The practice of agency is discussed with reference to the project *Garden Service*: a participatory public art garden installation in an Edinburgh courtyard.

Taking care of public space

Meike Schalk & Apolonija Sustersic

Through an examination of the public art project *Garden Service*, in this text we explore possibilities of and obstacles to practices of agency. The project was commissioned by the art institution The Common Guild in Edinburgh for the exhibition *Jardins Publics*, which took place in connection with the Edinburgh International Festival in summer 2007.[1] It was based on the participation of a community and the communication between different actors, from institutions and associations to individual local residents, communication which included solving conflicts as well as building partnerships.

For *Garden Service,* together with inhabitants of a council house and members of a housing association, we built a temporary garden on a public lot located within a courtyard. The point of departure was our research into a specific urban situation in the centre of Edinburgh. The collecting of information and a critical analysis of the particular spatial situation – its social, economic and political dynamics, and its inhabitants' practices of everyday life – were constitutive parts of our project. How, what, and from whom information was provided formed the basis of a process of participation, which resulted not only in analytical criticism, but produced first and foremost a proposal for change. We suggest that practices of agency have their beginning not in intellectual anticipation, but in actions. In these actions the

1 The Royal Mile in Edinburgh with one of the typical narrow entrances to a close



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artist, the planner, the activist, and everyone else engaged are not only involved and connected professionally, they are also acting as citizens.

We worked with *Garden Service* for approximately half a year, during which time we frequently returned to Edinburgh to collect information and make contacts. Very early we decided to address the peculiar situation of mixed public and private areas in the closes adjacent to the Royal Mile. The Royal Mile is one of Edinburgh's greatest tourist destinations, leading from the castle to the newly built parliament by Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue. The closes are accessible through small

2 A gate separates a private garden from the public area within Chessel's Court

3 The observation platform before the intervention of a temporary public garden



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entrances from the main road *[1]*. This spatial situation creates a sort of backstage, where actors may prepare themselves for their main act on the stage: the street. Spaces such as Chessel's Court, which became our project location, are at once secluded from and connected to the Royal Mile. They are frequented not only by residents, but also by locals and tourists taking a rest or having lunch off the main strip. The fact that the site is subjected to multiple uses by different groups – insiders as well as outsiders – gives rise to various conflicts around issues such as discarded rubbish and noise disturbance.[2]

Within Chessel's Court, some buildings belong to a housing association where inhabitants own their flats, and other buildings contain council flats rented by tenants. Some years ago the housing association bought a public part of Chessel's Court, an alley adjacent to one of their buildings, fenced it in, and transformed it into a garden, so withdrawing it from the public sphere *[2]*. The tenants of the council flats do not have the means to buy public parts of the court. Nevertheless, it was a resident of a council house who had started, very discreetly and illegally, gardening on a public spot when we decided to work with Chessel's Court *[3]*. In terms of gardening, he received advice from a woman in the housing association, who had been involved in the creation of the first garden, which now belongs to the housing association. Despite existing class differences between the various groups in Chessel's Court, which would become obvious during later discussions, here there was already the existence of an established partnership across the two housing groups, demonstrating the strong desire of the residents to take things into their own hands and to change the situation.

Thus with *Garden Service* we became involved with an already ongoing activity. We invited the neighbourhood to a public hearing in the nearby community hall to see if there were more residents who wanted to engage in the transformation of the public spaces within their courts. We learned about conflicts between different groups, such as their opposing views on design and safety issues. Together with the residents we opened up a discussion on the private care of public spaces. Addressing the issue of the legality of gardening on public land, we asked for permission from the Authorities to build a garden in Chessel's Court. After an initial refusal and several negotiations we were only able to achieve permission for a temporary garden for the time of the exhibition. During the following planning and installation phase, we understood our role as that of intermediaries in a process of self-organisation. Our own agenda was to support and study the transformation of the place and the overwriting of its identity in respect to the different layers of social and legal relations, which we will discuss here in terms of participation, agonistic plurality, the appropriation of space, and performance and performativity, using terms and concepts drawn from Patrick Geddes, Chantal Mouffe, Henri Lefebvre and Judith Butler.

