

CULTIVATING PROPERTY

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ABSTRACT

This article talks about the anonymous contributions to a fuller practice of the right to the city: the right to a qualified—and let's add, nutritive—urban environment. In this essay, Moreno argues that these gardens are alien to forms of finding sustenance without cultivation and to dominant social forms of agricultural production. There is an uncanny otherness to the strategies, methods, and effects utilized and, equally, an otherness in the conditions of those who perform the labor: retired, unemployed, marginal, or simply outside the normative time of labor. These gardens are, nonetheless, like other *horti conclusi*, images of paradise, and thus well-deserving of a properly-planted chair for contemplation.

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These notes from the underdog take their impulse from a licentious language slippage which replaces the “underground” of Dostoyevsky’s title with “underdog” and transforms “notes” into something closer to a field notebook, a locus to record the observations of a reality more marginal—more on the edge—than underground, something distant from the attention and visibility of centrality. Yet, these are also notes from under-the-ground, from things that literally grow from the soil. These kitchen gardens are not like the victory gardens on the home front of both world wars, when the “Dig for Victory” appeal underscored the role of food in the war effort. They are more closely related to individual crises than to total conflagrations such as wars, and are, mostly, spaces of otherness, unassuming small paradises created amidst the generalized impoverishment produced by a wider economic crisis. They are simultaneously paradises and protests, places to stage the affirmation of individuality, to make a personal worldview fructify, as well as vehement demonstrations for the right to plant and against land waste—against property as the absurd possibility of desolating the land, of making it barren and uncultivated. They cultivate the fertility of this waste land, turning ground into soil and feeding those who labor on it. Food sovereignty and the right to sustenance were some of the earliest and most evident victims of the Portuguese financial crisis in 2011 and the attendant World Monetary Fund intervention. In Porto, as in many other cities, scarcity—or the collective failure of our society to protect the most vulnerable — pushed many citizens to ingeniously reclaim and make fertile small patches of soil from uncultivated urban land, often on the fringes of infrastructure. Highway embankments, storm and industrial water drainage areas, leftover plots under overpasses, tiny plots adjacent to railways, and many other marginal urban geographies were suddenly made productive for the humble tables of those forced to defend their rights, or better said, to cultivate them with their own hands. This book is a small survey of some of these extreme forms of spatial use that blossomed in those hard times, sampling ten vegetable gardens out of the many that a huge diversity of our fellow citizens decided to plant, farm, broadcast, sow, and cultivate, fighting for their right to sustenance and fulfilling the social mandate of land ownership: till it and make it fruitful. Most of these gardeners are mysterious underdogs, and all of these gardens are underground inventions, discreet bodies invented to literally make the bodies of their inventors and their collectives. These gardens are personal paradises, calling for particular types of terracing to form the ground; for gates and protections made of reclaimed materials to set their limits; for the bricolaging of ingenious tools for their working; for pragmatic means of water storage and channeling; for composting areas to replenish the nutrients on the ground; for learned farming practices capable of enacting cooperation and symbiosis among the vegetables in each garden; and also for a comfortable, preferably reclining, vantage point from which to rest and proudly contemplate a well-laid plot. This book annotates these anonymous contributions to a fuller practice of the right to the city: the right to a qualified—and let’s add, nutritive—urban

environment. To learn from these gardens, these notes from the underdog must maintain the anonymity of the gardeners, because they exist outside what we call the formal system of titles and permits, or citizenship and ownership. Their singularity is being part of the crowd, partaking in and contributing to society without a name that allows them to be recognized or singled out. These gardens share the properties of many other formal places and events but lack a name, a specification of any particular agency or transforming agent. Perhaps it is for this reason that they are inadequately described as informal or illegal. But to label these gardens as without-form or outside-the-law is to be oblivious and incapable of learning from their forms and their laws. These labels are what Martha Rosler calls, with irony, inadequate descriptive systems. Her photographic installation *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–1975) is a protest against the stereotypical photographic representation of Bowery poverty. In contrast to the shameless use of misery even by documentary photography, Rosler proposes two alternative forms of description: on one side, frontal images of the Bowery's vacant storefronts and, on the other, a list of typewritten words associated with drunkenness—revealing both the urban place and the plot unfolding within it, without exploiting vagrants and alcoholics. These notes from the underdog, images and text as well, attempt, through a similar exercise, to unveil the forms, rules, and the laws of these *horti conclusi*. Most food-producing vegetable gardens are, by definition, limited spaces, convincing and concluded gardens, unless we include in this category foraging in the open woods or the openness of gleaning after a harvest. These gardens are alien to forms of finding sustenance without cultivation and to dominant social forms of agricultural production. There is an uncanny otherness to the strategies, methods, and effects utilized and, equally, an otherness in the conditions of those who perform the labor: retired, unemployed, marginal, or simply outside the normative time of labor. These gardens are, nonetheless, like other *horti conclusi*, images of paradise, and thus well-deserving of a properly-planted chair for contemplation. And if their form is a relief to the sore eyes of their gardeners and quite deserving of contemplation, why insist on calling them informal? Can't we see their doors? Their limits? The well-laid rows of crops? The sheds where the tools are kept safe? The gullies and channels for water? The perfectly-weeded ground? The only thing missing is a recognizable form of capital investment. The gardens do not follow the forms and norms that money prescribes: they are a product of scarcity and, thus, a valuable lesson for the wider collective. These gardens are also a form of a protest, imposing order and tillage upon places voided of use and meaning. They organize and formalize grounds that were outside the current order, making visible fantastic “beaches under the cobblestones.” They stage these fantasies in previously nonexistent places: they, the have nots, invent small oases where the haves could only see dust or spaces waiting to be “naturalized” inside highway cloverleaves. And because these places unveil for us what we could not see before, we call them informal, as if form was simply a projection of the

