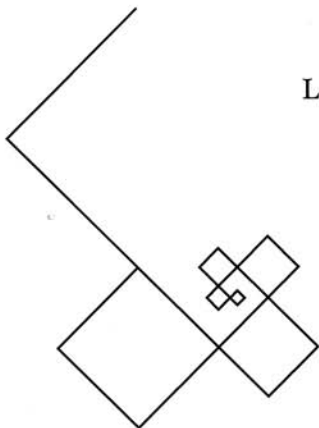


EnvironMentalities

TWENTY-TWO APPROACHES
TO ECO-ART

LINDA WEINTRAUB
with SKIP SCHUCKMANN



AVANT-GUARDIANS
TEXTLETS ON ART AND ECOLOGY

ARTNOW PUBLICATIONS

Regenerationist

Regenerationists revegetate diminished ecosystems.

Regenerationists direct their efforts at disturbed biomes where plant and animal life has declined and living systems have become degraded. They attempt to reestablish biotic diversity that has been compromised by the introduction of non-native species, soil depletion,

clear-cutting, mining, overgrazing, toxic spills, etc. The focus of their activities is to reestablish a full complement of living botanical species more quickly than would occur without human ministrations. Their methods involve replanting forests, grasslands, prairies, chaparral, and tundra. The goal of regeneration is to reestablish long-term, diverse botanical communities.

(0113)



Fritz Haeg

Born 1969 St. Cloud, Minnesota

stituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia

92 Carnegie Mellon University BA architecture

Malvina Reynolds created an enduring antisuburb anthem when she wrote the song "Little Boxes":

*"Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes, little boxes,
Little boxes, all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same."⁽¹⁾*

The promise of combining the calm of the country with the advantages of the city has lured two out of three American families into suburbia. Presumably, all these people envision a suburb as a green, secure, and convenient refuge. For others, this image doesn't jibe with the monotonous grid of rectangular plots lined with assembly-line houses wrapped in aluminum siding, all arranged along automobile thoroughfares. Variants of this model have colonized many tracts surrounding North American cities. Often one suburban town is separated from the next only by intermittent clusters of 7-Elevens, Pizza Huts, and Home Depots. Critics lament that suburbanites have few opportunities to escape from human constructs, since "nature" consists of parks, plazas, sports fields, bike trails, and endless installations of juniper shrubs planted in beds of bark-mulch outlining flat expanses of lawn.

America did not invent the concept of the suburbs. Ancient Romans in the time of Trajan developed the first towns on the edges of cities. This suburban model failed with the collapse of Rome and was not resurrected until the beginning of the industrial era. During the intervening centuries, people crowded into cities for protection. Gradually, the center of security shifted; living on the outskirts became appealing. Housing developments began to replace forests, wetlands, and farmlands, initiating an ongoing debate regarding whether suburbia deserves to be honored for expanding private home ownership, or condemned for the stultifying standardization it imposes on architecture, landscape, and lifestyles.

Few environmentalists welcome the growth of suburbia as a sign of a society's health. They are more likely to deride it as a drive-by affront to ecosystems. An extreme reaction is announced in a communiqué dispatched by the Earth Liberation Front in June 2003. It referred to several incidents of arson when it declared, "We will not sit back as all that is natural and beautiful is destroyed."⁽²⁾ Eco-artist Fritz Haeg takes a more constructive approach. Haeg's art practice is devoted to replacing the ubiquitous suburban lawn with edible landscaping. He describes *Edible Estates* as "a practical food-producing initiative, a place-responsive landscape-design proposal, a scientific horticultural experiment, a conceptual land-art project, a defiant political statement, a community outreach program, and an act of radical gardening."⁽³⁾

(1) Words and music by Malvina Reynolds. Copyright 1963 by Schroder Music Co.