Spatial negotiations

Garden Service was inspired by the work of the biologist and town planner Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), a former resident of the Royal Mile. Geddes planned a network of seventy-five gardens, of which several were installed in various closes along the Royal Mile around the turn of the last century.[3] Geddes was a firm advocate of the value of gardens as social places and gardening as time spent towards the common good. He was also an anarchist and befriended the anarcho-geographers Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, whose ideas of a society based on the natural principles of evolution he shared. Instead of progress through *competition*, the view of social Darwinists and liberal economists at the time, they felt the world – both nature and society – would develop only through *cooperation*. Although putting forward town planning as a subject for all citizens in cooperation based on participation and radical democratic principles, Geddes rejected the system of a representative democracy, as he feared that with different political parties, society would disintegrate into various rival groups. What is strangely absent from Geddes' social concept is *the political*: the possibility of a 'dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations', to quote the political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe distinguishes the 'political' from 'politics', which 'indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political"'.[4]

Negating conflict, Geddes' *politics* take place in the form of the unifying practices of gardening, and in theory – because he never really had the chance to test it – town planning. Gardening and town planning were for Geddes to be conducted through the direct actions of entire neighbourhoods. Part of it is the creation of common aesthetic experiences of nature and art, delivered through walks, exhibitions, and the staging of masques or performances. Although Geddes' conceptions of a good society are based on collective cultural experiences – processes through which a society connects emotionally *and* represents itself, which largely happen in public space – there is no thought of, or space for (class) struggle, conflict or antagonism, as one would expect. There are radical thoughts in Geddes' societal constructions, such as his emphasis on common *practices* and collective agency, which could be described as a form of empowered, responsible and engaged, even passionate, citizenship. What is problematic is that he never developed these thoughts beyond a mere idealistic narrative, and chose to neglect the tensions that might emerge within processes of collective agency in the public sphere. For the anarchist Geddes, public space is conflict-free, there are no legal borders, rules or regulations to obey, and space is only shaped and determined by natural boundaries and everyday culture. We took up this undeveloped thread and the project *Garden Service* reveals possibilities and problems with self-generated activities. On the one

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hand it shows openings, and on the other it also points to the limitations that arise when a body of legal regulations originally built to protect public space is challenged.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre points to the paradox that in order to protect public space, and the individuals in public space, the space must be dominated by rules and regulations *[4]*. An order created for preventing violations is always immanently built upon a power that restricts the use of that space. Against this abstraction of space, Lefebvre posits the activity that shapes social spaces, the *appropriation* of spaces. In practice this means that there is always a spatial conflict between domination and appropriation, as in the case of illegal or guerrilla gardening.[5] On the one hand, the state and its laws can never fully control public space from appropriation; on the other hand this space is always threatened with potential repressions. Important for Lefebvre, however, is that social space, meaning appropriated space, poses the possibility of a counter-culture or counter-space as it can provide an alternative to an existing situation.[6] This is not so far from Geddes' suggestions for collective agency, although Geddes sees space and place as not being produced by political struggle or the opposition of public/private as Lefebvre does, but as being formed

4 Prohibition signs in Chessel's Court

5, 6, 7 The gardening workshop with residents of Chessel's Court



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and determined by natural features, which produced cultural conventions naturally. Against any such essentialism, Lefebvre understands conflicts in Marxist terms, as a quality and not as a problem. Society bears a utopian potential that can only be described in terms of contradictions between the possible and the impossible.

For the project *Garden Service*, we asked the authorities for the permission to build a garden on a piece of public land that was already under transformation. The so-called 'observation platform' was once an institutional green of veronica bushes; in the 1980s it had been covered with concrete, and was now to be reconfigured as a garden. At first our request was refused with the justification that the platform might suffer structural problems through

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the construction of a garden. After proving that there had once been a garden there, and several debates, we received a temporary permit during the exhibition *Jardins Publics*.

From a constructivist perspective, law always points towards measurements that limit the complexity of life. This enables decisions that are orientated towards general rules, under a totalising discourse. So, on the one hand, law fails to take into account the complexity of social realities – including the right to difference and heterogeneity. However, this right is not ignored, but also made available for courts (institutions), as well as citizens, although there exists a power difference between legal and individual statements.[7] Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech*, criticises the productive potential of state law

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8 The seating area. In the background the stairs providing access to the green bluff

9 The temporary garden was inaugurated with a fête

10 Sunday tea talks were held during the time of the exhibition *Jardins Publics*

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as repressive. She focuses less on the normative order, on the existence of laws themselves, as Lefebvre did, and more on the implementation or the interpretation of laws.[8] Extending from her suggestion of performative repetition as a means of establishing norms as well as of transforming them, law is not simply given but negotiable. A constructivist perspective like Butler's implies the possibilities of creating another discourse of law.[9] A discourse that can liberate, shift meanings, and break through existing orders, and that is open ended.[10] There is a chance that a conflict can become a forum for change, when norms are not only repetitiously and performatively re-enacted and re-experienced, but also overwritten and changed.