limits of our recognition, failing to see the generous new commons these people are plucking out of thin dust, mist, and smoke. These gardens show us all the words we as a society are forcibly erasing from the lexicon. They find words to say things we might not want to hear, and thus we respond by describing them as something lacking form. Our failure is that we cannot see what Claude Lévi-Strauss argued only the “savage mind,” found in the bricoleur, could see: the potency to transform rubbish—through precious chains of processes, tools, and products—into unexpected fertility, which the anonymous gardener contemplates with glee. The gaze of the architect looks with envy at this contextual foresight and design intelligence which stages the views, builds steps and terraces, retains the land, contrives soil good enough to grow vegetables, develops individual and collective water collection and distribution systems to irrigate said vegetables, fabricates precious tools, and builds fencing systems to secure the fruits of each gardener’s labor out of the collective waste scattered in these voids. For architects, the process of learning from these endeavors might start with the project of formulating a better name, of igniting a better conversation with which to embrace this other architecture, this other way of cultivating the right to the city. Outside-the-law is the other inadequate descriptive system utilized to characterize these vegetable gardens. Rushed descriptions of these humble paradises call them abusive, illegal, or extralegal. Apparently, these farmers do not pay rents, taxes, or fees to the private or public owners of the lands that their labors make produce a yield, which would be the form of law. These yields are thus bastard fruits, not recognized by the pater, the original Latin father at the origin of the heritage or patrimony that organizes private ownership. Yet the product of the toil of these farmers is what fulfils the social sense of property of the land—its productive and fruitful justification—in opposition to the more or less defined absent owner, who abandons the land and renders it waste and barren. Here, the law should take on a new and different form, because this farming of disowned land is simply taking possession of the future in protest against a hard and unfair present. In yielding food where nothing existed before, these farms do not subtract or take possession of anything. On the contrary, they fertilize wasted land and change the outline of the discussion. These gardens are the reverse of the clearing of forests to make farmable land. They do not efface a place; on the contrary, they inscribe a productive possibility in the ground. Most of them are contemporary forms of *rus in urbe*: they bring the countryside to the city, or, more precisely, they bring a memory of the old common lands of the countryside, before the enclosure of land imposed by the duality of public and private. They bring to mind old memories of lands without subdivisions or fences, collectively owned, where each member of the community was responsible for appropriating without depleting, of managing the shared interest of the collective while tending to his own basic sustenance. Most of the gardens in this book arose in places where those memories of the commons overlap with property lines, blurred or imaginary, private or public, and the temporal sense of land reclamation runs in reverse, with the law trying to reclaim

the grounds that these farmers invented. Before the labor of these gardeners, there was no soil for the law to inscribe itself within. It is the law, property law, that is trespassing here, even if these gardens have doors and fences to declare the humble ownership of the food cultivated there. Planting, cultivating the urban soil, is both a right and a form of belonging to the city, and it is despicable and ridiculous to debate the legality of food making, when the inabrogable right to sustenance precedes the right to produce it. Gardens, all gardens, trade in futures, appropriating fruits from under the ground, from the inside of the land where furrows are plowed, seeds are sown, and the soil is then flattened and watered in hopes of a harvest. Kitchen gardens are celebrations of the miraculous transmutation of the ground into food, making the waste ground—amidst the infrastructure and legal fabric— yield and bear fruit. It is not much, but in the present moment—when industrial seeds are modified to have no future, when each crop ends a cycle instead of being a moment of renewal, when each year requires the purchase of new seeds from multinational companies (in the same manner that we renew a software license for a new and improved version), when a farmer can no longer project into the future the collective memories accumulated in his work of seed selection—these farms are in fact a protest as well as an affirmation of the self, a gesture of memory and rebellion. These casual farmers cultivate memories, many of them from quite far away, in time and space. They plant these memories of their ancestral rural cultures—imprinted when they moved to the city—and that patrimony is what they sow. They inhabit the future of the soil with these memories, and in so doing, they provide, they cultivate, they fructify, they feed, and they delineate another form and another law for the right to the city.

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