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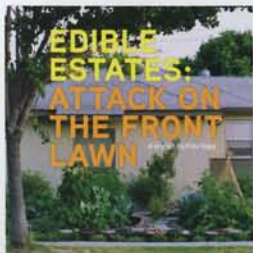
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Edible Estates

Fritz Haeg (Metropolis Books, New York, 2008)

Anyone who loves their front lawn may want to read *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* sitting down. This book, documenting an ongoing project by the artist Fritz Haeg, is a manifesto that seeks to replace the wasteful, socially divisive and environmentally toxic institution of the American lawn with the organic vegetable garden. Dismayed by the polarizing 2004 US presidential election, and inspired by the biological interdependency of places such as the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Haeg began to see the USA as one large socio-ecological organism. In deciding how to express this vision he focused his energies on the front lawn, emblematic of Jeffersonian optimism, suburban sprawl and the contentious divide between red states and blue. In 2005 Haeg was commissioned to create the first *Edible Estates* garden in Salina, Kansas. Since that time he has worked directly with homeowners and communities to create others in New Jersey, California and London.

Edible Estates is only tangentially about lawns and food. Its primary

Fritz Haeg
*Edible Estates Regional
Prototype Garden #3:
Maplewood, New Jersey*
2007

concern is 'people and their relationship to each other and to their environment'. The best parts of the book are diary entries by participating families expressing their deepening awareness of the way their now-absent front lawns defined their sense of community. Known for having hosted the Sundown Salons in Los Angeles, events which catalyzed interdisciplinary exchange among groups of creative people inside a geodesic dome, Haeg has always been interested in the power of social discourse and frustrated by systems that obstruct it. It is unsurprising therefore, that Gordon Matta-Clark is the artist Haeg 'can't stop thinking about'. Matta-Clark's work is a reaction to the exclusionary policies of urban renewal, which polarized neighbourhoods and devastated communities. The leftover, untenable parcels of land in New York that he purchased as part of *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1973) were symbolic of this. When Haeg turns the fake into the edible by proposing to convert 30 million useless acres of lawn into life-sustaining, revenue-producing landscapes, he elevates Matta-Clark's commentary on the economics of private property to the scale of an ecological revolution.

For architects Haeg is an artist, for artists he is a landscape architect, and for homeowners 'attacking' their front lawns he is an environmental activist. This ambiguity gives *Edible Estates* a certain currency, but it also makes the project hard to define. Marketed as a how-to guide for amateur horticulturalists with guidelines, techniques and regional planting calendars, the book focuses more on the practical necessities of individual action than on the conceptual dimensions of the project. Throughout the book's four essays there is a consensus that lawns are bad but little discussion of how *Edible Estates* fits into a wider artistic context. With all of the attention that the project has received from environmental groups, it is easy to forget that for Haeg the garden is as much a metaphor as it is a laboratory. He is making art. While it is admirable that the book has been designed to instigate change, it has had to leave out much discussion of what exactly makes Haeg such a compelling artist. In the end, however, this may be a valuable trade-off, because if *Edible Estates* is not about Fritz Haeg and his art, it's about us and our future.

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