Together with the residents of Chessel's Court we chose to insert some simple urban elements designed to make spaces available for use, not only for the people living in the court without a private garden or outdoor space, but also for other locals, as well as strangers. By installing stairs to a green level and providing a set of picnic blankets we supported already ongoing activities. In a workshop under the professional leadership of a gardener, in participation with Chessel's Court's residents, both homeowners and tenants, we installed a temporary garden with edible plants in movable containers *[5, 6, 7]*. The platform was equipped with large custom-made tables and benches *[8]*. The garden was opened with the re-enactment of a garden party according to the instructions of an elderly lady who used to organise these kinds of fêtes every summer with the support of most of the residents until she felt too old to continue taking the responsibility *[9]*. After its opening, a series of Sunday tea talks with garden lovers and experts, advertised on a tree, was held in connection with the garden *[10]*.[11]

Art practice as a practice of agency

Garden Service has been a *participatory art project*, which consisted in the process of negotiating with participants and authorities, and not in the garden as an object itself. What does this mean for a practice of agency? According to the art historian and critic Grant H. Kester, socially engaged and critical art practices during the 1960s and 1970s 'often focused on an internal critique of the work of art, [which they expanded] into a set of positive practices directed towards the world beyond the gallery walls, linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism.'[12] Since then, there have been various other practices that employ concepts seeking to grasp an art production in which an art piece, in the sense of a physical object, was not necessarily central, replaced by an activity that invited the participation of an imaginary community.[13] Attempts to frame *socially engaged art practices* have been Suzi Gablik's 'connective aesthetics', Suzanne Lacy's 'new genre public art', Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', Grant Kester's 'dialogical art', the so-called 'context art', and 'community based art'. Art projects that were based on social processes rather than on aesthetic objects, and that required the participation of an audience, challenged the frame of traditional exhibitions. With it came a wave of institutional critique.[14]

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11 The once temporary garden was transformed by the residents into a permanent public green taken care of by private garden lovers

What do we understand under all these terms? The common denominator for these more recent tendencies can be seen in a care for the participants and places' specific socio-political identities.[15] Several contemporary art practices have developed a critical examination of spatial problematics.[16] They have been conceptualising their projects mainly based on various forms of action research and public participation to question the usual passivity, non-activity or strictly regulated behaviour within planning processes. Their collaborative, consultative approach has deep and complex roots in the history of community art and cultural activism. The practices call for interdisciplinary collaborations of professionals with various knowledge and experiences, practitioners and theoreticians. They would often be addressed as spatial practices, which describe both a critical analysis of spatial relations and various forms of interventionist strategies that are being devised by professionals and non-professionals. They address questions of community and act as an agency.

As already mentioned, 'participation' has become a key word and a strategy for operation for different spatial practices. We could describe many modes of operation and variations of social interaction related to the notion of participation – from involving the public in a discussion via traditional exhibitions or other forms of publishing to inviting them directly into collaborative, creative processes, which provoke a dialogue. In *Garden Service* we addressed participation already within the research process. The dialogical encounter with the residents living in Chessel's Court and others related to our project created a specific situation where knowledge and information was exchanged through non-pedagogical – meaning non-hierarchical – processes, mainly through conversation, meetings, and one to one interviews.

Further on in the process a form of 'direct participation' developed in workshops involved residents in a production where there was space for individual creativity and community dialogue. Such a form of participation gave everyone involved a feeling that they possessed the power to change something that had seemed to be difficult, or even impossible, to change. Further than this, they actually enacted that change. The relationship described as participation could create a condition for a constructive democratic development in city planning, as in what Chantal Mouffe describes as 'agonistic plurality'. With this Mouffe means a form of struggle, which does not take on the form of 'antagonism', as in a struggle between enemies, but of 'agonism', as in a struggle between adversaries.[17] In this case, ideally, every party involved, activist group and institution, has to speak on equal terms, in respect to power relations. The agonistic model recognises passions, and probably also desires (although not in Mouffe's vocabulary), as a mobilising force towards democratic ends by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.

