

# X-TRA

CONTEMPORARY ART QUARTERLY

Encounter vs. Event: The Emergence of "Non-Art" in Japan  
Mika Yoshitake

Miami-Basel Meets Bourdieu  
Meredith Goldsmith

1 Image 1 Minute  
Micol Hebron

## Instant Classics

Trinie Dalton

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 4



# NOT ART:

Column by  
Shana Lutker

## “Every garden a munition plant”

Fritz Haeg is known to many in Los Angeles as the facilitator and host of the Sundown Salons—five years worth of collaborative art, design, performance, craft and literary events at his home in Mount Washington. An architect and designer by trade, he is also the founder of Gardenlab, an initiative dedicated to exploring the “garden as a metaphor” and organizing “ecology based art & design projects including site-specific installations and interventions, exhibits and events, ecological and environmental college curricula, conferences and lectures.”<sup>1</sup> In pushing forward a dialogue focused on changing the way we think about interdependence and community and combining the discourses of art, architecture, and design, Haeg questions self-reflexive, hermetic art. When one considers the recent spate of symposia dedicated to relational aesthetics, or Claire Bishop’s feature article “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents” in the February issue of *Artforum*, or Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions’ recent project “Civic Matters,”<sup>2</sup> a popular interest in that which is collaborative, community-based, and activist is evident. Many of these projects involve creating a kind of *exemplary* site—a model for society.

“Edible Estates” is Gardenlab’s current initiative—a plan to turn nine front lawns around the country into edible landscapes. On Haeg’s extensive website, a portion

devoted to the Edible Estates project is laden with statistics about the insidious, green and pristine American-dream-lawn. Lawns cover 40,000 square miles of North America, claiming more mileage than wheat, corn, or tobacco; homeowners use up to 10 times more chemicals on their lawns than farmers use on their crops; and most of those chemicals are known carcinogens.<sup>3</sup> Haeg’s website lists a number of precedents and inspirations for edible estates.

Among those precedents, I found the “Victory Gardens” most intriguing. In 1942, Americans (and Canadians, Brits and Europeans) were asked to help produce food to compensate for what was being sent overseas to troops and the victims of World War II. In the nationwide campaign for Victory Gardens, pamphlets (printed by various gardening magazine publishers and seed companies) were widely dispersed in cities and towns—transforming citizens into small-time farmers and instructing the novice city gardener in basic fruit and vegetable cultivation. By 1944, there were 20 million of these patriotic gardens, wedged onto front, side, and back lawns, empty lots, and public parks; Victory Gardens accounted for as much as 40% of all food consumed.<sup>4</sup>

The first Edible Estate was also planted during a war, albeit one where notions of patriotism and national sacrifice were not

blossoming in the same way. The garden was installed on the former site of Stan and Pritti Cox’s front lawn in Salina, Kansas, on July 4, 2005. For each project, Haeg finds a sponsor; this first garden was commissioned by the Salina Art Center. For the Salina project, Haeg also had the opportunity to work with the Land Institute, a research group dedicated to studying and developing ecologically sensitive agricultural alternatives to harmful methods of commercial farming commonly used today. In Salina, Haeg’s edible garden pamphlets continue to be available at local nurseries and the Cox’s prototype continues to grow. By starting in the middle of the country and launching the project on a patriotic holiday, Haeg foregrounded the national scope of the project and its potential to reach a wide, mainstream audience.

The next Edible Estate is scheduled to begin planting this spring in Los Angeles, as soon as Haeg can find the perfect lawn to destroy. Reading his open-call for a family to volunteer its front lawn for the project, I started imagining the prospective family, their lives transformed when they realize the joys of home-harvest. I am fascinated by the pending decision of some family to heed that call, to be chosen for the project and surrender to the ideals and mandates of the Edible Estate. The Los Angeles edition will most likely become the flagship estate, and what seems more prominent here in the



city of LA is this process of turning a private, camouflaged lawn into a public prototype, and the potential that an "average" family could step into an interdisciplinary, multi-discourse art-landscape project.

In the aforementioned article, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," Claire Bishop takes up the aesthetics and ethics of collaborative, socially active work. In a number of recent essays and discussions, Bishop, as a critic, grapples with how to evaluate projects that fall into the "expanded field of relational practices."<sup>5</sup> Haeg's work is tied to the practices of artists Bishop discusses such as Suzanne Lacy and Temporary Services who aim to create their own "interdisciplinary network," with an "interest in the creative rewards of collaborative activity."<sup>6</sup> These types of projects generally do not produce a product for a museum or gallery; more often they involve a series of public meetings, the re-purposing of a site, or a confrontation between communities in conflict. The Edible Estates project does involve an exhibition, but it consists of documents, videos and presentations on ecological issues and educational material on creating sustainable food gardens. The heart of the project is a family's vegetable garden. The problem in such cases as Bishop describes is how does one judge a project by an artist or collaborative that works with a community or group (outside the art-world) in order

to address political, social, economic, or aesthetic concerns to the art-world?