(2) Press release, "ELF Strikes Twice in 48 Hours against Urban Sprawl in California and Michigan," Earth Liberation Front, June 4, 2003, www.mindfully.org/Heritage/2003/ELF-Urban-Sprawl4juno3.htm

(3) "Edible Estates," Machine Project, machineproject.com/2006/09/29/edible-estates/

Postscript: Many eco-artists are expanding gardening practices to accommodate their environmental concerns:

Kathryn Miller shares Haeg's pastoral vision despite the fact that her regeneration schemes involve "bombs" and "guerilla tactics." These bombs are not destructive incendiary weapons; they are seed bombs, fertile devices that Miller sculpts by hand out of soil, recycled forest products, composted sludge, sand, water, dextrin (a harmless organic binder), and native grass and flower seeds. Nonetheless, Seed Bombs (1992) are weapons because they battle the wholesale destruction of native vegetation by commercial and domestic development. The bombs are dropped anywhere toxic materials have contaminated soils or monoculture lawns have replaced diversity. Both habitats are damaged. Thus Miller tosses them over security fences enclosing defoliated industrial installations, or over neighbors' picket fences surrounding manicured yards. The bombs 'explode,' disperse their seeds, and initiate environmental regeneration.

Agnes Denes constructed Tree Mountain — A Living Time Capsule in Ylöjärvi, Finland (1996) on an enormous

mountain that was the site of a gravel quarry. Volunteers from many different countries participated in a ceremonial planting of 11,000 Finnish pine trees in an intricate mathematical pattern that resembles the interlocking spirals on a pineapple or sunflower. Each volunteer received an inheritable certificate that was valid for 400 years. It granted them responsibility for the stewardship of the tree he or she planted, assuring that future generations will be able to experience an old-growth forest.

Daniel McCormick cultivates healthy habitats for wild plants instead of cultivating botanicals for domestic food production and ornamentation.

As a Preservationist, Alan Sonfist engages in "rewilding," a process that permits landscapes to develop without human involvement. Thus Sonfist includes the planting phase of gardening, but he omits tending and harvesting.

Mel Chin's garden focused on planting crops to harvest toxins as a means to prepare the soil for vegetative regeneration that may take the form of trees, weeds, or conventional crops.



(0114)

Haeg posits many reasons why the emerald green carpets of grass and ornamental shrubbery have more connection to industrial installations than do meadows or prairies. First, the sweet smell of grass clippings is not the only aroma that wafts in the summer breezes each time a suburban lawn is mowed: "Hydrocarbons from mowers react with nitrogen oxides in the presence of sunlight to produce ozone."⁽⁴⁾ Second, he notes that the pesticides that are lavished on lawns affect innocent organisms that don't understand the little warning flags that landscapers install after dousings. In addition, the chemicals contaminate water: "To eradicate invading plants (lawns are) drugged with pesticides which are then washed into our water supply, with sprinklers and hoses dumping our increasingly rare fresh drinking resource down the gutter."⁽⁵⁾ Third, he regrets the loss of diversity associated with carpetlike lawns: "The monoculture of one plant species covering our neighborhoods from coast to coast celebrates puritanical homogeneity and mindless conformity."⁽⁶⁾ Fourth, he points to the debilitating effects of lawns on community relations: "The lawn divides and isolates us. It is the buffer of antisocial no-man's-land that we wrap ourselves with, reinforcing the suburban alienation of our sprawling communities."⁽⁷⁾ The final travesty is that, in addition to occupying productive land, producing contamination, and consuming resources, the lawns provide little benefit. "An occasional lawn for recreation can be a delight, but most lawns are only occupied when they are being tended."⁽⁸⁾ For all these reasons, Haeg says his work is "an attack on the American front lawn and everything it has come to represent."⁽⁹⁾

The federal Environmental Protection Agency supplies statistics that support the claim of serious environmental problems associated with suburban lawn care:⁽¹⁰⁾

(4) Fritz Haeg, "Edible Estates," machineproject.com/2006/09/29/edible-estates/

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) *Ibid.*

(10) "Green Landscaping Wild Ones Handbook," www.epa.gov/greenacres/wildones/handbk/w08.html



(0115)

Twenty million acres in the United States are planted in residential lawns.

From 30 to 60 percent of urban fresh water is used for watering lawns (depending on city).

