

Art in America

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PROPAGANDA IN THE GARDEN

Proving that there are still art rules to break, a spate of green avant-gardists invent unorthodox models for growing produce in underused city spaces.

BY CATHY LEBOWITZ

RATHER THAN WAIT for sustainable environmental policies to be implemented from the top down, increasing numbers of people are acting on a small scale and at the grassroots level—including artists, who are finding new ways of committing themselves to the world outside the gallery. For many artists dealing with ecological issues today, the point of departure lies in devising community interventions and social situations. Their endeavors depart from the linear, goal-oriented strategies of conventional activism and open up environmental engagement to metaphorical thinking and multiple layers of meaning.

The artists discussed in this article—Fritz Haeg, Amy Franceschini, the Baltimore Development Cooperative (BDC) and the duo Rebecca Bray and Britta Riley, all based in the U.S., and Nils Norman, in the UK—have created projects that incorporate small-scale food production, essentially claiming the urban farm as an art initiative. The current excitement over urban farming emerges from widespread concerns about the global industrialized food system—problems that have been articulated in recent documentary films like *Food, Inc.* (2008) and *Meat the Truth* (2008), by writers including Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser (who are featured in the former film), and by the international Slow Food movement. The most basic prescription arising from this analysis is to consume foods that are not highly processed and that come from nonindustrial local sources.

Food politics as well as land use, community education and waste processing are central issues for these artists. The innovative conceptual frameworks of their projects generate objects and circumstances that variously partake of the

fantastical, the poetic, the propagandistic and the practical. In each case, the artists have broken through the barriers that typically separate contemporary art from the general public, establishing opportunities for collaboration and exchange. Many other midcareer and emerging artists are working with similar commitment. Among those who have participated in ecologically themed exhibitions over the last year alone are Marjetica Potrč, Superflex, Åsa Sonjasdotter, Mary Mattingly, Purves and Cockrell, Amy Balkin, Tue Greenfort, Fallen Fruit [see review this issue], Katie Holten, Raul Ortega Ayala and Ettore Favini.

A rich history of socially conscious art from the 1960s and '70s exists for contemporary artists to mine, from the participatory experiments of Fluxus to Joseph Beuys's call for a social sculpture. Further serving as models are the decade-spanning practices of environmental artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles (ongoing, unsalaried artist-in-residence for New York's sanitation department), Agnes Denes (*Wheatfield*, 1982, and *Tree Mountain*, 1996-present), and Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison (from *The Lagoon Cycle* of 1974-84 to *Greenhouse Britain*, 2007-09).

IN HIS LANDMARK *Relational Aesthetics* (1998/English edition 2002), which designates the entire sphere of human interaction as a legitimate subject for art, Nicolas Bourriaud posits art as a social interstice, defined as "a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system."¹ Philosophers such as Félix Guattari, Slavoj Žižek and Antoni Negri have asserted the potential of engaging interstitial space to effect radical change. The readiness to exploit leftover and in-between spaces—both physical and conceptual—is another characteristic shared by the artists considered here. The influence of Gordon Matta-Clark's pioneering work should be noted, too; he used both interstitial space ("Fake Estates," 1973-74) and food (the cooperative restaurant/art endeavor FOOD of the early 1970s) as art "materials."

Nils Norman: *Proposed Redevelopment of the Oval, Hackney E2, London. Renamed: Let the Blood of the Private Property Developers Run Freely in the Streets of Hackney, Playscape Complex A*, 2003, digital inkjet print, 48 by 37 inches.

FOR HIS “EDIBLE ESTATES,” HAEG ENLISTS PARTICIPANTS WHO LIVE ON ORDINARY RESIDENTIAL STREETS, WHERE THE LAWN-TO-GARDEN TRANSFORMATION WILL HAVE MAXIMUM IMPACT.

WHY MOW?: FRITZ HAEG

With a bachelor's degree in architecture from Carnegie Mellon University, Fritz Haeg has worked for the past decade as an artist, architect and designer, concentrating in recent years on art initiatives, usually commissioned by museums. A long-time garden advocate, he created his first “Edible Estate” in 2005, replacing the front lawn of a couple's suburban home in Salina, Kan., with fruit and vegetable plants. The homeowners had responded to a call issued by the Salina Art Center, which sponsored the project and organized a concurrent solo exhibition for Haeg. Since then, he has made “Edible Estates” at other private homes, looking for willing participants who live on conventional residential streets, where the lawn-to-garden transformation will have maximum impact. In the book *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (2008), which documents the first four projects of the series, Haeg enumerates the negative environmental effects of standard ornamental grass:

[The] lawn devours resources while it pollutes. It is maniacally groomed with mowers and trimmers powered by two-stroke motors that are responsible for much of our greenhouse gas emissions. . . . To eradicate invading plants the lawn is drugged with pesticides and herbicides, which are then washed into our water supply with sprinklers and hoses, dumping our increasingly rare fresh drinking resource down the gutter.³

Haeg asks the participants in the “Estates” to write some account—essay, blog, letter—of the experience. He includes three in the book.

Last May, I visited an “Edible Estate” in west Baltimore commissioned in 2008 by the city's Contemporary Museum. The museum's director, Irene Hofmann, drove me to have a look, and we found homeowner Clarence Ridgely outside watering his fruit and vegetable garden, which has been designed in Haeg's distinctive style of tepee trellises

and groupings of compost mounds surrounded by mulch. Pleased with the intervention, Ridgely explained that the front yard had become a hot topic among his neighbors, who often express interest in starting their own (though no one had). In this case, Haeg's endeavor provokes conversations about the standard blanket of grass and the benefits of growing one's own produce. It has not, however, spurred a movement. The garden is unique on Ridgely's street, perhaps underscoring its condition as an artwork.

Haeg has also made “Edible Estates” outside apartment complexes. The Tate Modern commissioned one in 2007 for the nearby Southwark neighborhood, on a patch of lawn located between several public apartment buildings. In June, I joined volunteers for the planting day of Haeg's *Lenape Edible Estate*, the first in Manhattan. The garden was made for the community organization Hudson Guild on a compact triangular plot outside a facility located within a public housing complex on West 26th Street near the Chelsea gallery district. Haeg's website (fritzaeg.com) describes the garden as “a view back to the lives of the native Lenape people, how they lived off the land 400 years ago on the island of Mannahatta.” Hudson Guild will conduct educational programs for children there. Multiple organizations supported and promoted this “Edible Estate.” The nonprofit New York Restoration Project produced the garden, from construction to caretaking, while Friends of the Highline is credited as its partner in the project.⁴ Photographers and a film crew from the cable channel Ovation documented planting day, and the garden's corporate sponsor, Gardenburger (since 2007 owned by the Kellogg Company—no small member of the agribiz “community”), gave out Gardenburger T-shirts. The Native American theme ties the project to the 400th anniversary of Henry

Before and after the planting of Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estate Regional Prototype Garden #6: Baltimore, Maryland, 2008*. Photos Leslie Furlong.



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Hudson's exploration of the region; the commemoration is a public relations extravaganza for municipal and business interests from New York City to Albany. The *Lenape Edible Estate* moves away from the project's original mission as a provocative grassroots action, and one wonders what role the residents played. There's been no indication that they were involved in the process on this occasion.

Among Haeg's other art projects are the "Animal Estates," dwellings for creatures whose habitats have been disrupted by human settlement. Several were shown in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, including a 10-foot-wide bald eagle nest of sticks and twigs installed over the museum's entryway. Haeg has made "estates" for some 30 animals, from a barn owl to a beaver.