The form of an art exhibition seems to us especially useful as a test site for community

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projects, which when successful have usually been taken over and continued by an organisation, group or individual. The project *Garden Service* provided a platform for different, sometimes even oppositional, thinking where a dialogue among different participating groups, city authorities, and media, was possible. Conflicts did occur, especially around the issue of whether or not to build a gate for the new garden to keep out homeless people. The staging of a fête was also met with resistance by a few residents who were afraid of too many strangers invading 'their' court. In the end the fête took place with overwhelming support.

The garden is a public expression of private care and shared benefit – a public green space created and looked after by private garden lovers. The example raises questions about the provision and the use of communal spaces in the very centre of the city. We believe the city of Edinburgh, and especially its historic centre, is very well suited to the needs of the tourists who invade the city looking for attractions and entertainment – but it offers little to those who keep the city alive and vibrant at all times of the year, the residents living in the historic centre.

The temporary garden that was supposed to disappear when the exhibition finished has developed and entered a new phase. The residents of Chessel's Court have pursued the project further and a permanent permit was granted. They have removed the pots and most of the concrete slabs, and inserted the plants into proper flowerbeds *[11]*. The garden we installed together presents an old/new prototype, and is a reminder of the value which Geddes placed on gardening. With its shared facilities it offers places to linger and it serves as a meeting place where insiders and outsiders encounter each other. During the time of the exhibition and the festival the garden was animated by specific programmes. Today, Chessel's Court is part of the Greenyonder Tours programme exploring 'Hidden Gardens of the Royal Mile'.

Notes

1. We thank Katrina Brown, the curator of the show *Jardins Publics*, for the invitation to participate, and for her enthusiastic support throughout the project. Many thanks also to Katie Nicoll, project leader, Wendy Short, and Daniel Kilean.
2. For understanding the relationship of the closes to the Royal Mile, see <http://www.edinburgh-royalmile.com/closes/royalmile-closes.html>. Click on the close's name [accessed 9 April 2009].
3. For a discussion on Geddes' gardens of the Royal Mile, see Sofia Leonard, 'Patrick Geddes and the network of gardens in the Old Town of Edinburgh', Conversations under a tree at Chessel's Court for *Jardins Publics*, Edinburgh International Festival (2007).
4. Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism', *Political Science Series, 72*, ed. by Christine Neuhold and Gertrud Hafner (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000), p. 15, and Chantal Mouffe, 'Politics and Passions. The stakes of democracy', *CDS Perspectives* (London: Centre for the Studies of Democracy, 2002), p. 7.
5. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), originally published in French *La production de l'espace* (1974), translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, pp. 164–5, p. 343.
6. Ibid., p. 387, 349.
7. Susanne Baer, 'Inexcitable Speech. Zum Rechtsverständnis postmoderner feministischer Positionen in Judith Butler's "Excitable Speech"', in *Kritische Differenzen – geteilte Perspektiven. Zum Verhältnis von Feminismus und Postmoderne,* ed. by Antje Hornscheidt, Gabriele Jähnert, Annette Schlichter (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), pp. 229–50, p. 276.
8. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 65.
9. Baer, p. 239.
10. Ibid., p. 244.
11. Warm thanks are owed, first and foremost, to the dedicated residents of Chessel's Court, to Jenny Mollison, our marvellous gardener, to the joinery and carpentry workshop especially of David Harvey and his team, and the Sunday tea talk speakers, Rolf Roscher, landscape architect; Greig Robertson, Edinburgh Communities Backgreens Initiative; Sofia Leonard, Patrick Geddes Centre and the Cockburn Association; and Anne Jepson, social anthropologist, School of Social and Political Studies at the University of Edinburgh.
12. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 9.
13. See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*...(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), and 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power', in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 341–58.
14. See *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. by Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), especially Suzi Gablik, 'Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism', pp. 74–87; Suzi Gablik, 'The Dialogic Perspective: Dismantling Cartesianism', in *The Reenchantment of Art*, ed. by Suzi Gablik (London; New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 146–66; and Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).
15. Alex Farquharson quoted in *Nya relation-aliteter – ett seminarium om kruxen med relationell och interaktiv konst*, programme description for a seminar 25 February 2006, IASPIS, Stockholm.
16. For example atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) from Paris; Constant from Brussels; Park Fiction from Hamburg; public works from London; WochenKlausur from Vienna, among many others.
17. Mouffe, p. 9.

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