

Living in the Veggies

Urban Agriculture and the Global Renaturalization of City Life

by Harald Lemke

Most people associate “climate change” with the phenomenon of global warming—the melting of the polar caps, flooding, turbulent weather such as heavy rains or long dry spells and brutal storms. The concept of climate change elicits mental images of an unleashed violent nature. These images are as real as they are deceptive, because the term “climate change” and the language its images speak generate a questionable *naturalization of a societal context*. In its everyday use this term intentionally *fails to spell out* the actual problem—the global fact that human behavior and its effects have their consequences on the natural resources for life on the planet. Instead of talking about the climate disaster, the destruction of nature, the environmental crisis, the collapse of civilization, the last days, the end of the world, about a purgatory (this Biblical motif would even be somewhat plausible considering the reality of global warming), and other such dramatic or alarming things, this prescribed terminology “climate change” actually camouflages the threatening scenario which is hiding behind it and at the same time is heralded by it. The camouflaging and belittling term “climate change” does not want to be an ominous warning or a grave exhortation.

And yet, the global public has long understood the real implications of manmade destruction of nature all the way into its unfathomable abysses. Understood critically, climate change does not stand for a veil of ignorance. Everyone (well, almost everyone) knows by now what this expression conceals and what, at the same time, it approves as a path of action. *Everyone knows what should be done in order to avert “climate change.”* All of us have understood that at the core of climate change there is nothing climatic: what we are actually dealing with here are simple truths and intrusive maxims, all of them adding up to

putting—our—Western lifestyle in question and demanding a radical departure from it. We all know “it,” ad nauseam: “drive your car less and not as far; ride a bicycle or use public transport when possible; reduce your personal energy consumption for lighting and heating; change to climate-friendly energy sources; whenever possible only buy environmentally acceptable products; fly only if you can make immediate compensation for the emission of the CO₂ which is caused by your journey; see to it that your home is equipped with sustainable technology; make sure your ecological footprint is as small as possible, etc.”

These concrete practical guidelines and responsibilities for a climate-friendly way of life are proof of and an example of the remarkable fact that we are no longer living under affirmative circumstances and in postmodern times, which would keep us unclear as to what using Adorno’s dictum “right living within the wrong life” would consist of. What is right and wrong, what factors are conducive to promoting climate change and what kinds of things and decisions would make a better world possible: we are definitely able to say so and it has been expounded in countless publications.

To be sure, one further essential source of climate change has entered public consciousness only in recent times: Up to one third of the greenhouse gases in the world are produced by agriculture. All in all, agriculture is responsible for the annual emission of between 8.5 and 16.5 billion tons of CO₂ equivalents.¹ (CO₂ equivalents are the internationally used assessment base for the climatic effects of greenhouse gases in relationship to CO₂ .) Between 2004 and 2005 alone, farmers worldwide applied ninety-one million tons of mineral fertilizers to their fields and grazing lands. In the process of over-fertilization with nitrogen, large amounts of nitrous oxide (N₂O) are being released. Nitrous oxide is a gas especially detrimental to the climate, approximately three hundred times more damaging than carbon dioxide. Nitrous oxide emissions are generated especially by spreading large amounts of nitrogen-based fertilizers (mineral fertilizers, but also slurry and manure) on fields and grazing areas. If too much fertilizer is applied or if it is

¹ Cf. Greenpeace, Industrielle Landwirtschaft heizt Klimawandel an, 2008. Cf. also the article by Mike Davis in this volume.

applied at the wrong point in time, the plants are unable to completely assimilate the nitrogen, thus causing it to enter the environment (by ground water, by surface water or by air). A part of this excess nitrogen enters the atmosphere in the form of nitrous oxide. (The amounts of nitrogen-based fertilizers applied vary extremely. China, for instance, is responsible for 40 percent of the global input of nitrogen as a mineral fertilizer, Africa for only two per cent.)

