# Introduction

*Erin Despard and Monika Kin Gagnon*

In his introduction to garden theory, *Greater Perfections* (2000), John Dixon Hunt outlines a field of study which is both impossibly broad and, he argues, necessarily specialized. As a starting point, he notes that the garden finds its etymological roots in words denoting 'enclosure' in many languages. On the basis of this rather minimal defining feature, he generates a vexing range of garden types. Amongst some thirty-two gardens cited by Hunt, are such diverse species as rose gardens, vegetable gardens, landscape gardens, cloister gardens, bog gardens, therapeutic gardens, container gardens, and corpse gardens. Contributors to *Public: Gardens* add even further variants to Hunt's typology, referencing many garden forms in historical and contemporary contexts. For example, there are the "botanicuratorial" museum gardens described and analyzed from an eco-critical perspective by J. Keri Cronin; the numerous forms of school garden analyzed by Kai Mah from the perspective of John Dewey's pedagogical philosophy (whose experimental school at the University of Chicago incorporated a garden as early as 1896); and finally the very special form of allotment garden which is the Alex Wilson Community Garden, whose inception is animated here by one of its creators, Richard Brault.

Such diversity speaks to the generativity of the garden form. As Lesley Johnstone, former artistic director of the *International Garden Festival* in Grand-Métis, Québec, asserts, gardens represent "an ideal place for experimentation and innovation" (2007, 7). Not only is there a great deal of flexibility in what can be considered a garden, gardens in general are inherently "approachable" compared to other art forms. Also, "[b]ecause they are places conceived to be used, because they are outside and thus subject to the variables of weather and nature, because they implicate visitors' bodies as well as their minds, gardens offer particularly intense aesthetic experiences" (9). A good example of how such potential is exploited is found in Jane Hutton and Adrian Blackwell's *Dymaxion Sleep*. Created for the 2009 festival and featured in this issue, it is at once a sensual olfactory garden, a play structure, and inspired quotation of Buckminster Fuller's famous geodesic dome. The hydroponic community garden known as *Flood*, created by the artists' collective, Haha, and discussed here by Heather Davis, similarly demonstrates, though in a very different context, how a garden can facilitate new forms of collective agency and expression. Both kinds of gardens experiment not only with design and artistic practice, but also with processes of perception, participation and social relations.

The openness implied in this potential for experimentation, however, exists in a somewhat paradoxical relationship to the garden's etymology and the qualities for which it has more traditionally been valued: that is, of providing a space of seclusion set apart from the world and offering opportunities for reflection, relaxation and disinterested aesthetic appreciation. While such qualities are important to the overall cultural significance and ubiquity of gardens, there is already a

great deal of garden scholarship, which has elaborated on them. We are more interested in exploring engagements that challenge the garden's apparent separation from politics. As earlier works in garden history have demonstrated, if a garden encloses, it also excludes (Pugh 1988, Harris 2003). Many contributions to *Public: Gardens* thus ask: what might the implications of bringing formerly excluded elements, or the garden's 'other' within the scope of its study? Wilderness, the uncontrollable, even the unattractive—what do these philosophical and aesthetic species bring to the garden's ecology?

Working along these lines of inquiry, several contributors draw attention to the boundaries and edges of gardens, and the ways that these serve to both exclude and privilege certain qualities or characteristics. For example, Jill Didur's essay explores the colonial history of planthunting expeditions in the Himalayan mountain ranges of Nepal, through the chronicles of Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers*, and demonstrates how this history influences the contemporary designation of plants as 'gardenworthy' or not. Taking a more concrete approach, Susan Herrington's photo essay of extraordinary hedges in Vancouver reflects on the significance of using plant life to demarcate boundaries between public and private spaces. Finally, Lisa Uddin's analysis of attempts to anthropomorphize and choreograph the sex lives of pandas at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, demonstrates how garden elements helped to create a setting in which heterosexual norms could be reproduced and naturalized for the public.

Other contributors focus on how the garden's boundaries can be stretched to promote social and political interventions. Broken City Lab's 'removable gardens', for example, attempt to inspire residents of Windsor, Ontario, to creatively intervene in the city, and to actively imagine its transformation. Working in a similar direction, the contributors to the "Mobile Gardens" portfolio present interventions that are at once whimsical and practical in their response to changing urban environments. Meanwhile Gina Badger's critique of the use of the 'seed bomb' by guerilla gardeners argues that in order to become more radically political, such garden-making must do more than simply beautify. We are also very pleased in this context to present two new texts from garden designer Gilles Clément, whose gardens always have an explicit political program, and whose writing on gardens has been influential (and controversial) in the worlds of ecological garden design, landscape theory, and garden studies. Clément has a history of working with plants often rejected by other designers for being weedy or invasive, but whose habits of growth and movement around the garden help to make it a more dynamic place, and solicit a different kind of attention from visitors. The garden described in this issue (and theorized in part by Clement's notion of 'symbiotic man'), features stinging nettle—a plant that is usually shunned due to its capacity to sting and irritate human skin, but which in this context produces other effects: the cleansing of a polluted environment, and the creation of an opportunity for community empowerment and education.

Other artists featured in this issue have stepped outside the garden's boundaries to investigate and support the life and beauty of those elements that have escaped its control. For example, Oliver Kellhammer's found garden of flourishing weeds and indigenous flora, *Concrete Island*, offers an ecology for local insects and birds to co-inhabit in unexpected ways, while Mike MacDonald's long-time commitment to creating butterfly habitats, has led to the planting of naturalistic, abundantly beautiful gardens across Canada. The Wayward Plants Registry rescues abandoned plants that have, in a sense, been ejected from the garden, and attempts to reintegrate them into

healthy human-plant relations. Finally, Aviva Rahmani's *Trigger Point Garden*, which is part artwork, part ecological restoration, seeks to bring wildlife back into the garden, and to find an opportunity there for mutual healing.

The reprinting of literary writings on gardens by poet, Lisa Robertson, by novelist, Sandra Cisneros, by nineteenth-century writer, Catharine Parr Traill, and French Situationist founder, Guy Debord, animate even more varied approaches to imagining what makes a garden.

A survey of the texts and works collected here confirms the necessity of the almost impossibly open-ended definition provided as a starting point by Hunt. Building on this openness, *Public: Gardens* highlights the garden as an ideal site for experimentation and innovation. It seeks to give life to a wide-ranging conversation, one informed as much as possible by concerns beyond the garden's boundaries. In so doing, we hope to show that gardens need not be limited to landscapes of leisure or mere ornament but rather, belong equally in the realms of art, ethics, and politics.

### References


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