Sixty-seven million pounds of synthetic pesticides are used on U.S. lawns.

Five hundred eighty million gallons of gasoline a year are used in lawnmowers.

Seventeen million gallons of fuel, mostly gasoline, are spilled each year while refueling lawn equipment, more than all the oil spilled by the Exxon Valdez oil spill disaster.

The EPA also lists ways to diminish the harmful consequences of lawn care by choosing nonpolluting pest controls and organic fertilizers, watering at night, and planting drought-tolerant species. But Haeg's scheme for regeneration exceeds mere damage control. He approaches lawns as wasted ecological opportunities. For example, suburbanites receive free sunshine and rain that are horticultural treasures. Their soil contains microorganisms that are miracle workers. Haeg proposes a way to utilize these valuable resources. Instead of growing grass, grow food.

Edible Estates offers a remedy for the environmental jeopardy associated with global, industrialized food production that depends upon long transport lines. Haeg decries "engineered fruits and vegetables wrapped in plastic and Styrofoam, cultivated not for taste, but for ease of transport, appearance and uniformity, then sprayed with chemicals to inhibit diseases and pests that thrive in an

unbalanced ecosystem.”⁽¹¹⁾ Referring to the fact that most Americans don’t know where their food comes from or who grows it, he reports, “This detachment from the source of our food breeds a careless attitude towards our role as custodians of the land that feeds us. Perhaps we would reconsider what we put down the drain, on the ground, and in the air if there was more direct evidence that we will ultimately ingest it.”⁽¹²⁾

Haeg hopes to solve these immense cultural and environmental afflictions by establishing prototype gardens on a suburban front lawn in nine regional districts around the country. Each garden will be responsive to local culture, climate, topography, and food preferences.

The first formulation of *Edible Estates* was established in 2005 in Salina, Kansas, the geographic center of the United States, in the front yard of San and Priti Cox’s suburban home. The Foti family is carrying out the second edition of the project. Their home is located in Lakewood, an iconic 1950s housing development 10 miles from Los Angeles, that commenced the post-war assembly-line housing boom. The Fotis answered the ad that Haeg placed in area newspapers: “We are currently seeking the skilled, eager, and adventurous occupants of one conventional American house on a typical street of endless sprawling lawns. These L.A. citizens should be brave enough to break this toxic uniformity by having their entire front lawn removed and replaced by an edible landscape. As role models, they will then proudly devote themselves to the indefinite cultivation of fruits, vegetables, grains and herbs for all neighbors and car traffic to see.” The announcement then explains, “This once-hostile front yard will become the southwest regional prototype for the *Edible Estates* series. We will work in collaboration to create the layout, design and plant specifications. All costs associated with establishing the garden for the first season will be covered. If you or someone you know of would be interested you will find the complete list of parameters and specifications on our website, <http://www.edibleestates.org>.”

Each of Haeg’s collaborating families commits to maintaining the garden as long as they occupy the house. They, therefore, make a long-term pledge of defiance against suburban landscaping norms. Although the host family and volunteers plant, weed, and harvest, Haeg has ample opportunity to display artistic creativity. He serves as the project’s mastermind, administrator, educator, and public relations officer, initiating each project by arranging for a local art institution to sponsor an *Edible Estate* within its region. At the same time he works with a local horticultural center to design the garden. With each installment, Haeg designs, publishes, and distributes a free brochure encouraging lawn replacements; it itemizes regional fruits and vegetables and provides a directory of local gardening resources. Educational outreach takes the form of websites, books, brochures, and videos. Documentation of the each first season’s growth is exhibited in the sponsoring art institution.

Haeg admits to prospective participants that he cannot predict neighborhood reactions to the transformation of a watered, mowed, and chemically drugged space into an activated, fertile, productive habitat. He hopes the experiment will demonstrate that “food grown in our front yards will connect us to the seasons, the organic cycles of the earth, and our neighbors.”⁽¹³⁾

(11) Fritz Haeg, “Edible Estates.”

(12) Ibid.

(13) Ibid.