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SUSTAINABILITY



A bar of chocolate Birt molded to show how the cost of the product is divided among those involved in its production.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

ARLENE BIRT'S "BACKGROUND STORIES" SHOW THE LIFE CYCLES OF THE ITEMS WE CONSUME.

By David Doody

Arlene Birt wants to tell you a story. It's a story about where things come from. It's a story about how they found their way to you. And it's a story about where they're going.

Actually, let me start over: Arlene Birt wants to *show* you a story...

"When we talk about sustainability it can become a very complex topic," Birt tells me at the Birchwood Café, where one of her murals adorns the wall near the counter. In it a Zen meal prayer on a banner connects different scenes, showing the trip food takes from farm to table. "Innumerable measures bring us this food," the prayer says. "We should know how it comes to us."

"It's important to help people understand a little bit more about the big picture and how these elements play together," Birt continues, "and visuals are a really good way to do that, because you can very quickly show a context that helps people understand the big picture."

Birt is a visual storyteller and her "background stories" aim to highlight issues of sustainability happening all around us. Whether it's a T-shirt with its own life cycle printed on it, or a wrapper on a chocolate bar that shows its trip from an organic cocoa orchard in Costa Rica to (1,787 miles later) the grocery store where you bought it, everything around us has a backstory. Birt wants to bring those stories to the forefront.

"I tend to look for what data is out there and then [see] how I can add a layer of sustainability communications on top of it," Birt says. "My work is very much about providing the information and trying to string together the story in a way that helps people understand the scenario."

For last month's Twin Cities Bike Walk Week, Birt partnered with the Center for Energy and Environment to install her "Bicycling Counts" art project at bike routes around the metro area. For that project a bicycle counter tracked the number of passing cyclists, projecting the data that each of those bikers means in terms of environmental, personal and societal health (e.g., improved air quality or financial savings) on a nearby wall in real time. The installation was meant to show the cumulative impact biking can have on a community.

"I really try to pair an emotional connection to the data," Birt says. "There's a lot of things being tracked and traced these days, but I think a lot of them are missing that emotional connection and [that] is what will nudge people... to hopefully eventually change behavior to more sustainable practices."



(Top) Birt's "Bicycling Counts" project shows the impact of biking on a community. (Bottom) A mural at Birchwood Café shows the farm-to-table concept.

Seeing information alone cannot change behavior, so many of Birt's projects give consumers the tools to dig a little deeper on their own. A prototype for an in-store, retail system called TraceProduct.info that she developed with The Wedge Co-op in Minneapolis would print a custom code on customers' receipts so they could explore an online map at home showing them the origins of each item on their grocery list and the percentage of local food bought. "The project aims to visualize the narratives behind the seemingly ubiquitous everyday objects that we interact with as consumers," Birt writes on her website, "focusing on the ways in which these products connect us to the larger world."

Like the Zen meal prayer that appears in Birt's Birchwood mural, we could all probably use a little more knowledge as to where the things around us come from and where they will go. With her background stories, Birt is trying to show us the way. •

backgroundstories.com

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