Another relevant factor contributing to the emission of greenhouse gases is the continuous practice of cutting down primal forests and other forest areas as well as the relentless exploitation of the soil. Any conversion of fallow land to agricultural use causes carbon dioxide to be released and thus contributes to further heating of the global climate. This is because arable areas contain less carbon than any other kind of terrain—with the exception of deserts and semi-deserts. The largest consumer of agricultural land is livestock farming. In addition to the growth of the grazing areas there is also an increase in grazing land being converted to the cultivation of forage crops (especially in the case of livestock being kept in permanent housing). For example, the cultivation of soybeans as a forage crop, rich in nutrients, in the form of gigantic monocultural plantations contributes immensely to the destruction of the Amazon rain forests in Brazil or of the Chaco virgin forests in Argentina, thereby further adding to the global climate disaster. The “exhaust fumes” of ruminant animals the media love to refer to them as “cattle or sheep farts” are responsible for the largest part of the global methane gas emissions, approximately sixty per cent. Like nitrous oxide, methane has a much stronger climatic effect than carbon dioxide. However, in spite of its daily production of 235 liters of methane gas, the farting cow is a comparatively small climate killer.

Among all the originators of climate change in the world, man still is the true culprit—simply because of his enormous consumption of meat for which the livestock is fattened, and for which more and more forest areas are destroyed to cultivate grains. This, again, is a field where the public all over the world is well informed about what to do and what not to do: “Do not eat any meat, or at least less meat than before and if you do eat meat, make sure it comes from livestock-friendly farming or, better yet, eat climate friendly sausages made from tofu (a

meat substitute). If at all possible, enjoy only unrefined seasonal biological products from regional farming. If you can, buy only those kinds of groceries that were produced with environment-friendly methods and by paying just wages. The more that the production of your food takes place in a large industrial context and the more refined it is, the higher the aggregate energy consumption will be and thus the amount of damage done to the climate in the course of their production. And: Go for products with little or no packaging the more elaborate the packaging, the greater the consumption of resources.”

The political ethics of *better eating*, in the sense of climate protection and sustainability, stands for the general realization that we, by our own doing, *can* cause a transformation of the currently dominant type of agriculture in the direction of an ecological kind of agriculture.² Anyone talking about “climate change” should also have in mind these everyday points of a gastrosophical art of living and of global wisdom (which would treat the *global community* as a *global dinner-table community*).

The Urban Garden as Culture Nature

This is not the place to get into the doctrinary debate whether a bio-agriculture of a small-farm structure will be able to feed the growing population of the world or whether the future of man will have to rely on a production of plant and animal foodstuffs based on genetic engineering—or, to put it in simplified terms, whether the path leading out of the climate disaster will be either a humanistic or a technological one. Instead, let us assume that—based on the general awareness of climate change described above and in analogy to the enactment of other international conventions and rights—there will be agreement in the worldwide community that genetic engineering is not a solution for, but part of the problem behind the global environmental and nutritional crisis (less because of the health risks connected with genetic engineering as is often said, but because the kind of agrarian capitalism that is optimized for genetic engineering will accelerate those

² Cf.: Harald Lemke, “Welt-Essen und Globale Tischgesellschaft. Rezepte für eine gastrosophische Ethik und Politik,” in: Iris Därmann / Harald Lemke (eds.), *Die Tischgesellschaft. Philosophische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen*, Bielefeld, 2008, pp. 213-237.

factors responsible for climate change/world doom rather than eliminating them). Assuming that there was also agreement that this agrarian capitalism, further optimized for genetic engineering, would only accelerate those epochal migration processes that drive masses of jobless rural people into the large cities as an “industrial reserve army” (Marx) of cheap and precarious laborers, thereby intensifying the process of the urbanization (which in most cases means pauperization) of mankind. In other words, for now, let us assume the social utopia that to avert the scenario just described, it is necessary to environmentalize global agriculture (and the global table community, too) in order to defend the environment and the climate.

It is important to point out that what we are dealing with here is quite definitely not one of those abstract utopias with which the history of utopian thought is filled, but for whose real feasibility there is not even one practical example: At this point in time the practicability of ecological agriculture as an alternative to the conventional agro-industry, invested deeply in genetic engineering, is being proven in very concrete ways. One example of the timely utopia of ecologizing the world for the protection of its climate is given by the many forms of mini-agriculture in the urban sphere. This utopia is taking place day by day in countless places all over the world *in concreto*. In Wilhelmsburg, too: *Wilhelmsburg*, taken as a random name of locality for this concretely utopian praxis, is *everywhere*. All over the world, agriculturally utilized urban gardens are popping out of the ground as if it were mushroom season. The praxis of the urban fruit and vegetable garden, *urban gardening*, a rural kind of urbanism, is epitome of *culture-nature*: the indivisible collaboration and collective unity of culture and nature, of cultivated nature and naturalized culture.

