

Gardening as critical practice

Much of our thinking about nature in the Western world is structured on a colonial romanticism that emphasizes the divide between humanity and the sublime wilderness. In thinking about humans as being separate and independent from nature, we don't leave space to imagine what an ethical and sustainable place our species might have in the global ecosystem. By prioritizing certain kinds of engagement over others, the US Parks System (which is symbolic of our broader cultural understanding of nature) elevates leisurely appreciation and devalues forms of engagement that entail prolonged labor such as agriculture, pastoralism, hunting/gathering, etc. The wilderness realizes its value through its being put aside for "non-use." In this sense, agriculture and gardening retain less cultural value than the aestheticized experience of wilderness. Current systems of denoting cultural value exclude the sites and practices that represent a sustained and co-evolving relationship with the land.

When we think of gardening as an artistic and social practice, we invite subtle recalibrations in our perceptions of cultural value. I want to put forth the argument that gardening is both an artistic product and an artistic process. It is a practice of sustenance and self-reliance, of slow labor and meaningful growth, of remediation and resiliency.

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Art, with its elasticity and capacity to hold, represent, and interrogate culture, presents an opportunity to expand of our understanding of cultural value so that it may encompass gardens and small-scale farms, where individuals and communities on the edges of the dominant narrative nurture pockets of biodiversity, tradition, and reciprocal relationships with the land.

The colonial ideology of mechanized production is one that permeates our relationship to the land and to our own bodies and selves. Stepping back from productivity, we might make space for slow healing and remediative practices. Gardening cultivates relational reciprocity while actively rehabilitating urban ecosystems; biodiverse gardens and farming systems provide much needed habitat for pollinators, improve soil health through natural processes of bioremediation, restore soil's ability to sequester carbon from the atmosphere, and reduce consumption of fossil fuels used in transportation of food from distant farms.

Relationships with the land under colonialist/capitalist frameworks hinge on constructs of production and resource extraction where value is determined only in regards to the land's usefulness to humans. The financialization of nature by corporate entities justifies the endless exploitation of our environment and advances anthropocentric narratives that displace our species from the interconnectedness of all other lifeforms. Industrialization and neo-imperialist agendas continue to magnify the mindset of exploitation and anthropocentrism, effectively disempowering Indigenous worldviews and saturating the agricultural sector with corporate entities and profit-minded policies. When yield and profit margins are the utmost concern, social and environmental implications of agricultural practices are disregarded.

Gardening and biodynamic agriculture, artistic processes in themselves, allow us to re-establish a thoughtful engagement with the earth while quietly resisting industrial agriculture and its violent insistence on the factory model of production. The practices that put us in intimate and prolonged engagement with the Earth create the space necessary for reconciling and restructuring the dominant narrative of blind exploitation and interminable consumption. Understanding that the industrial model of agriculture is incompatible with environmental wellbeing, and thus societal wellbeing, the need to challenge the factory model and invent new modes of operating and creating becomes an imperative task of our contemporary times.

Dependency on corporate-controlled food systems has largely displaced the potential for self-sufficiency and an intimate, ongoing relationship with the land. Conventional agriculture and our food system as it currently stands in the US creates a critical detachment of the individual consumer from the source of their food. This strategic distancing of food from farm renders invisible the myriad of resources, labor, and natural processes that go into producing any given food product, as well as the negative externalities of industrial agriculture. Gardening, in the context of an artistic, social & critical practice, can re-centralize power and self-sufficiency within communities and foster relationships between individuals and their environment. In the simplest terms, growing our own food means that we are less dependent on corporate agriculture and give our support to remediative practices rather than destructive ones.

Gardening facilitates an engagement with the Earth that attunes our individual awarenesses to seasonal rhythms and the gradual changes in local climate. We cannot perceive the subtle shifts in our environment without first entering into a close proximity and ongoing relationship with the planet and its natural processes. Close interactions with and caretaking of soil and plants honors the land for its life-giving nature and fosters a sense of reciprocity between people and the environment.

By placing gardens in the context of a critical, artistic and social practice, we can reject the structures of cultural value that prioritize an aestheticized wilderness, and in its place, propose an expanded conceptual framework that reasserts the interconnectedness of all lifeforms and their interdependency on the natural processes of a global ecosystem. This emerging discourse has the power to transform ordinary acts of gardening and growing into vibrant forms of critique and social practice.

References

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