Public Gardens Private Spaces

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Abstract

Gardens are political spaces rife with contradiction. Historically, artists and filmmakers have represented them as cultivated enclosures that convey a sense of paradise when juxtaposed with the reality outside the garden gates. Germany is home to approximately one million private allotment gardens that are clustered together in colonies and open to public view. Sown throughout a dense urban setting, Berlin allotments offer a glimpse into the simultaneously public and private, German community garden subculture. Kleingärten associations embody a desire for a contained, self-sufficient utopia that acts as an idealized micro-version of the larger society. This site-specific inquiry into Kleingärten will culminate in an extended video art piece through the combination of taped conversations with Berlin gardeners in their allotments, the use of text, narration and both direct and constructed sound. It will address the central question: When recording people in their idealized environment, where is the line between documentary and fiction? This ambiguity points to an inherent dialectic between modes of documentation and the presumption of objectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Kleingärten spaces are constantly in flux. The gardeners choose which elements to cut, contain, cultivate and adorn, revealing the individuality of their spaces in the same way that, in film/video terms, the choice of framing and editing reveals intention. Fences contain each garden plot and small cottage. There is a sense of intimacy, although public pathways serve as a network to view the garden scenes as personal tableau. The forms of Kleingärten are inherently theatrical; ornamented cottages or handmade huts, with a garden laid out in front of them, are customarily oriented toward the communal pathway. Consequently, they are on perpetual, sequential display for gardener neighbors and visitors to the colony. The theatrical quality of the gardens calls for the inclusion of some staged elements when videotaping them. Whereas the ritualized movements of gardening and the gardeners' codified horticultural language requires a more documentary, archival approach to recording in the allotments.

City gardens are inherently political spaces that prompt debate about the public benefit of urban green spaces and citizen rights to land use. Within clearly delineated boundaries, cultivation can only exist from a defensive position against both the wilderness and urban planning initiatives. Dichotomies abound in these gardens. There is nothing

natural about constructing a garden inside a metropolis and Berlin Kleingärten are, in fact, artificially constructed on top of landfill. They retain the utilitarian function of food production, which necessitates hours of physical labor, yet they are treasured as a verdant backdrop for leisure time. The garden associations can become social equalizers. Neighbors may have varied cultural, economic or political orientations that reflect Berlin's diverse population, but horticulture is common ground and anyone can become an expert. Though the joy of gardening is evident, an air of nostalgia in the melancholic sense permeates some of the allotments. Gardeners in Berlin originate from within and outside of Germany and often take up the practice because it reminds them of their hometown and of gardening in their childhood. However, the act of planting is the opposite of evoking a different place and time and instead grounds one in the present.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In *Gartenfreund* magazine, a short article titled: 'Wer macht mit?' (Greenfield, 2009) described my *Public Gardens Private Spaces* video project and invited interested gardeners to participate. Since early spring 2009, I have visited gardeners from the center of Berlin to its furthest corners, videotaped conversations and sundry objects, assisted in gardening and learned about each association's particular history. During an interview at the *Lerchenhöhe Kolonie*, founded in 1929 in the eastern district of Treptow, one gardener recounted, in detail, the history of a weighty concrete structure in the center of the gardens. It had first been used as a base to hold the flag of the Weimar Republic, then the National Socialists' flag, then the DDR flag and, when the Berlin Wall fell, children in the gardens used it as a playground. Gardening, through its cyclical nature, is a means of ritualizing time and revisiting history. Elements from the past hundred years of German history come unexpectedly to the foreground in the gardens, which are perceived with a directness that is the antithesis of a mediated museum experience.

One aim of *Public Gardens Private Spaces* is to confront the generalizations and stereotypes that exist about these gardeners. Regarding Kleingärten associations, terms such as petit bourgeois, kitschy, narrow-minded and nationalistic hover around conversations with Berliners who have no contact in the gardens. Recently this perception seems to be shifting. With more immigrant families and a younger professional generation entering the associations, opportunities for new kinds of interaction are possible.

This project will consist of a series of video pieces, most closely resembling the essay film format in that its primary concern is with the evolution of a theme through visual montage, text and narration as opposed to the unfolding of a plot through a linear narrative structure. The essay form is considered conceptually and aesthetically radical because it refuses to align itself with one particular genre, making it difficult to categorize, in favor of a more layered form of expression. The essay film can question and redefine the boundaries of what constitutes documentary and narration, and it is in this regard that it will function as the underlying structure for *Public Gardens Private Spaces*. The essay film gathers research from various intersecting sources, draws potent connections between them and creates new layers of meaning that do not purport to answer questions but instead, offer possibilities for deeper inquiry on the part of the viewer. Montage in the essay film openly displays itself as an artifact of the process of editing and is a fitting method for drawing out the multi-faceted

qualities of Kleingärten because it allows for incongruous elements to be considered on the same plane.