The previous history of urban and suburban subsistence agriculture (I shall also be using the term “kitchen garden” culture to describe any kind of cultivation of foodstuffs on small plots) is long and multifaceted. Let’s take at least a brief journey through time to the beginnings of this utopian world, which has urban gardening at its center: As early as 1516, the English social philosopher Thomas Morus sketched out an ideal society that he called “Utopia,” which has remained the basis of our present-day concept of utopia through the course of the history of

ideas. What deserves particular attention in our present context is the fact that Utopia was understood as a kind of *garden city*. For Morus, part of this concept was a critique of a “life of excessive consumption” as well as a constructive reorientation of the entire process of economics and labor. This new society thus called for, among other things, *one* activity which “all men and women carry out together: agriculture.”³ In their urban gardens, according to the vision of Morus, the philosophical city founder, “they cultivate grapes, fruits, vegetables and flowers of such splendor and beauty that I have never seen anything more luscious and tasteful. Their diligence is spurred on not only by their joy in the matter as such, but also the competition between different parts of the city in caring for the gardens. And it was certainly difficult to find something in the entire city more apt to be of use and enjoyment to the citizens, for which reason the founder seemed to have exerted more prudence on planting such gardens than on anything else.” Charles Fourier, the influential social reformer, also created a utopia of a “harmonious society,” a vision which “will fill us with the love for agriculture which today seems repugnant and which one would carry out only by necessity and out of fear of starvation.”⁴

It would be no problem to trace the rhizomatic history of this utopian love for agriculture and gardening in its most diverse theoretical as well as practical shapes through the course of the last two centuries. In terms of the history of ideas, we would have to name Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Nietzsche in this context as the philosophical heads and theoreticians of gardening.⁵ Looking into cultural

³ Thomas Morus, *Utopia*, Reinbek, 1964. p. 52.

⁴ Charles Fouries, *Theorie der sozialen Bewegungen*, München, 1977, p. 51.

An agriculture organized cooperatively would bring about, as was Fourier’s hope, an ample food supply as well as a refined gastronomical culture, which would be enjoyed not only by a privileged few, but by all humans. Other contributing factors were supposed to be alternative dwelling forms and communal housing or communal dining (so-called Phalanstères) respectively. The early French socialist goes on that one can “see in the dwelling of a Phalanstères how delicious the dining is and that one can eat three times as well and as richly for one third of the costs of a meal cooked in a household, that one can live there three times as well for a third of the price, with the added advantage of not having to prepare the food and of storing it.” (ibid., p. 55)

⁵ For more details cf.: Harald Lemke, *Ethik des Essens. Eine Einführung in die Gastrosophie*, Berlin, 2007.

history of Germany, our country, we find that gardens disappeared from the cities only in recent history and in many cases they disappeared from the centers of our provincial towns as late as the second half of the nineteenth century.

However, much more crucial than a historical continuity of a utopian love for agriculture and gardening is the fact that today, at the outset of the twenty-first century and in the age of globalization, we can observe a renaissance of gardens. Even more: in the face of a nutritional crisis and of the drama of the climatic disaster, we are witnessing the rise of a new future for urban kitchen gardens or for subsistence agriculture. Whether it is in Nairobi, Kenya, where the wages are insufficient and where men and women plant illegal gardens on fallow city land; whether it is the gardens by the dachas in the periphery of Moscow helping Moscovites to survive, now that the stores in their city no longer offer enough food at affordable prices; whether we turn to Bishkek, the capital of Kirghizia, where just about each city dweller tends his garden because of the precarious food supply; or whether we set our sights on Cuba where the jobless try to master the permanent crisis by gardening, and on San Francisco where social workers successfully struggle for the establishment of gardens for those without a job and a home. Whether in New York, Buenos Aires, in Kyoto, Samarkand or, for that matter, in Wilhelmsburg, for a number of years now, agricultural food production in the middle of cities has been taken up everywhere. Talking about *urban gardening* or *city farming* means dealing with a contemporary phenomenon that has, so far, received relatively little attention in the general public but is spreading out all over the world. All over the planet, the economic need is growing, as well as the individual desire to produce one's own foodstuff by applying ecological methods and insights.

