

MEAN



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MEANSCENE

FRITZ HAEG

BY VALERIE PALMER

"I've been getting hundreds of emails from people all across the country that want to tear up their front lawns," Fritz Haeg explains to me on the deck of his home, a geodesic dome up in the hills of L.A.'s Mt. Washington neighborhood. His idea to replace the suburban front lawn with an edible landscape is resonating with the American public in a way he didn't quite expect. He leaves his Edible Estates open to interpretation, and the result has been everything from a landscape project to a radical political gesture to a conceptual art piece to a sociological experiment, and that's just fine with him.

The idea came to Haeg after the elections in 2004, that year when many of us had to face up to the reality of another four years. "I felt like I needed to do a project in the center of the country," he explains, "Like I needed to get out of New York and L.A. and do something that really engages with this part of the country that I'm not in touch with and I don't understand." So he traveled to the geographic center of America — Kansas — and found a suburban family willing to grow their own food right there on the front lawn. His second lawn appeared in the suburbs of Los Angeles earlier this year and seven more will soon be sprouting up around the country.

Haeg's work can be appreciated as art, with reference points like Gordon Matta-Clark or the Ant Farm collective of the '70s, or his individual projects can simply be appreciated for shaking up the status quo. Trained as an architect, he's very preoccupied with our notion of public and private space and the ways this can mess us up. "We isolate ourselves from the people around us and then we isolate ourselves from the natural environment, and that's why we're so screwed, frankly." All his work revolves around the private space we call home; whether he's designing one as an architect, inviting people into his own for his Sundown Schoolhouse or digging up other people's front lawns in the name of his Edible Estates.

These three areas of Haeg's practice all complement each other, inspire each other and, thankfully, develop at different speeds. So while the seeds have been sown on his Edible Estates, the Sundown Salon series he ran in his home for six years morphed into the Sundown Schoolhouse this fall — a more rigorous, structured and academically inclined program with a roster of 24 visiting teachers. The students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but, Haeg explains, "They all are interested in the agenda of the Schoolhouse socially and politically; how an artful, creative life can engage with the reality of the world we're living in and not isolate itself from it."

His approach seems to be catching on. Coming up in January, his Sundown Schoolhouse will be in session for a day at New York's Whitney Museum, where Haeg plans to host a series of dance workshops called "Dancing 9 to 5." In 2007, two books are due out as well: one on Edible Estates and one covering the six years of his Sundown Salon series. Haeg also mentions plans for a "capitalist commune" in Mexico: a place where he and his friends can experiment with alternative, creative ways of living. Through all this, Haeg just follows his nose and listens to his gut. He shrugs modestly, "I really believe that when you put something out there that you believe in and that you feel strongly about, inevitably there's going to be others who feel the same way." fritzhaeg.com



"WE ISOLATE OURSELVES FROM THE PEOPLE AROUND US AND THEN WE ISOLATE OURSELVES FROM THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, AND THAT'S WHY WE'RE SO SCREWED."