The images I make are slow. I frame a shot and let the camera record a single scene for longer than the (conditioned) expected duration because spaces hold resonances. There is time to dwell on the image and discover details that normally go unnoticed. Though many of the gardens follow the same guidelines regarding their outward appearance, they are each unique in their form (Fig.1). Personal objects, the types of plants grown and the style and decoration of the small cottages characterize this. During my meetings in the associations, I distributed recyclable cameras and asked gardeners to take one photograph of the most important thing in their allotment, after which they would pass the camera to a neighbor who would repeat the process. Enlarging and studying the incidental details in the periphery of these still photos offers insight into those less obvious but potentially more revealing aspects of life in the garden. Still photos act as a bridge between video and film. Juxtaposing still photos to create segments in video makes reference to the process of filmmaking by pointing to the material aspect of editing film in which each frame constitutes a discrete image.

The use of text and sound, both direct and constructed, plays an important role as a subtle, 'staged' element, seemingly outside of the documentary thread of the gardens. For example, in several scenes, a direct sound recording of a gardener sweeping their pathway is altered and edited into the sound of a perpetual, almost manic sweeping texture. The persistent and repetitive sweeping sound runs underneath a conversation with a gardener, which operates as a metaphor for cleaning up or altering memory. The result in layering images of isolated, personal garden objects with an alienated voice-off narrative whose intimate content is presented in a detached, remote and unfamiliar manner is unsettling. Since constructed sound becomes the dominant element in this scene, it subverts the notion of 'objective' documentary.

In another segment, a word or phrase spoken by a gardener is drawn out and written onto the video image (Fig.2). Typography is a nuanced form of communication but subtitling is blunt. When combining text with image, meaning is communicated through the text because it identifies and dominates the image. In one segment, I use the typeface "Futura" because it has the modernist appearance of efficiency and forward thought. Designed in 1924 by German typographer Paul Renner, his work is seen as connecting traditional and modern aesthetics by attempting to fuse Gothic and roman typefaces (Burke, 1998). This form of montage in the video isolates language as a means of identifying an image and imprints a phrase such as, "everything has its history" on the viewer's memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Berlin, Kleingärten associations are an undeniable part of the cultural and visual landscape. Clusters of garden plots and tiny cottages can be seen when riding regional trains throughout Germany. In comparison to any equally sized city, Berlin, with its approximately 77,000 allotments (which accounts for 11% of green space in the city) has the highest concentration of Kleingärten within city limits. These numbers have declined in recent years instigating gardeners to become activists against urban planning initiatives in order to maintain the land for allotment associations (UEIS, 2009).

Land Use

Formalized garden colonies in Berlin originated in 1833 and were developed by the government to offset the effects of industrialization and rapid growth of cities, including overcrowded living situations and a total lack of green space. These gardens were created from unused parcels of land for the working class and unemployed to tend so as to improve self-sufficiency and health conditions as opposed to receiving financial support from the state. During this time, they were called Armengärten or 'Paupers Gardens'. The first Armengärten in Berlin was founded in 1833 with 100 hectares designated for the cultivation of potatoes. This model of garden existed in Berlin until 1897 (Warnecke, Gröning and Friedrich, 2001).

Although in Germany most people refer to Kleingärten as "Schrebergärten," this is in fact a misnomer. Daniel Gottlieb Moritz Schreber (1808-1861) of Leipzig was an orthopedic doctor who believed that children's health was being compromised by a lack of quality outdoor space in urban areas. Though he was a proponent of having children tend gardens and engage in rigorous physical training, Schreber was not the founder of allotment gardens in Germany since they existed in the less structured form of Armengärten as early as 1797 (Warnecke, Gröning and Friedrich, 2001). Children did not respond well to the constant maintenance and patience required to cultivate a garden so their parents took over the responsibility of tending them. Schreber also developed orthopedic instruments of restraint for good posture that he tested on his five children and the subsequent mental collapse of his son, Daniel Paul Schreber, served as Freud's primary study of paranoia.

It is noteworthy that many of the first colonies founded in Berlin still exist as active associations today including "Zur Linde" in Treptow, one of the first colonies founded in Berlin in 1887. The rich history of Berlin Kleingärten that follows includes being the primary source of food production and also permanent housing for displaced people, as well as places of resistance and hiding during and after the 1st and 2nd World Wars.