As early as 1993, the United Nations assumed that approximately 800 million people in the world were involved in urban agriculture, the majority of them in Asian cities. The urban production of groceries is thus responsible for feeding a considerable percentage of the world's population.⁶ There is no doubt that in the

⁶ Luc Mougeot, ed., *Agropolis. The Social, Political, and Environmental Dimensions of Urban Agriculture*, Earthscan, 2005.

future even more people urban settings will recultivate fallow land, contain lawn spaces, or start new vegetable gardens, and join hands to take possession of their immediate living environment, with the goal of transforming it into a useful city garden. The activists and avant-gardists of this new global movement, who practice their gardening as the art both of economic survival and of ethical good living—exemplifying this “avant-gardening” to others through their own lives—have several motives. They have a very wide range and often are heterogeneous: It would be false to assume that each individual garden activist or each particular gardening collective would refer to each and every one of the many good reasons speaking for urban agriculture. But it is exactly that many-sidedness of these arguments that makes the seminal relevance of this natural-cultural praxis and environment-friendly art of living plausible. Quite often, the crucial factor may not even be the striking argument of “averting climate change and saving the world,” but rather a subconscious mixture of motives coming from economics, ethics, aesthetics, the culinary arts, urbanism, everyday culture, etc.⁷

Gardening as a Worthwhile Activity and as a Social Praxis

The phenomenon of mass unemployment in many parts of the world and the fact that the lives of less and less people are centered around a full-time job that secures them a decent living are the causes behind a situation where more and more people live in dire straits, and where they, as individuals, wish to spend part of their time in their own vegetable garden or in a collective one. What is earned by many people as much-needed (additional) income by moonlighting in the “informal sector” of the economy is, for many other people, that which they generate by their (additional) subsistence work in their own garden.

The art of urban gardening has a tangible economic value not only for the poor, the unemployed and those living precariously, but actually for all those who have time or take time for it. A certain grade of self-sufficiency (a state of complete autonomy is rarely achieved in minimal subsistence gardening, sideline agriculture, non-commercial or semi-commercial vegetable growing) brings about a noticeable

⁷ Cf. the article by Lisa Heldke in this volume.

savings and thus a reduced need for money: if you don't have to buy your entire daily requirement of vegetable and fruits, because you produce at least part of it on your own, you will lower your cost of living proportionally. In the face of rising food prices and of the higher price base for vegetables and fruit from ecological sources, garden activists have an economic advantage. If the rise of food prices sharpens as a result of climate change, many people forced to live on little money will either become paupers or they will have to live off of inferior food stores.

These people can, however, access healthy, high-quality natural food if they have a piece of land available where they can produce even more than just the most necessary foodstuffs. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has pointed out that boosting a sustainable, environment friendly and humane kind of agriculture with fair prices for its products could end mass migration into the cities and urban poverty. Only a revival of the rural areas and a fair distribution of the rights to use rural land would be helpful in stopping poverty-motivated migration into the cities. The right to use a piece of land for gardening, to grow kitchen gardens in one's immediate living environment, is an elementary human right and a latifundium of self-determined nutrition.

As an alternative to conventional paid labor, self-determined garden work has both real economic and social value. Since it is not taxable or "relevant for the markets," this kind of gardening work, however, is still not even being considered in global politics, even though it often is a matter of survival for those involved in it. Urban agricultural activities are invisible to the eyes of traditional economics and the national economy, as is the case with female housework. These activities are not finding society's attention because they, like housework, are usually taken care by women. To be sure, the male contingent among those doing gardening is on a constant rise. (Could that be the reason why this work is now starting to receive social attention?)

In contrast to conventional paid labor, self-determined garden work also carries the value of doing something useful with one's life, across all existential and gender borders. I am using the term "doing something useful with one's life" intentionally, because the kind of gardening being discussed here is not a job

creation program handed down by the state; and it should not be part of any kind of program that is forced upon those permanently unemployed. Urban mini-agriculture is an economic alternative only as far as it is carried out by people voluntarily and as part of their conviction that it is an (economically) viable and an (existentially) pleasurable everyday praxis that is part of a good life. That is the reason vegetable gardening will protect the unemployed from undignified inactivity, and why it has an ethical (in terms of the philosophy of life) as well as a social value.

