

**BEYOND CURATED NATURE:  
THE GARDEN'S POTENTIAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the potential of the garden in contemporary art through a range of examples. Specifically, it examines three different ways in which the garden appears in contemporary art: as an exhibition space, an artistic product, and as a strategy. The discussion of these areas is framed by the context of the ecological crisis, which has fostered diverse engagements with issues such as biodiversity and sustainability. The selected artistic positions demonstrate various ways of addressing the ecological crisis and its associated questions, both on a conceptual level and through materiality.

**Keywords:** garden, biodiversity, plant-human relationship, artistic activism**OLTRE LA NATURA CURATA: IL POTENZIALE DEL GIARDINO NELL'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA**

Questo saggio esplora il potenziale del giardino nell'arte contemporanea attraverso una serie di esempi. In particolare, vengono analizzati tre differenti modi in cui il giardino appare nell'arte contemporanea: come spazio espositivo, come prodotto artistico e come strategia. La discussione di queste dimensioni si colloca nel contesto della crisi ecologica, che ha stimolato approcci molteplici a questioni quali biodiversità e sostenibilità. Le posizioni artistiche prese in esame mostrano vari modi di affrontare la crisi ecologica e le problematiche ad essa connesse, sia sul piano concettuale sia attraverso la materialità delle opere.

**Parole chiave:** giardino, biodiversità, relazione tra piante e esseri umani, attivismo artistico

## 1. INTRODUCTION

«To a void confusion, it should be noted that the actual delphiniums will be shown in the Museum – not paintings or photographs of them. It will be a “personal appearance” of the flowers themselves»<sup>1</sup>. At the time of the exhibition «Edward Steichen’s Delphiniums» at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, the appearance of flowers or plants in the museum was a rarity, as the quoted passage from the press release shows. Today, this artistic and curatorial strategy is well established<sup>2</sup>. There are numerous examples of contemporary artists that introduced living entities into the museum space or even abandoned the institutions in order to develop an artistic practice which is to be located between art and activism and takes place outside the museal exhibition space<sup>3</sup>.

In this article, I will focus on the appearance of not only single plants but of gardens.

A glance back in history reveals a long tradition of depictions of gardens, which have served a variety of functions. These range from religious motifs, as in Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500) or Upper Rhenish Master’s *The Little Garden of Paradise* (1410-1420) – where the plants within the hortus conclusus even are identifiable – to idealized and idyllic visions of nature and places of longing as for example in Claude Monet’s *The Artist’s Garden at Giverny* (1900). As Jacob Wamberg suggests in his article «Between Paradise and the Anthropocene Garden. Views of Nature In and Outside the Arts 1600-2017», artistic imaginaries of the garden have changed profoundly during postmodernism<sup>4</sup>. Nowadays, numerous artists engage in the discourses around the ecological crisis<sup>5</sup> and the relationship between humankind and nature. Aspects that are linked to the Anthropocene such as a growing awareness of our environment, biodiversity and the ecological crisis manifest themselves in the content of artistic production, while at the same time also shaping the artists’ approaches, perspectives and even their use of materials<sup>6</sup>. In his article «Flowers after Fukushima», Toni Hildebrandt, for instance, discusses the experimental film *Atomic Garden* (2018) by Ana Vaz, which addresses the topic of contaminated nature and the compelled distancing of humans<sup>7</sup>. In his article «Imaginaries, Scenarios and Materialities. The Arts as Part of Ecology»,

<sup>1</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *Edward Steichen’s Delphiniums. Press Release for Monday, June 22, 1936*, New York 1963, p. 1. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2940>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example «Greenhouse» in the Portuguese Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale, 20 April-24 November 2024 or «No existe un mundo poshuracán. Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria» at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 23 November 2022 - 23 April 2023 are two of countless examples that have included plants in their curatorial strategy. Whitney Museum of American Art (ed. by) *No existe un mundo poshuracán. Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 2022, exhibition catalog.

