

# INTERROGATING PUBLIC SPACE

## Fritz Haeg, July 2007

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**Nato Thompson:** Gardening features prominently in your work. How do you see gardening in relation to the politics around public space?

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**NT:** Not to be a complete Marxist, but it appears you are attempting to deal with the alienation one feels from being separated from the total outcome of production. That in growing a garden, one becomes in tune with the cycles of food production that keeps him alive. Along with the macro-political components, do you find this approach has personal therapeutic effects?

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**NT:** I am clearly a fan of an aesthetic practice unafraid to take on multiple forms from community building to hermetic gesture to straight up classroom. These forms have a long history with grassroots activism. What are your personal inspirations for a multi-faceted practice?

**FH:** I believe that if I allow myself to surrender daily to what I am drawn to, no matter how confusing or strange, it will be good for me and my work. Mmmmm, is that a lesson I learned from being gay?!

I want to wake up every morning and have a place in my practice for whatever it is I feel like I need to do that day: manual labor, writing, meeting people, dancing, drawing, computer work, gardening, traveling, making spaces... I want a practice that allows me to spend my time in an infinitely diverse way. I want to create a practice the same way that I would create any project. It should age well, evolve with my changing interests and obsessions, but at the same time maintain a conceptual and principled focus that transcends media or material.

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Along those lines, it is quite difficult to work with MFA students that will graduate \$100,000 in debt. They enter into the world unable to take any real risks, or experiment in ways that may not pay off for years or have the luxury to fail spectacularly at something.

**NT:** What do you find to be the key issues regarding public space and how do you see aesthetic interventions being a benefit and a problem?

**FH:** Right now I am most interested in private spaces that have the capacity to be public. It's not that I have given up on public space (though maybe I have!) but I do think that private property, and in particular the home, has become the focus of our society. We are obsessed with our homes as protective bubbles from the realities around us. Today's cities are engineered for isolation, so starting a salon in your living room or growing food in your front yard become ways to subvert this. Perhaps at this moment working from private space out may be more useful than working from public space in.

**NT:** I find that answer quite interesting actually. There are more than a few who consider the entire concept of 'public space' as deeply problematic as it tends to legitimate a large portion of the planet as inherently private. I also know from working in a museum that there are a lot of different possibilities when one owns the space in which experimental gestures are attempted, which might not be feasible in public. Yet, surely there are plenty of folks who do not own their front lawns. What are your thoughts in regard to renters or those without any private property whatsoever?

**FH:** Conversely I am also interested in "public" space that can be claimed and appropriated for private use. I especially like the idea of taking the least humane, most neglected and visible spaces in our cities and repurposing them for intimate human activity or nature interventions. For example I am reminded of my friends who do the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest that had a birthday party in the parking lot of Ralph's (a grocery chain in Los Angeles). They also organized a wonderful neighborhood project in L.A.'s Highland Park a few years ago called October Surprise where they "took back the streets" and staged projects all over town with local organizations. I am very ambivalent about the "community project" though. It is a delicate matter to go into someone else's neighborhood as the "enlightened artist" and impose on them your vision of what they need. With the garden that the Tate Modern commissioned me to do in Southwark (just south of the museum), I worked with a local organization that is based in the neighborhood. They were a vital link to the residents of the council estates where we did the project. I went door to door with them to talk to everybody about the edible garden I was planning. Even still, on my first day of work on the land, a woman who has lived in the building for 37 years came up to me demanding to know what I was going to do to their last piece of green space. When she found out I was from Los Angeles, she got even more suspicious....like "ok, let me get this straight, you come over here to screw up our green space & then go back to California?". But I went to visit her when I had finished the garden and she was really delighted with it. It turns out she is an amazing painter and is now working on a portrait of the garden.

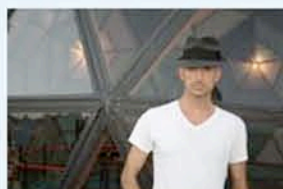
**NT:** You are currently planting an edible estate in a front lawn in New Jersey, how is that going?

**FH:** I just finished three brutal days of manual labor, turning sod by hand, shoveling dirt, lifting rocks. Every muscle in my body ached this morning. Fortunately I had about 20 volunteers turn up over the weekend to help out. It was fun and I'm really happy with the way the garden turned out. On one side of the front yard we installed 15 raised beds of vegetables and herbs and on the other we planted a mini orchard of fruit trees and vines. The neighbor next door (on this street of meticulously groomed lawns) was upset as soon as she heard about the plan, so I knew I had picked the right spot!

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**FH:** When you live on the street with an Edible Estate, you see the owners out there gardening every day. You get to know them better than those with the lawn. You talk to them about how the crops are doing. They can't possibly eat everything they are growing, so every time you pass by they are trying to unload the latest harvest of tomatoes or zucchini on you. Just the act of witnessing a garden grow can have a profound effect. When you watch daily as seeds sprout, plants mature and fruit is produced you can't help but be drawn into the wonder of it. By being a witness, you have become complicit and are now part of the story.

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Sundown Salon #29: Dancing Convention / performance in the geodesic dome / July 9th, 2006  
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Sundown Salon #22: Janfamily "How to be Taken Away" / embroidering in the garden all day and evening / October 30th, 2005  
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Bernardi Residence / Silverlake Hills, Los Angeles / under construction, to be completed summer 2007 / view from back garden  
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