By transforming “work”, such as voluntary gardening work, into a form of self-determined activity, you lay the cornerstone of rebuilding the worn-out model of the job-oriented society into a humane culture-oriented and activity-oriented society.⁸ More and more people are active in this way, performing their daily work without being forced to do so. In that sense, the art of living as a kitchen gardener nowadays is less and less indicative of the renaissance of a kind of economy which means living from hand to mouth on a “primitive level.” Sure, as pointed out earlier, having a kitchen garden close to home is one possibility for the urban poor—whether in southern or northern metropolises—to cheaply acquire fresh, high-quality foodstuffs. But subsistence activities are becoming more and more a question of “lifestyle,” particularly in urban environments where autonomy and new values of life are not only being claimed politically, but where those involved in them want to experience them economically by their own doing. This land seizure is a *radical* and *subversive act*—in the literal sense of those words: gardening means digging the earth to turn over the topsoil to the bottom (Latin subvertere = to turn over) and to get to the roots (Latin radices = the roots). So this process of re-appropriating the land in the city as the working place of one’s own good life goes along with a gain in one’s power over one’s own existence, with a gain in one’s power to acquire healthy foodstuffs that were produced by environmentally friendly methods and to acquire urban spaces. Understanding subsistence-based activities as urban praxis is a consistent part of a gastrosophical art of living, realizing a sustainable way of nutrition. A healthy climate, seasonability, regionalism, biodiversity, short methods of transport, and traceable

⁸ Cf. the article by Adrienne Goehler in this volume.

production methods are goals *also* reached by way of self-supply from one's own garden: City gardens are inconspicuous powers behind the protection of our global environment and climate.

In contrast to the usual activities for protecting environment, which entail keeping nature free of any kind of human interference, urban agriculture is at the crucial interface of man's relations to nature—the agricultural production of food. Since industrial agro-capitalism has had the effect of destroying nature and damaging our climate, the agricultural production of food is faced with the need for fundamental change. Recent reports containing dramatically rising evidence for a global nutritional crisis throw light on the urgency to transform the dominant form of agriculture—relying on large-scale monoculture, massive export trade, intensive use of water, and agro-chemicals and on high-tech machinery—into an ecologically and socially just and fair form of agriculture. Subsistence fields and small-scale production methods are the concrete features of this often cited agrarian turnaround. Urban vegetable gardens, based on ecologically sustainable and labor-intensive methods of working the land, are thus places of creative resistance against a system of food production that exists at the expense of nature and man, in particular of the third-world farmers.

Urban Agriculture: The Concurrence of Climate Protection, Environmental Ethics and Natural Aesthetics

Urban agriculture, or urban kitchen gardening, respectively, combine protecting the climate and environmental ethics with natural aesthetics: they set into motion an irreversible process of greening and re-naturalizing our cities. An ecological garden without the input of pesticides requires less plowing which, in turn, has positive effects on humus development. Humus enriches the soil with carbon, thus counter-acting a further warming of the climate. Any piece of fruitful gardening soil acts as a "CO₂ sink."

One of the ways in which kitchen gardens improve the urban climate is by creating spheres of calm and plant diversity, a resurrection of nature that we can perceive with our senses—natural beauty in the midst of urban culture. Fantastic oases are

created in the middle of crowded metropolitan areas, helping the city dweller to overcome his alienation from agriculture by having more and more aesthetic experiences in and with nature in the form of fragrant, gorgeous, and delicious garden plants. Those types of cityscapes transcend the century-old antagonism of “urban” and “rural” areas.

Urban cultivation of nature is not so much part of the tradition of a *modernistic* utopia of the garden city, whereby inner-city green spaces served only as places of recreation from the coercion to work. Rather, the pioneering city gardening movement of our times realizes the *humanistic* ideal of an urban culture which has “grown up from grassroots”—in both meanings of that expression: the ideal of an urbanity that has been created by urban dwellers and which has grown up in “union with nature”—that is, in union with the experience and the knowledge of an ecological way of producing food and utilizing garden space.

