, ruminants trampling it and migrating birds dropping their waste from seafood eaten on the coast. It's estimated that up to 75% of this soil has already been lost to erosion, a direct result of the practices used in the large-scale farming of corn and other annual crops — tilling the soil to keep it bare, so that nothing that isn't crop lives there, which exposes it to rain that washes it away. What remains has been damaged by exposure to the sun and the application of ever-increasing amounts of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, year after year.

Trees, and other woody perennials, prevent erosion and improve soil health. By being there year-round, trees also maximize photosynthesis, making the most efficient use of the one true energy input that we have on Earth — the sun. Corn fields are only green for a few months of the year, and even at their tallest, the plants don't approach the volume of photosynthetic surface area of a mature chestnut tree.

We chose chestnut, to offer as an alternative to corn, mutant or otherwise, because the chestnut nut is a high-carbohydrate low-oil nut, nutritionally comparable to grains like corn or brown rice. Chestnut trees can produce crop tons per acre comparable to corn. Chestnut trees have the potential to produce staple food, while preserving and enriching soil. A different approach to feeding our species is not only possible, but absolutely necessary.

Castanea is the Latin name for chestnut, and the X stands for hybrida, because our seeds were open-pollinated. Because of this, we don't know the exact parents of these trees, but they are most likely mainly composed of Castanea mollissima (Chinese chestnut,) with some strains of Castanea dentata (American chestnut) and Castanea crenata (Japanese chestnut).

These three trees were direct-seeded in the spring of 2015, and have not been fertilized or weeded.

Katrina Rudmin
Manifold Farm, Enfield NY

VICTORY SEEDS®

Sweet Corn (Maize)
Zea mays
'Midnight Snack'

Days to germination – 5 to 10 days
Days to harvest – 85 days

Soil must be at least 65ºF to germinate. Be patient and do not plant too early or you will waste a lot of seed! Plant in full sun and keep it watered. Corn is a wind-pollinated plant. Plant in blocks several rows wide to ensure full ears.

Sow seeds about ½ to 1 inch deep, 3 to 4 inches apart, in rows spaced 24 to 30 inches apart. Thin to 6 to 12 inches apart.

Very sweet and flavorful, light colored when fresh, darkens to a deep blue-black color at maturity as it dries. The plants are five to six feet tall and bear seven inch long ears, containing fourteen to sixteen rows of kernels.

Developed by the late Dr. Elwyn M. Meader of the University of New Hampshire.

Net Wt. 1 ounce
Lot Number HOO14

VICTORY SEEDS®

Popcorn (Maize)
Zea mays
'Miniature Pink Popcorn'

Days to germination – 5 to 10 days
Days to harvest – 105 days

Soil must be at least 65ºF to germinate. Be patient and do not plant too early or you will waste a lot of seed! Plant in full sun and keep it watered. Corn is a wind-pollinated plant. Plant in blocks several rows wide to ensure full ears.

Sow seeds about ½ to 1 inch deep, 3 to 4 inches apart, in rows spaced 24 to 30 inches apart. Thin to 6 to 12 inches apart.

'Miniature Pink' popcorn is an old variety that grows six to seven feet in height and produces two to three ears per stalk. The ears are small, narrow and average three to five inches in length. The shiny, bright kernels range from pink to mauve to light purple in color and often have a pearly appearance. The ears are not only quite attractive and ornamental, but they pop great and taste good with a slightly nutty flavor.

Net Wt. 0.5 ounce
Lot Number MP14

VICTORY SEEDS®

Sweet Corn (Maize)
Zea mays
'Glass Gem'

Days to germination – 5 to 10 days
Days to harvest – 105 days

Soil must be at least 65ºF to germinate. Be patient and do not plant too early or you will waste a lot of seed! Plant in full sun and keep it watered. Corn is a wind-pollinated plant. Plant in blocks several rows wide to ensure full ears.

Sow seeds about ½ to 1 inch deep, 3 to 4 inches apart, in rows spaced 24 to 30 inches apart. Thin to 6 to 12 inches apart.

Amazingly beautiful, translucent, multicolored kernels that are rare in the plant world, let alone all contained on one ear of corn.

Although folks are primarily growing it for the unique ornamental value, it can be popped or it can be ground into cornmeal or flour.

Net Wt. 0.5 ounce
Lot Number DF014
Hand Packed for 2015


WHAT IF
myths
were
ENTERTAINED
To
RESIST
disbeliefs


BEARITOS
Blue Corn
Tortilla
Chips

NIGHT SOUNDS
Isaac Sharp

This piece was first conceived sitting on the porch outside my parents' house in suburban Connecticut. I was captivated by the chorus of frogs, birds, bugs and wind. As a classically trained musician jaded by conventional performances, I was compelled to find a way to transform this experience into something I could do in a recital. Different ideas about how exactly to accomplish this goal rolled around in my mind for months. Gradually, I came to realize a few things that would most effectively convey what I liked about the organic experience of listening to the sounds in nature:

- sounds should be coming from every direction.
- rather than trying to mimic the exact voice of any particular creature, there should be a layering of many distinct and non-conflicting voices.
- each different sound should have its own rhythmic gesture.

The orchestration I've decided upon for this performance is by no means fixed; I'm certain it will evolve over time. If fact, it may change between now, as I write this, and the performance. Some of the instruments employed more closely resemble a specific animal call or natural sound. Others are simply interesting noises that I've woven into the texture. Within this soundscape, a soloist or small ensemble of musicians can improvise or perform a piece of their choosing.

Instruments and instructions:

Notched wooden stick with wood scraper - scrape scraper along notches once every 5-10 seconds

Plastic comb with wood scraper - scrape scraper along fine-toothed side of comb twice rapidly every 10-15 seconds

PVC recorder - gently blow once every 30-40 seconds

Plastic shopping bags - after being cued by the performance conductor, a specified bag player will rustle their bag for about 10 seconds; bag players adjacent to the starter will wait a few seconds then begin rustling for about 10 seconds; subsequent bag players will listen/watch until a bag player near them starts rustling, wait a few seconds, then rustle their bag for about 10 seconds

Your List of Corny Puns!

Your corny president - Abraham Lincorn!

Your alma mater - Cornell University

Your motto - Every moment holds a kernel of truth

How to romance a corn - Whisper sweetly in his ear

Compliments to a corn - Your voice is so husky

Why is corn so good to talk to? It's all ears!

Why shouldn't you tell a secret on a farm? Because the potatoes have eyes, the corn has ears, and the beans stalk.

Many thanks to all those who have helped make this project happen: to Wylie, Hugues, Kevin and Alexis for our first round of winter brainstorming; to Danila, Matthew, and Joe for helping build the beds and keep the corn alive and growing; to Jessica for graciously hosting us at your house; to Lily, Marietta, Isaac and Katrina for contributing your works to this book and for the festival; to our Brooklyn friends - Jennifer, John, Ken, Glen and Manny - for making the long drive up to Central New York and helping out; and to Jose, for planting the seed of relocating the project in Ithaca, "cuz you know, CORN-ell." Thank you all. We couldn't have done this without you.

-Mike Estabrook and Vandana Jain (artcodex)
-Lea LSF (The Dacha Project)