<sup>3</sup> In his manifesto «Ecoaesthetics. A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century» which is also a call to action, Rasheed Araeen urges artists to leave their studios and direct their artistic skills more towards the challenges humanity faces in terms of ecological discourses. R. Araeen, *Ecoaesthetics. A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, in “Third Text”, XXIII/5, 2009, p. 684; P. J. Schneemann, *Der ökologische Imperativ als Paradigma einer engagierten Kunstgeschichte*, in “Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte”, LXXXV/4, 2022, pp. 436-437. Cf. P.J. Schneemann, *Manifesto. Artistic Articulations of Engagement*, in “Terms. CIHA Journal of Art History”, I, 2021, pp. 18-21 for a detailed analysis of this manifesto.

<sup>4</sup> J. Wamberg, *Between Paradise and the Anthropocene Garden. Views of Nature In and Outside the Arts 1600-2017*, in A. Vandsø (ed. by) *The Garden, End of Times, Beginning of Times*, ARoS Kunstmuseum, Aarhus 2017, pp. 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> In «Post-Apocalyptic Amazement: Aesthetics and Historical Consciousness in the Natural Contract», Toni Hildebrandt examines the relationship between nature, history, and aesthetics in the context of the Anthropocene, discussing Walter Benjamin’s concept of “fallen nature”. Regarding today’s ecological crisis, he argues that catastrophes are no longer isolated, clearly definable events, but rather have become an ongoing reality. This emphasizes once more the importance of artistic examinations of these discourses. T. Hildebrandt, *Post-Apocalyptic Amazement: Aesthetics and Historical Consciousness in the Natural Contract*, in “Technophany. A Journal for Philosophy and Technology”, 1/2, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Wamberg, *Between Paradise and the Anthropocene Garden. Views of Nature In and Outside the Arts 1600-2017*, cit., pp. 19-21. Cf. also G. Aloï, *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, Brill, Leiden 2019.

<sup>7</sup> T. Hildebrandt, *Flowers after Fukushima*, in “Unruly Natures”, 2018. Available at: <https://unrulynatures.ch/Flowers-after-Fukushima>.

Peter J. Schneemann discusses the role of the arts, their methods of engagement in ecological discourses, and the paradigms associated with them. At the same time, he reflects on the consequences of this ecological engagement within contemporary art for the methodology of art history<sup>8</sup>.

My article is dedicated to the question of the potential of the garden in contemporary art. I consider the garden a concept – a curated arrangement of living plants in a defined space – whose connotations over time have ranged from an element of power, intellectual or spiritual expression, manifestation of a will to order, utopia, up to the preservation of biodiversity. Gardens are both shaping and being shaped by our perception of nature<sup>9</sup>.

The structure of the article follows my claim that there are three categories of how the garden is being used in contemporary art. In the next chapter, I discuss the garden as exhibition space. I use specific examples of exhibitions that took place in botanic gardens to examine how this particular exhibition space can influence artworks, and with what opportunities and difficulties an exhibition in this environment is being confronted. The third chapter focuses on the garden as product of artistic practice, whereas Precious Okoyomon's works serve as case studies. In the last chapter, the emphasis lies on the garden as artistic strategy. How does a garden in contemporary art serve as a space for negotiations and how does it sharpen and break with our perception of nature?

## 2. THE GARDEN AS EXHIBITION SPACE

Intensively staring birds is what visitors of the botanic garden of Palermo experienced, when they entered the Padiglione Tineo in the summer of 2022. The portraits of various animals form part of Laura Pitingaro's solo exhibition «Extinctively | Estintivamente. L'Arte tra sensazioni boschive e animali quasi estinti» curated by Diego Mantoan<sup>10</sup>. The disarming directness in which they focus on the viewer eliminates any kind of distance. The recipients no longer possess the role of a silent observer, as they would in a birdwatching scenario, for example, but is directly addressed by the birds' gaze. The urgency of their expressions mirrors the critical situation in which they find themselves: For the exhibited series, Pitingaro chose to portrait birds that represent species that are – due to the human impact on the ecosystem – at risk, some of them are already extinct. Thus, in her artistic practice, Pitingaro deals with the complexity of the human impact on our natural environment.