I wanted to see how the Edible Estates project fits into this problem, but I found that three aspects seem to prevent the evaluation of the Estates project alongside these other relational art practices. First, Haeg does not identify himself as an artist, though he is often working with and around artists. Secondly, Haeg is approaching this project with a specific goal in mind—his aim is not to see where the collaboration leads, or how the families' needs are best met—his goal is to invigorate a dialogue around personal responsibility for a public good. Thirdly, Haeg's project does not harbor any ethical questions about the nature of collaboration or the potential for manipulation of his chosen communities.

In my conversations with Haeg, we discussed the currency gained or lost by the fact that he does not identify himself as an artist. Haeg claims to be some combination of an architect, a landscape designer, and curator. And although some careful research on his website reveals a painting show in the late-90s in Philadelphia and a recent "artists, residency" in Australia, Fritz does not want to be an artist. If one were to look at all of Fritz's various projects (the Sundown Salons, "the gardenLAB experiment" exhibition at the Art Center Wind Tunnel in September of 2004, or the growing number of residences and

1. From the Gardenlab mission.
2. <http://www.artleak.org/civicmatters/>
3. <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/statistics.html>
4. This type of patriotic garden also played a role in WWI, when the National War Garden Commission rallied the patriots urging them to plant "war gardens" to stave off widespread food shortages in Europe and at home. Wisely, the interwar years saw a shift in the gardens' title, perhaps inspired by one of the 1918 slogans "Will you have a part in Victory?: Every garden a munition plant." <http://www.earthlypursuits.com/WarGarV/WarGard1.htm>
5. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006, vol. XLVI, no. 6, pp. 178-183. Quote on page 179.
6. *Ibid.*

*Edible Estate #1*, Salina, Kansas, 2005. Photos by Fritz Haeg and Stan and Pritt Cox, spanning July 2005–February 2006.

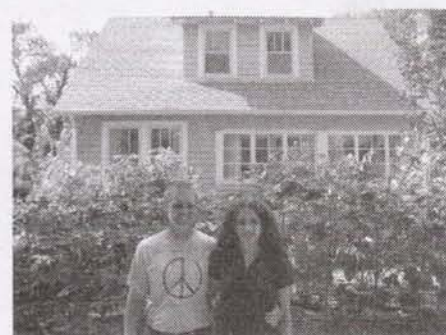
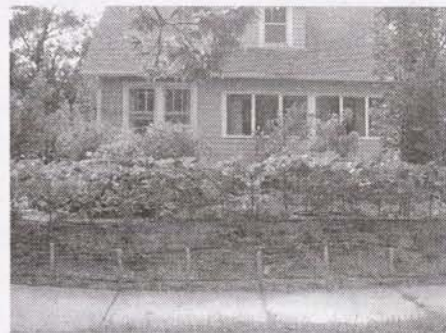
art spaces for which he served as architect and designer) a true dedication to the blurring of lines between public and private, and an aesthetic enmeshed in making the boundaries permeable between interior and exterior all become apparent. As host and curator of the Sundown Salons, Haeg has opened his house to specific groups of artists, inviting them to take over the grounds for one day, and share them with the public. Hundreds of attendees have milled around his elaborate garden, geodesic dome studio, and cave-like basement, listening to music, watching performances, having their bodies painted. For "the gardenLAB experiment" exhibition, Fritz and Gardenlab collaborators invited a wide selection of artists, architects, designers, and environmentalists to, in effect, bring their work from the outside inside.

So what is Haeg's role in the Edible Estates; what does he have at stake? He designs the garden for the house, taking into consideration how the family lives and eats, and he authors and organizes the website, books, and exhibitions that chronicle the process. The chosen collaborator—the family—will make a commitment to keep the garden going as long as they are in the house. (But one supposes that the agreement is not legally binding and, if the weeding gets too tiresome, the garden could be rotated back into lawn without the family fearing legal action.) Haeg definitely

seems invested in this unknown future of each estate: what happens after he is gone, when the family is left to live out their commitment. This makes Haeg vulnerable, in that he is dependent on the family following through, being good to their word, for the longevity or success of the project. But the project cannot be evaluated on the goodness of the family or the success of the individual family gardens because that would enter into murky critical territory.