Today many of Berlin's allotment gardens are found close to railroad tracks. This is the result of 'Railroad Agriculture' in which employees of the Railroad Company were given plots to cultivate. In other cases, people unofficially established their own colonies on unused land owned by private individuals, companies, churches and the Railroad Company, at times creating garden huts from abandoned train cars (Gröning, 1996).

Although in the 1950's and 60's their primary use shifted from food production to leisure spaces, Berlin gardeners from the East and the West were, and still are, extremely politically active. After 1989 there was massive reapportionment of land and many gardeners lost their plots as a consequence of urban development. However, through the gardener's political organization and action, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they were able to secure approximately 85% of new land use for allotment gardens (Gahrig, 2007). Colony sizes range from about 90 to 600 square meters and individual plots range in size averaging 20 square meters. Starting from 100 parcels in the late 1800's, there are now approximately one million in Germany and Berlin alone has 934 Kleingärten associations (UEIS, 2009).

Garden Rules

To receive a garden plot one must join a garden association, pay an initial fee that includes an estimated value of the cottage and an itemized valuation of each tree and large plant. Depending on the condition of the garden and the hut, this can range from several hundred to several thousand Euros (average 2,000-5,000 €) but this payment does not constitute ownership of the parcel. The state leases the land to the district association (Bezirksverband) and the gardener subleases his or her plot from the association. After this initial fee, gardeners must pay a yearly rent on the plot that is typically a very small sum and, as long as they abide by the rules of the association, gardeners can stay indefinitely. Although technically the gardeners are not allowed to live in their cottages, most everyone sleeps in them on occasion and many clubs have at least one family that permanently resides in the garden. There are even some people who have lived their entire lives in the gardens. The garden association is a club that is run from within, by an association of elected gardeners. All gardeners receive a comprehensive set of rules that outline, both generally and specifically, how the gardens should be kept. Some common examples: the garden should be kept free from weeds; hedge height should be kept at 1.25 meters and designated quiet hours are outlined. The types of rules and their enforcement vary from association to association (Mainczyk, 2001). One rule that still stands since its early history is that approximately 2/3 of each plot must be used for food production. This is to maintain the tradition of the Kleingärten as sources of food production and also to distinguish them from the similar looking, weekend cottage colonies that have no such requirements and function solely as leisure spaces.

Garden Art Politics

This project began with research into the history of community gardens in Germany but has also directed my attention to studying 'green' themes in contemporary art, where the garden is used as a means of critique and a catalyst for political action. When the Reichstag Building in Berlin was inaugurated as the new German parliament in April 1999, to mark the occasion, 19 contemporary artists were commissioned to create new works that directly refer to the building and its history including German-American artist Hans Haacke. With his installation piece, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* (To the Population) Hans Haacke wanted to create a 'thought-work' memorial (Fig.3). An artwork that prompts one think about the present and the future instead of fading into the background of history through ossified commemoration. A Bundestag Arts Committee (Kunstbeirat) was formed in 1990 to make decisions regarding artwork at the Bundestag, due to the parliamentary belief that politicians should not debate the question, 'what is art?' In 2000, the Arts Committee consisted of 12 parliamentary representatives and arts experts. Although they voted twice in favor of the Haacke piece, there was such uproar about its installation that a special parliamentary debate was called on April 5, 2000.

The parameters of the piece are a 21 x 7 meter garden plot situated in north inner courtyard of Reichstag, with the white words: *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* embedded into the soil and illuminated at night. Haacke used the same, deliberately non-classical, typeface on the entrance to the Reichstag from its 1916 dedication: "Dem Deutschen Volke" (To the German People) which was cast by the Jewish owned Loevy foundry. The installation can be seen

from all levels of the Bundestag and the visiting public. All 669 members of parliament were invited to deposit 2- 25 kg sacks of soil from their constituents' districts into the garden and all future members are extended the same invitation. The ground can never be maintained, tended or groomed and whatever seeds land in the plot must be allowed to grow wild. Inspired by the 1935 Bertolt Brecht quote, "In our day, whoever says population instead of people is at least refusing to support a pack of lies," the piece asks the lawmakers and representatives of the people to reflect on who they write laws for. The "population" consists of a growing diversity of peoples residing in Germany. *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* also asks the question: What kind of society do we want for our future? Major controversy surrounded this piece. Some legislators thought they would be made a laughing stock carrying sacks of dirt into the Reichstag and thought they would be defined by or locked into the National Socialist years due to the mythically inflected, propagandistic reference to, and critique of, the term "Volk." Others were completely in favor of the installation citing that these specific words embedded in mixed German soil reflects the heterogeneity of the German population and, in order to achieve tolerance, one needs a dialogue between art and politics (Ogger, 2004). Ultimately, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* was accepted because the measure to block its installation was defeated by only two votes with 258 representatives voting "yes," 260 voting "no" and 31 abstentions on the principal that they so strongly disagreed with the idea of voting on art. (Deutsche, Haacke and Kwon, 2004). Today over 100 different plant and 20 different animal species have settled in Haacke's installation (Kaernbach, 2007). As part of the installation, a webcam records the garden's growth twice a day so as to maintain it as a living monument and so that the public outside the Reichstag can follow its progress (www.derbevoelkerung.de). In the end, the fierce debate came down to how the power of words and the potent metaphor of the garden can reflect a nations perception of itself.