Another work, which refers to this interest in ecological discourses and that was exhibited in the botanic garden of Palermo is called *Posidonia* (2022). It is the result of Pitingaro's investigation on the eponymous algae. *Posidonia* plays a significant role in the marine ecosystem because it supplies the sea with oxygen and contributes to the marine habitat by its physical appearance. Even though these might be its primary functions, *Posidonia* recently also drew attention regarding its ability to filter and bundle floating plastic

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<sup>8</sup> P.J. Schneemann, *Imaginaries, Scenarios, and Materialities. The Arts as Part of Ecology*, in “Contemporary Aesthetics”, XI, 2024. Available at: <https://contempaesthetics.org/2024/07/13/imaginaries-scenarios-and-materialities-the-arts-as-part-of-ecology/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Szafranska, *Place, Time and Movement. A New Look at Renaissance Gardens*, in “Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes”, XXVI/3, 2006, pp. 194-236; B. Fibicher (ed. by), *I Never Promised You a Rosegarden I and II*, Stämpfli, Bern 1999, exhibition catalog.

<sup>10</sup> “Extinctively | Estintivamente. L'Arte tra sensazioni boschive e animali quasi estinti: Laura Pitingaro”, curated by Diego Mantoan, at the Orto Botanico di Palermo, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Sistema Museale di Ateneo, 16 November - 4 October 2022.

particles in the sea<sup>11</sup>. Pitingaro's visual analysis of the algae which is exhibited in the Padiglione Tineo, integrates in her exploration of ecology and the human impact on ecosystems.

In this case the botanic garden serves as an exhibition space. It is noteworthy both on a physical and on a conceptual level. The performance *Odori di bosco (After Walt Whitman)* (2022) marks a critical moment regarding the meaning of the botanic garden as exhibition space. For the performance that took place on the opening of the exhibition, Pitingaro collected dry leaves from the ground of the botanic garden. Becoming the key material of the performance, the leaves are a subtle, yet strong point of connection between the exhibition space and the sphere of artworks. This is reflected not only in the practical sense of the leaves, that are biological material collected in the garden, but in a conceptual way as well because they became a part of the artwork. Fallen leaves play an essential role in the nutrification of their surroundings as well as assisting in the management of the soil's water balance. This process is especially prevalent in a region like Sicily where the environment faces serious water deficiency and droughts. In this regard the botanic garden marks a moment of conflict. Whereas it would be favorable for the natural process to leave the fallen leaves on the ground, the botanic garden has to build a bridge to its audience. Keeping the well maintained and clearly defined paths clean of fallen leaves makes only a small part of taken measures to evoke a certain image of the botanic garden<sup>12</sup>. In this context, the leaves collected for the performance can thus be read as a manifestation of the discourse in which our ideas of aesthetics and nature collide with the reality of ecological processes.

While it is apparent that the botanic garden can serve as an exhibition space, the question arises as to how it differs from museums and galleries in this respect. But how does this differ from museums or galleries as exhibition spaces? One characteristic I would like to point out and which needs to be highlighted in relation to Pitingaro's exhibition, is its framing. Similar to other institutions, the botanic garden is not a neutral display. Botanic gardens, especially those constructed before the 20th century, are characterized by colonial entanglements<sup>13</sup>. However, after growing concerns about our natural environment in the 1960ies and 70ies, many botanic gardens started to change their focal points and objectives to conserving plant genetics and researching biodiversity<sup>14</sup>. On a theoretical level, the history of the exhibition's environment adds to the exhibition itself, as it frames the artworks. In the case of the garden, this effect gets intensified, as the space, even visually, cannot be ignored by the visitors of the show. For artists working within ecological and environmental discourses, such as Pitingaro, it can provide an ideal framework. Through its proximity to plants, it situates the artwork within a broader context. This can be seen in other exhibitions as well, like in «how like a leaf I am» or «The Greyhouse» in the botanic garden of Bern<sup>15</sup>. In her artistic practice, Alexandra Baumgartner focuses on genetic material of plants. Her concerns for the diversity of

<sup>11</sup> P.A. Aramburu, S. Flecha, C.A. Morell Lujan-Williams, I.E. Hendriks, *Water Column Oxygenation by Posidonia oceanica Seagrass Meadows in Coastal Areas. A Modelling Approach*, in "Science of the Total Environment", CMXLII, 2024, pp. 1-12; N. Porcino, T. Bottari, F. Falco, S. Natale, M. Mancuso, *Posidonia Spheroids Intercepting Plastic Litter. Implications for Beach Clean-Ups*, in "Sustainability", XV/22, 2023, n.p.