A truly sustainable urban development would rest—certainly not completely, but surely to a high degree—on the “creative economy” which grows and prospers in urban kitchen gardens. In other words: *a progressive urban development nowadays has to include an innovative promotion of urban gardening.* For this reason, a programmatic division between an International Building Exposition on the one side and an International Horticultural Show on the other side, as is the case in Hamburg, should be reconsidered, especially as it is presently carried out politically in Wilhelmsburg as part of Hamburg’s policy of the “growing city.” If there is anything like a “growing city” anywhere, then it is to be found in these places of creative economics and life praxis. “Dwindling cities,” to be sure, can find ways of sustainable growth in the real prosperity produced in urban kitchen gardens. Processes of urban decay as well as of wild urban sprawl in all regions of the world will help the young movement of urban gardening to grow even further.

In their efforts to abide by the international regulations for the protection of the climate and for sustainable development, metropolitan areas and their programs for city development can find enormous potential in those green areas that are used agriculturally and by *urban gardening* activities. If the global economics of food production is supposed to develop along the lines of socio-ecological

sustainability, then the creativity on the side of urban agriculture will *have to* become more significant. Applied to the metropolitan area of the city of Hamburg, the Wilhelmsburg district is especially suited to being fostered as a model for a sustainable culture of urban gardening by developing and testing a “new kind of garden city,” of a culture-nature urbanity: There are a large number of green spaces, interstices and small gardens here which have been used merely as flower gardens and as idyllic “gems of nature,” in the tradition of the dominant nature ideal and of the bourgeois leisure ideal. Thus, cultivating urban kitchen gardens in this part of Hamburg creates significant potential for humanizing nature or rather renaturalizing urban life. On that basis, the desire to create a landmark project of city development, as has been advanced by the citizens’ action committee *Unser Grünes Wilhelmsburg* (“Our Green Wilhelmsburg”), could very well be realized as a socioecologically oriented showcase farm in the city named “Archehof” (“Arc Farm”).⁹

However, up to now there has been no awareness of the importance of this kind of societal praxis, neither in politics nor in the field of city planning. This lack of recognition from politicians and city planners is a large drawback in establishing kitchen gardens. To be sure, there are some cities where the realization is dawning that the culture of urban gardening is able to ease social poverty and generate a creative economy and useful cultural work on the basis of informal structures, as well as vegetate and aesthetically enhance city quarters, improve air and housing quality, and create spaces for social encounters. Some city administrations have decided to boost inner-city vegetable gardening (in Berlin, for example, the city council has decided that the administration of the city districts have to define suitable spaces and furnish starting sets of tools and other materials). Measures of that kind can (or, better: could) be amazingly efficient, particularly if one considers the consequences if the enormous funds presently used to subsidize a small number of huge agrarian complexes were rechanneled toward a large number of small agricultural enterprises and urban kitchen gardening activities.

⁹ BUND Hamburg, *Unser Grünes Wilhelmsburg*, Hamburg, 2006.

Legislative acts as well as political funding instruments can be helpful in making city gardens grow and prosper. For that reason, the general political framework will have a great influence on the future of urban agriculture and gardening work. A good gastrosophically oriented city policy would set as one of its goals to involve those active in kitchen gardening in the development of city life. Among other things, that would mean creating institutions to consult and coordinate the founders of these kinds of initiatives. With a view to the economic goals of such initiatives, it would be necessary to create possibilities for direct marketing of their products in places like schools and other state institutions. The permanent agricultural use of urban space is greatly hindered by conflicts of interest, such as unresolved ownership questions or conditions of lease, or by utilization problems like unresolved cases of industrial pollution and soil contamination. Thus, free soil testing (and, if necessary, soil exchange), the existence of water resources and drainage systems, free distribution of seed materials, and training and networking to insure a good flow of expertise and experience among activists are all necessary measures. Besides that, options for limited-time utilization of fallow land and earmarking or rededicating usable land are highly desirable.

Cultural Creativity Beyond Economics and Profit

One thing that speaks for the economical and subsistence praxis of kitchen gardening is the fact that it is a *creative activity*. It is creative, for one thing, in the artistic sense of creativity, by being self-determined work as is the artist's work. "The creative people" in their city gardens are their own bosses. There is no one else, no employer who could decide or dictate what to do. Gardening creativity is not to be understood or to be mistaken as a *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, as generating something out of nothing. Nature, the soil, the plants etc. are not treated as mere material inputs by gardening—as the sculptor or the architect would treat the stone as mere material with which he would make a piece of art or an edifice. Gardening work as a creative activity is *cultural work* in the original meaning of the word culture. According to the Latin noun *cultura* and its verb *colere*, "working on culture" basically means fostering and nursing or cultivating nature by applying human art, allowing that which is (or can be) in and out of itself to nurture its innate potential and allowing its potential for well-being to prosper.