Gardens as Setting

Bertolt Brecht believed that montage was the principal organizing factor in a modern work of art because it did not pose as natural or organic unity. Instead, it freely displayed itself as an artifact. In other words, to reveal the material elements of an artwork's construction is paramount to achieve clarity of purpose in art (Müller, 1987). There is a theatrical quality, an element of exhibition and a nature-artifice to Kleingärten. As composed and cultivated spaces that exist within articulated borders, they are in fact anything but natural. Fences frame the garden to allow for an order inside, which helps to cope with incongruities in the broader outside world. One way to depict the metaphor of garden spaces is through quotation from garden scenes in film history.

In film, gardens are most often settings for murder and romance. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) has the main character, a photojournalist, wheelchair bound due to an accident. Through his voyeuristic camera lens, he theorizes that his neighbor has killed his wife and buried her in the courtyard garden. Like tiny vignettes on display for the photographer, each window from across the courtyard offers a glimpse into the mundane rituals of life. His voyeurism mirrors the role of the audience. Through analogy, Hitchcock is calling for the viewer's heightened attentiveness to the process of filmmaking.

Gardens are also frequently a metaphor for utopia. One example of this can be found in the spectacle of Fritz Lang's vision of a 21st century totalitarian future, *Metropolis* (1927).

A massive working class supports the looming city with its huge towers, vast wealth and advanced technologies. The "Eternal Gardens" are a hidden playground that exists for the ruling class living in luxury and decadence. The garden in *Metropolis* displays social contradictions between rich and poor, revealing that there is nothing 'natural' about this inequality.

Gardens in film have been used perhaps most interestingly, as sites for political organization. A potent example can be found in the 1932 Bertolt Brecht/Slatan Dudow film, titled: *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt? (To Whom Does the World Belong?)*. During a pivotal scene in the film that was set in a still functioning garden colony near the Müggelsee in southeast Berlin, a worker's family is evicted from their apartment and the garden colony is their last refuge. In this case, the garden serves as a micro version of society where all of the families living in the colony are trying to escape the realities of impoverishment by maintaining the illusion of normalcy through every day domestic rituals and behavior. In the center of this colony, a theatrical stage functions as the central meeting place for political organization.

During the time he was making *Kuhle Wampe*, Brecht was developing his theory of materialist aesthetics. Through studying Marxist texts, he sought new answers to questions such as: what is political art and how can it function to mobilize people into action? This model of filmmaking recognized the empowering potential that was the result of imbuing the spectator with the cognitively active role as a co-producer of meaning. Brecht's formulation of Epic Theater, which he tested in *Kuhle Wampe*, laid the groundwork for conceiving of film's political potential through a kind of 'visual essay' (Silberman, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

Gardens are intrinsically political spaces owing to questions of land-use, self-sufficiency and cultural identity. How does a city's dynamic change when its citizens help to decide how public space is used? The ability to cultivate and share ones own food and to have a personal stake in how the landscape of the city is shaped can strengthen community, and in some cases, facilitate social integration.

Video, due to its relative ease of use and affordability, is a democratic medium that makes for the ideal method to look into Kleingärten spaces. The key to a deeper understanding of the gardens and their intrinsic 'nature-artifice' or 'documentary-fiction' dialectic is through the deliberate use of montage, where the idea of documenting the Kleingärten is placed not solely in looking at the material aspects of the garden itself but also in analyzing the function of the mediums that can represent it- photography, text, video, sound, film quotation. When experienced at a slow pace, these elements resonate with the political aspects that are inherent to the social phenomenon of the garden.

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Images

Fig. 1. Painting in *Kolonie Frohsinn*, Schöneberg, 2009

Fig. 2. *Public Gardens Private Spaces* video still, *Kolonie Lerchenhöhe*, Treptow, 2009

Fig. 3. Hans Haacke, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG*, 2000, north courtyard of the Reichstag, Berlin