<sup>12</sup> As Paolo Inglese and Manlio Speciale pointed out, during the period of closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic measurements, the fallen leaves in the botanic garden of Palermo remained on the ground and were not being collected. P. Inglese, M. Speciale, *The Beauty of Function. Miscuit utile dulci*, contribution to the conference *L'Estetica della biodiversità. La bellezza come motore per la salvaguardia ambientale*, Università degli Studi di Palermo, 15 October 2024.

<sup>13</sup> K. Grötzner Neves, *Botanic Gardens in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainability. History, Contemporary Engagements, Decolonization Challenges, and Renewed Potential*, in "Journal of Zoological and Botanical Gardens", V/2, 2024, pp. 260-262.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 263.

<sup>15</sup> «How like a leaf I am» at the botanic garden of Bern and Photoforum Pasquart, 15 September-24 November 2024; «The Greyhouse» at the botanic garden of Bern, 10 August-22 September 2024.

cultivated plants are reflected in her artworks, which were exhibited in her show «how like a leaf I am»<sup>16</sup>. In 2024, the botanic garden of Bern displayed «The Greyhouse», showing Roberta Faust’s art. The installation was exhibited in the orangery of the botanic garden and was based on scans of extinct plant species from various historic herbaria. Printed out on paper, they were transformed into three-dimensional structures that occupied the space<sup>17</sup>.

The example of Roberta Faust’s work allows for a practical perspective on exhibitions in botanic gardens. At first glance, displaying paperwork in a garden seems counterintuitive. The fragility and ephemerality which, due to the fact that the installation depicts extinct plants, is inherent in the work, is being reflected in the material and its environment. Even though «The Greyhouse» is installed inside the orangery, the artwork is exposed to sunlight and humidity, an ambient which certainly does not correspond to guidelines of paper conservation<sup>18</sup>. However, it is exactly these circumstances that form the core difference in perception of whether a work of art is installed in a museal exhibition space or in a botanic garden. The different circumstances are very distinct compared to the idea of the white cube, as described by Brian O’Doherty in his programmatic essay «Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space»<sup>19</sup>. It is the garden which offers a context and leads to a form of reception that is not characterized by the sacred property that O’Doherty describes for the white cube, and which therefore evokes a distance between the viewer and the work<sup>20</sup>. Rather, the garden as an exhibition space enables visitors to view the works in a space which, also characterized by social norms, relates less to the art system and thus makes the works more approachable.

### 3. THE GARDEN AS PRODUCT

While there are certain thematic tendencies in the content of artworks exhibited in botanical gardens, one notices a broad diversity in their manifestation. Their mediums and techniques, as shown above, include performance, installations and drawings, just to name a few. In this chapter, I shift the perspective away from the garden as a framework, towards the latter as a product of artistic production and therefore as an artwork.

Thinking of the artist in the role of gardener<sup>21</sup> leads towards the tradition of Land Art. Indeed, there are works such as Alan Sonfist’s *Time Landscape* (1965-1978-present), which follow the garden-like curation of plants and trees in their artistic practice. His installation that recreates an indigenous forest, like it grew in the region of Manhattan before European colonization, is the result of research about the local botany and history<sup>22</sup>. However, for the perspective on the garden as a work of art, I argue to expand the term and detach

<sup>16</sup> “Alexandra Baumgartner. How like a leaf I am”, *Photoforum Pasquart*, 2024, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://www.photoforumpasquart.ch/event/alexandra-baumgartner-seed-carriers/>. Other installations, such as Regula Dettwiler’s *Schneeglöckchen Tuff, 3 Blüten*, were exhibited in the outdoor area of the botanic garden of Bern. Regula Dettwiler, *Schneeglöckchen Tuff, 3 Blüten* (1999), installation in the botanic garden of Bern, made of approximately 2000 plastic flowers.

<sup>17</sup> “The Greyhouse”, *Botanischer Garten Bern*, 2024, accessed 8 January 2025, [https://www.boga.unibe.ch/agenda/ausstellungen/the\\_greyhouse/index\\_ger.html](https://www.boga.unibe.ch/agenda/ausstellungen/the_greyhouse/index_ger.html).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. for example “Licht im Magazin, Arbeitsraum und Ausstellungen“, *KEK*, 2024, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://www.kek-spk.de/fachinformation/licht-magazin-arbeitsraum-und-ausstellungen#licht-bei-ausstellungen>.