One of the ways urban gardening actualizes the art of dealing with nature by way of cultural work is that, like any other artistic praxis, it requires thorough knowledge and diligent research of the subject matter. The countless urban gardens presently being created in all parts of the world are irreplaceable production and research sites dealing with a store of knowledge in botany and, in terms of the appropriate urban geography and its ecological environmental requirements, in site-specific expertise on local biodiversity. These cognitive processes and field research exercises have to be carried out if the goal is to conserve the biodiversity of urban nature. In other words: garden activists and garden artists are venerable pioneers of the protection of species and experts of a local store of nature-culture knowledge. These “creative people” are not only responsible for a vitally important greening of the city and for improving the climate in the city, but they also do their share in ensuring the existence of rhizomatic ecosystems and the survival of a diverse flora and fauna. (An ironic as well as subversive example of a similarly creative praxis is the “Peutegrund” project by Nana Petzet, an art project in the context of “Kultur|Natur” that realizes the idea of “greening the port” by illegally upgrading a fallow port area to a valuable biotope worthy of protection.)

Philosophers and Artists as Gardeners

One of the reasons that voluntary gardening work and urban mini-agriculture are not recognized by society as core activities of cultural life can be found in the long tradition of philosophy to look down on anything connected to rural and agricultural farm life. In the final analysis, this tendency to degrade farm work and to construe as *contradictory* the relationship between “city and rural areas,” *between nature and culture*, had its beginning in the early days of Western philosophy with Plato. In the dialogue “Phaidros,” Plato argues for the programmatic alienation of “urban man” from nature: Phaidros accompanies Socrates on a walk outside the Athens city walls. When Socrates, the urban intellectual, expresses his astonishment about nature in this rural environment, Phaidros replies, “Indeed, you are like someone foreign who lets himself be shown around, not like someone from here. That is how seldom you wander outside the

city and across the border, not even outside the walls.” The answer Plato puts into Socrates’ mouth is indicative: “Please forgive me, my best friend. I am eager to learn and field and trees do not want to teach me anything, but the men in the city do teach me.”¹⁰ With nature and culture as poles, the learning city on the one hand and the “idiocy of rural life” (read: Karl Marx) on the other, Plato establishes that set of values—formative for the entire Western history—which positions the environment of nature and rural farm work as the complete opposite of the urbanity of intellectual life in the Polis, by necessity far removed from nature, as the true domain of a humane existence.

These traditional habits of thought and metaphysical dualisms of Western philosophy are losing the last remnants of plausibility in the face of the present environmental crisis. Climate change is bringing a radical confrontation to philosophy: the inescapable challenge to self-criticize its own alienation from nature by setting into motion a *fundamental*—and relative to the interplay of urban and rural areas in urban agriculture and of culture and nature in global agriculture—*gastrosophical self-reformation*.

Contemporary philosophy, however, is only beginning to enter into this process. Or is there already such a thing as a generally accepted philosophical concept of urban gardening work? Are all people conversant with the universal rational ideal of ecological agriculture and urban kitchen gardens? The diagnosis is different for contemporary art. For three decades now, art projects and art performances have been contributing to a cultural reassessment of agriculture or gardening work respectively. Countless artists have been pointing out the social relevance of an “art” that is capable of improving human life and the situation of nature; they have been doing this by staging themselves as gardeners and by enriching the art interventions of “Land Art” and of ecological aesthetics with the gastrosophical aspect of ecological agriculture.¹¹

¹⁰ Plato, Phaidros, 230c-d.

¹¹ Cf. Harald Lemke, *Die Kunst des Essens. Zur Ästhetik des kulinarischen Geschmacks*, Bielefeld, 2007.