Instead, it seems that Haeg's primary goal is to show people that this is a responsible way to live and to inspire others, maybe even *everyone*, to get rid of their toxic or wasteful lawns. But the more I think about it, I realize that, truly, the project is not about lawns, wasted water, combating evil chemicals, or growing vegetables to feed the planet. (In fact, most gardeners that I have spoken to water and fertilize their lawns less than their vegetable gardens.) The transformation of front lawn into Edible Estate is most successful in causing a shift away from the status quo. Since the British settlers imported lawns to America, they have been the standard domestic front yard dressing, symbols of status and leisure. Haeg sees de-lawning as a radical gesture of nonconformity, a new declaration of independence. He hopes that the project will be evaluated on its success in spreading this missive—as Haeg puts it, "Hey, people, there is a better way!" And, in *not* being

*Edible Estate #1*, Salina, Kansas, 2005. Photos by Fritz Haeg and Stan and Pritt Cox, spanning July 2005–February 2006.



7. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006, XLVI number 6, pp. 178-183.
- 8 <http://www.fritzaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/guidelines.html>

an artist, Haeg may be able to expand his potential audience. As an artist's project, the Edible Estates would either be too readily contained within the discourse of contemporary art, or contradictorily, would be seen as too design-oriented—not art at all. On the other hand, as an architect's project, it is *too arty*. The Edible Estates project is a hybrid, and it is too contaminated by its makeup of part architecture, art, ecology, and design to be accepted by any one of these disciplines. Haeg is dependent on contemporary art networks for exhibition venues and financial support, partially because he is already familiar with them, but also because few other venues could house this kind of project. But ideally, he envisions the project moving beyond the art world. He hopes to turn Edible Estates into the kind of news story run on the AP wire that gets picked up across the country—like Christo and Jean-Claude's *Gates Project* in Central Park or the "Body Worlds" exhibition traveling the States.

In Bishop's closing, she proposes that socially engaged political projects must have their own futility or failure as part of their premise; they must cause discomfort and cannot actually have a socially responsible mission. She suggests, "The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on the antinomy both in the structure

of the work *and* in the condition of this reception."<sup>7</sup> It is hard to locate some seed that is orchestrating failure or constantly indicating the futility of the Edible Estates project. In other words, what makes this project "not art," at least on Bishop's terms, is that it might actually be optimistic and idealistic and does not attempt to outline the boundaries of power and influence that make change impossible and the individual powerless. Instead, it calls out, sincerely, "There is a better way!"

Looking again at Gardenlab's mission to use "the garden as metaphor," one can see that metaphor made explicit—the cultivation of the garden on private land for public good is an illustration of an isolated citizen transitioning to become part of a socially engaged network.

One hopes the Victory Gardens will not be an exemplary precedent for the future of the Edible Estates project. In 1946, after the troops returned home, the victory gardeners no longer felt the need to spring into action and new seeds were not planted that season; the weeding was neglected. Commercial farmers back from the war had not yet returned their farms to full capacity. As a result, there were severe food shortages throughout the Allied territory that summer.

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#### Guidelines for selecting sites for the nine prototype gardens [Edible Estates]<sup>8</sup>

The house should be:

- not too big and not too small.
- in some way 'conventional', 'iconic', 'american'.
- on a somewhat lengthy typical residential street lined entirely with uninterrupted groomed front lawns.

The front yard should be:

- very visible from the street, with regular car traffic.
- relatively flat and currently covered with lawn.
- few large trees or any major landscaping that couldn't easily be removed.
- have good solar access, ideally with a south or south-west orientation.
- be relatively pesticide free.

The prospective edible estate owners/gardeners should be:

- super enthusiastic about the project.
- committed and willing to continue the Edible Estate prototype as long as they live in the house.
- avid and knowledgeable gardeners.
- potential spokespeople, willing to engage others in conversation about the project.
- agree to take weekly digital photos to document the progress and development of the project throughout the seasons for the first year.

We would particularly like to do the Edible Estate prototype on a street where the interruption of the endless lawn would be dramatic and controversial. A monotonous housing development of identical homes and front lawns would be ideal! (but not a requirement).

We will work in collaboration to create the layout, design and plant specifications. We will install the landscape, all costs associated with establishing the garden for the first season will be covered. Right now we are planning to establish our next Edible Estate edition in spring 2006 in Los Angeles.