<sup>19</sup> B. O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, Santa Monica-San Francisco 1986 (the essays in this book originally appeared in *Artforum* magazine in 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ivi*, pp. 14-16 and 49.

<sup>21</sup> In 1999, the art magazine *Kunstforum International* has published the issue “Künstler als Gärtner [Artist as Gardener]”. Also the following issue “Das Gartenarchiv [The Garden Archive]” has been dedicated to the garden. “Kunstforum International. Künstler als Gärtner”, CXLV, 1999; “Kunstforum International. Das Gartenarchiv”, CXLVI, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> “Time Landscape”, *Alan Sonfist*, accessed 12 January 2025, <https://www.alansonfiststudio.com/install/time-landscape>.

the concept of *garden* from the notion that it must be located outside. It is the exhibition «I Never Promised You a Rosegarden», that took place in 1999 and was organized by the Kunsthalle Bern, in cooperation with the botanic garden of the University of Bern, that seems to be particularly interesting in this context<sup>23</sup>. This exhibition did not only exhibit gardens as artworks, like Reiner Matysik's *Alpinum* (1999)<sup>24</sup>, but also discussed the notions of and relationships with gardens<sup>25</sup>. Within the theme of the garden, the exhibition explored the blurred boundaries between the natural and the artificial. The exhibition only marginally touched on topics such as ecology and biodiversity.

Since the exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, which already included artworks related to plants but not necessarily to the notion of ecology and biodiversity, these discourses have developed and become increasingly relevant, as evidenced by the enormous number of contemporary works that deal with them. One example, which gained much attention is Precious Okoyomon's installation entitled *The Milk of Dreams, To See the Earth before the End of the World* (2022). As the title indicates, this artwork was exhibited at the Biennale di Venezia 2022. The immersive installation was presented in the form of a topography and consisted of sculptures and various plants, mainly kudzu and sugarcane. Every now and then, a blue butterfly would cross the visitor's way as they walked through the installation on the designated paths<sup>26</sup>. And it is exactly these winding paths that build an associative bridge to the English garden. During the seven months in which the Biennale di Venezia was open, Okoyomon's work underwent a process of growth. The kudzu plants which at the opening of the show were rather small, grew – as it is characteristic for the vine – rapidly. As a result, the sculptures which in the beginning of the show stood impressively tall in the fields, gradually disappeared into the thicket of the plant.

At first glance the installation seems like a fairytale where one strolls through, but it is in fact charged by heavy discourses. Through the kudzu – used to physically stabilize the exploited soil and therefore prevent erosion after excessive cotton plantation in the American South – Precious Okoyomon refers to the colonial history of that area<sup>27</sup>. This juxtaposition of fairytale and postcolonial commentary is manifested in the title of the article on artsy.net. It reads “Precious Okoyomon Ushers Dirt, Blood, and Butterflies into the Venice Biennale”<sup>28</sup>. It is precisely this dialectic, between beauty and horror, between cognition and immersion that conveys the substance of the work so effectively. It is the dissonance between the notion of the garden as a protected space for experiencing nature, a place to relax, and the cognitive exploration of colonial entanglements and ecological questions that characterizes Precious Okoyomon's artistic practice.

The strategy of using the garden as a product is also tangible in other works by Precious Okoyomon, such as *The Sun Eats her Children* (2023, 2024) which was first installed in a church in Rome and later recreated in a green-house as part of the exhibition «Summer is Over» in the Fondation Beyeler<sup>29</sup>. This time the artist is focused on the immediate relationship between mankind and nature, the relationship between

<sup>23</sup> “I Never Promised You a Rose Garden”, at the Kunsthalle Bern and the botanic garden of Bern, 2 June-22 August 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Reiner Matysik, *Alpinum* (1999), modelling clay, granite, plants, lamps, colour copies.