The German artist Joseph Beuys has to be named in this context as one of the famous representatives of “Eat Art.” As a socially minded sculptor and revolutionary, Beuys developed his enlarged concept of art by conceptually relating to kitchen and agricultural work, thereby underlining the creativity of their processes. In a performance in the spring of 1977, Beuys planted potatoes in the front yard of the Berlin gallery owner René Block. A knapsack on his back, the artist worked as a “farmer,” as someone gardening. At the close of the “Documenta 6” art festival, in October of the same year, he dug out the harvest of this piece of ecological agriculture. Beuys staged the cultivation of one’s own kitchen garden in the middle of the city as an act of reappropriation of the control of one own life, liberated from the mass production of agro-capitalism.¹² His different gardening and farming projects have had, similar to his project idea of “Gesamtkunstwerk Hamburg,”¹³ far-reaching consequences for social life. In the 1970s, Beuys began to plant more firmly into the general consciousness projects like “gardening art” and performances of “The Gardener as an Artist”; since then, these kinds of artistic activities have developed into a huge multitude of intellectual positions and artistic poses and interrelations. In the meantime, art projects and interventions “cultivating” topics such as nature, environment, ecology, agriculture, sustainability, urban development etc. have become a quite normal part of the repertoire of any political aesthetics.

Nowadays, in many places you see gardens being cultivated as a result of artistic intervention to replace front yards as the last remnants of “natural green,” still characteristic of many smaller cities, and to replace consolidated suburban lawn gardens, “lovely” parks or weedy tree grids along our metropolitan streets—gardens that can infuse urbanized life with an extremely wide range of developmental perspectives in social, cultural, economic, ecological, migratory and urban terms.

¹² The well-known formula, “Every human being is an artist,” which concentrates the “enlarged concept of art” of Joseph Beuys, was originally the title of a TV documentary shown on German public television featuring Beuys as he prepares food. According to Beuys’ philosophy, the art of cooking is one of the alternatives where man can make himself an artist leading a creative life, as is the case with the art of garden.

¹³ About Beuys’ project idea “Gesamtkunstwerk Hamburg” (“Hamburg as a Total Work of Art”), cf. the article by Dirck Möllmann in this volume.

The art and culture platform “Kultur | Natur” part of the “Elbinsel Sommer 2008” (“Elbe Island Summer 2008”) in Hamburg got involved in this bundle of perspectives of city development with a number of projects. One of these was a workshop on “Guerilla Gardening,” where strategies of “green” appropriation of public nature areas were discussed and where recipes for so-called “seed bombs” were exchanged.¹⁴ In another one of these projects, American artist Susan Leibovitz Steinman, with her performance *Gardens for Everyone*, encouraged the local citizenry to embrace the easily accessible praxis of a self-determined way of life by way of working in one’s own kitchen garden. One can start gardening by simply adapting a plastic container to this purpose, but even more so by gaining access to a garden plot, thus creating a piece of self-determined, cultivated city.¹⁵ At the same time, this intervention also topically related to small, local garden clubs, particularly to the club in Groß-Sand and to the Intercultural Garden Wilhelmsburg, which is helpful in improving the social climate by accenting social integration.¹⁶ This kind of garden art as well as the treatment of this topic by artists achieve what comprises the societal relevance of art in the public interest. It gives reality to a cultural praxis and to a sustainable urban development; they are thriving in the Hamburg district of Wilhelmsburg as in many other places around the globe and they are confronting the existing political, economic, and social situation with a concrete utopia and a practical alternative. With the help of “the arts,” or, somewhat more precisely: with the help of a kind of art that intervenes in the ongoing struggle around the complex topic of nature-culture-city—and, in the same vein, with the help of a liberated way of thinking, of a philosophy that intervenes in the ongoing struggle around the complex topic of nature-culture-city—climate change can be dealt with *radically*; taking “radical” in the true and dual sense of that word, namely by its roots: If there were gardens growing all over and for all, neither the “Growing City” nor “City in Times of Climate Change” would be mere

¹⁴ Cf.: Recipes for Seed Bombs in the illustrated volume.

¹⁵ For more on the artistic work of Susan Leibovitz Steinman, cf. articles in this volume as well as in the illustrated one.

¹⁶ Cf. documentation on the Intercultural Garden Wilhelmsburg in the illustrated volume and the article by Lisa Heldke in this volume.

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slogans for public relations campaigns and for agile city planners, but rather universal formulas for a climate-friendly way to a better urban life.

Translated from German by Helmut Bredigkeit