<sup>25</sup> K. Ammann, *Kleine Philosophie des Gartens*, in B. Fibicher (ed. by) *I Never Promised You a Rosegarden II*, Stämpfli, Bern 1999, exhibition catalog, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Batsaki, *The Plant at the End of the World. Precious Okoyomon's Invasive Art*, in “Critical Inquiry”, L/4, 2024, pp. 585-609.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 585-586. Cf. L. Head, *The Social Dimensions of Invasive Plants*, in “Nature Plants”, III/17075, 2017, pp. 1-7 for a critical discussion of the term “invasive” in relation to the social dimension.

<sup>28</sup> A. Dozier, *Precious Okoyomon Ushers Dirt, Blood, and Butterflies into the Venice Biennale*, in “Artsy”, 21 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-precious-okoyomon-ushers-dirt-blood-butterflies-venice-biennale>.

<sup>29</sup> Precious Okoyomon, *The Sun Eats Her Children* (2023, 2024), installation in Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome in 2023 and in the exhibition “Summer is Over” at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 19 May-11 August 2024.

the spectator and the plants used in the installation in particular. Since the plants included in the installation are poisonous to humans and have the potential to harm the visitor's body, the encounter between human and nature theoretically intensifies and takes place on an even more direct level<sup>30</sup>. While the use of real plants and butterflies in exhibitions is questionable, especially with regard to what happens to them after the show, Precious Okoyomon creates a space for discourses on our perception of nature, reinforced by a similar strategy as we have seen before: the discrepancy between a stunning garden and the potentially destructive character of the plants.

But where lies the potential for the use of gardens as artistic products beyond the artist's intention and what is immanent in the work itself? As a possible approach to answer this question I want to introduce the concept of *plant blindness*. Initiated by James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler in 1999, the concept describes the tendency of *overlooking* plants. The article «Preventing Plant Blindness» lists physiological reasons but also identifies aspects within the education system that could possibly lead to the phenomenon of plant blindness<sup>31</sup>. In the context of this article, the consequences of this phenomenon, the lack of awareness and appreciation of plants, are of particular interest. As Wandersee and Schussler explain, plant blindness could be one reason why, although we know on a cognitive level that plants and plant diversity are essential to our ecosystem, we are not *aware* of it<sup>32</sup>. Especially in the context of today's climate crisis, this consciousness could be a powerful motivator to take an effort towards environmental protection.

According to this concept it is imaginable that the garden as an artistic product serves to overcome plant blindness. This is especially true in the museum context, where people become viewers and their attention is focused accordingly, turning the plant into a work of art. Another strength of the garden as an artistic product is that, in contrast to a single plant, it has an immersive character which reinforces this effect.

#### 4. THE GARDEN AS ARTISTIC STRATEGY

As a third focal point on the presence of gardens in contemporary art, the work *DOTE Garden. Seeding Stories and Relations* (2023) by Aterraterra serves as an example. The project by Fabio Aranzulla and Luca Cinquemani was part of the Dancing on the Edge Festival in 2023 and was located in Palermo. Aterraterra created a framework, a space for discussions and reflections on our relations with nature, specifically with food-plants. In the context of the Dancing on the Edge Festival, they have rented a 100 square meter parcel of urban garden land. By inviting people to contribute food plant seeds that are of personal importance to them, Aterraterra created the basis for the collaborative practice in which they planted the garden<sup>33</sup>. For this article, the letters written by the people who took part in this, are particularly interesting. They talk about the relationship between the selected food plants and the participants. Many letters discuss childhood memories or stories of origin and migration with hints of melancholy; two of them are particularly relevant

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<sup>30</sup> O.C. Yerebakan, *Precious Okoyomon. The Sun Eats Her Children*, in "The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture", September 2023.

<sup>31</sup> J.H. Wandersee, E.E. Schussler, *Preventing Plant Blindness*, in "The American Biology Teacher", LXI/2, 1999, pp. 82, 84 and 86; M.A. Pignatone, *Die Überwindung von Pflanzenblindheit durch die Plantness Studies und Theophrast. Neue Perspektiven auf Pflanze-Mensch-Beziehungen*, in T. Cress, O. Murawska (ed. by) *Posthuman? Neue Perspektiven auf Natur/Kultur*, Brill, Leiden 2023.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 199-215.

<sup>33</sup> Dancing on the Edge, *DOTE Garden. Seeding Stories and Relations*, in "DOTE Magazine", 26 April 2023. Available at: <https://magazine.dancingontheedge.nl/dote-garden-seeding-stories-and-relations/>.

for this chapter, as they break, in a subtle way, with common notions of gardens. The letter entitled «Garlic of Magdalena» challenges the idea of the garden as a place of relaxation or an almost spiritual space for reconnecting with nature<sup>34</sup>. In her letter, Magdalena writes about the garlic industry but also about her encounter with people who discriminate others eating-habits. From her opening paragraph, it becomes clear that she has an ambivalent relationship with the concept of garden, which stems from her childhood during which she was obliged to work hard in her parent's vegetable garden<sup>35</sup>. Reading her letter, our romanticized notion of gardens begins to crumble – it is moments like these where a space for negotiation unfolds.

Less specifically linked to the garden, but more generally related to our understanding of different plant species, is the letter «No Seeds of Natascha», in which she asks Aterraterra to leave some space open in the garden for pioneer plants. These are often considered weeds due to their «tenacity and aggression»<sup>36</sup>, as Natascha describes it. In her letter, she questions the humans' tendency to categorize between different plant species and assess them as “good” or “bad”. Indeed, it is questionable how and why we value plants, especially given that their worth is often linked to their benefit or harm to humans or only evaluated by their aesthetics. A discussion that could also be initiated on the occasion of Precious Okoyomon's work *The Milk of Dreams, To See the Earth before the End of the World*<sup>37</sup>. What can be observed in the work *DOTE Garden. Seeding Stories and Relations* and what has been initiated by Fabio Aranzulla and Luca Cinquemani with the realization of their work is a reflection on food plants. At the same time, it becomes clear that although the garden provides the framework, the essential quality of the work lies not in the physical appearance of the garden, the result of the planted seeds, but in the collective process of reflection. This is the reason why I consider the garden here as an artistic strategy and not as an artistic product as in the examples in the previous chapter.

The critical reflection of how we categorize and treat our natural surroundings leads me to an example that breaks once again with our notion of gardens: Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1991). His interest in the human impact on nature and ecologies of dumpsites led him to his research about the possibilities of phytoremediation<sup>38</sup>. In 1991, in collaboration with the senior research agronomist Rufus Chaney, Mel Chin built *Revival Field* on the area of the Pig's Eye landfill in St. Paul, Minnessota. This area was used as an unpermitted dump site for domestic and industrial waste and the soil was severely intoxicated with harmful heavy metals like cadmium and zinc. For his installation, Chin separated a square area from the rest of the dump with a chain-link fence. Within the square, he created a circle, again using chain-link fence. Furthermore, the area is divided into four equal parts by two narrow paths that both run through the middle. Chin and Chaney used the space in the circle to plant so-called hyperaccumulators – plants that are able to grow in soil that has a high heavy metal concentration and accumulate these metals in their tissue, thereby

<sup>34</sup> Dancing on the Edge, *Garlic of Magdalena*, in “DOTE Magazine”, 26 April 2023. Available at: <https://magazine.dancingontheedge.nl/garlic-of-magdalena/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Dancing on the Edge, *No Seeds of Natascha*, in “DOTE Magazine”, 26 April 2023. Available at: <https://magazine.dancingontheedge.nl/no-seeds-of-natascha/>.

<sup>37</sup> Another dimension that can be observed in the work of artists who use the garden as an artistic strategy would be social aspects and community building. An example of this aspect is Coloco and Gilles Clément's *Becoming Garden* (2018), which is located in the ZEN (Zona Espansione Nord) in Palermo and was part of Manifesta 12. L. Mazza, Manifesta 12 (ed. by) *Manifesta 12. Il Giardino Planetario. Coltivare la Coesistenza = The Planetary Garden. Cultivating Coexistence*, Rozzano, Milan 2018, 176-181.

<sup>38</sup> At that time, the strategy of phytoremediation was still new and not yet properly developed. Cf. F. Tonelli, R. Bhat, G. Dar, K. Hakeem, *The History of Phytoremediation*, in R. Bhat, F. Tonelli, G. Dar, K. Hakeem (ed. by) *Phytoremediation. Biotechnological Strategies for Promoting Invigorating Environments*, Elsevier, Amsterdam 2022, 1-18 for the history of phytoremediation.

serving phytoremediation purposes. The space between the circle and the square was used for planting control plants<sup>39</sup>. The use of chain-link fence, the symmetry and the meticulously precise arrangement of plants mirrors the aesthetic of experimental setups which usually are associated with the field of natural sciences. However, the symmetry and the centralized structure are also reminiscent of Baroque gardens. This is an ironic parallel as Baroque gardens ascribe to a *Zeitgeist* of controlling nature<sup>40</sup>. The fact that Chaney and Chin had to complete 40 hours of training on handling hazardous waste materials makes clear, that the narrative of the defenseless nature or romanticized notions of it is not accurate anymore. The Pig's Eye landfill, which certainly is the result of how human beings treat nature, also shows us the impressive resistance of certain species like hyperaccumulation plants. This is further illustrated by the photographs of the first harvest of the *Revival Field* in 1991, where people are standing between the plants, equipped with gloves and masks<sup>41</sup>. For the installation *Revival Field*, Mel Chin uses the concept of the garden to investigate upon the method of phytoremediation and engages with human made ecological disasters in a very practical way.

Mel Chins *Revival Field* and Aterraterras *DOTE Garden. Seeding Stories and Relations* are only two of numerous examples, that show how the concept of the garden in the broadest sense serves as a medium to engage with ecological discourses, such as the ecological crisis or the human-non human relationship. While the examples discussed here already demonstrate how art and activism merge, some artistic projects additionally include efforts of social urban regeneration, such as the *Bowery-Houston Community Farm and Garden* (1973) in New York, initiated by artist Liz Christy<sup>42</sup>, or *Becoming Garden* (2018) in the Zona Espansione Nord in Palermo, initiated by Manifesta 12 in collaboration with Coloco and Gilles Clément, and now managed by the Associazione Zen Insieme<sup>43</sup>.

To answer the question of the potential of the garden in contemporary art, this article has shown how the garden can serve as an exhibition space, an artistic product, and an artistic strategy. However, in order to deepen the discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the garden, although a curated construct, is made up of living beings. As Donna Haraway points out, in multi-species projects, each member of the project is in one way or the other involved in the lives of the other members<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, it would be fatal to exploit and reduce the garden, along with its living beings, to merely an artistic tool. Rather, these artworks demand a sense of responsibility from the artist – an aspect of their role that should be further reflected upon. Nevertheless, the examples of exhibitions discussed here, as well as the garden itself as both artwork and artistic strategy, make it possible to engage with ecological discourses in a theoretical but also immersive way, even outside the museum space.

<sup>39</sup> “Revival Field”, *Mel Chin*, accessed 11 March 2025, <https://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field/>; “Invisible Aesthetic. Revisiting Mel Chin’s *Revival Field*”, *Walker*, 2017, accessed 11 March 2025, [https://walkerart.org/magazine/mel-chin-revival-field-peter-boswell-rufus-chaney-eco-art#\\_ftn20](https://walkerart.org/magazine/mel-chin-revival-field-peter-boswell-rufus-chaney-eco-art#_ftn20).

<sup>40</sup> J. Wamberg, *Between Paradise and the Anthropocene Garden. Views of Nature In and Outside the Arts 1600-2017*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> “Interview *Revival Field*, Mel Chin”, *Art21*, accessed 11 March 2025, <https://art21.org/read/mel-chin-revival-field/>.

<sup>42</sup> “History of the Community Garden Movement”, *NYC Parks*, accessed 11 March 2025, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/community-gardens/movement>.

<sup>43</sup> In his article “The Public Artist as a Fringe Agent for Sustainability. Practices of Environmentalist Driven Art-Activism and Their Digital Perspectives”, Diego Mantoan identifies four categories of sustainable art: «ecological interventions», «community engagement», «radical action» and «digital presence». D. Mantoan, *The Public Artist as a Fringe Agent for Sustainability. Practices of Environmentalist Driven Art-Activism and Their Digital Perspectives*, in A. Schwan, T. Thomson (ed. by) *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital and Public Humanities*, Springer, Cham 2022, pp. 501-521, pp. 509-510.

<sup>44</sup> D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, New York 2016, pp. 71-72.

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