



Community gardens as public art

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to discuss community gardens as works of public art. Even if artistic status of gardens has been widely recognized, it is usually taken into account when historic gardens and parks or works of contemporary landscapes architects are concerned. However, there are good reasons to approach community gardens as artworks, as well. First, aligning community gardens with contemporary art is honorific, in the sense that it shows that they may be considered in another way than seeing them only as vernacular art, significant because of its social and political dimension. Second, in spite of their allegedly edenic character, community gardens are very often contested spaces, while the conflicts may be sparked by, among other things, the community garden aesthetics. In order to recognize community gardens as art it is useful to refer to new genre public art and not to “paradigmatic arts” such as architecture or painting.

Keywords: art, community gardens, public art, new genre public art.

*It doesn't have to look like public art
Don't make it for a community.
Create a community.
Don't waste time on definitions.
(New Rules of Public Art, 2013)*

1. INTRODUCTION: CITIES, GARDENS AND ART

The garden is one of the most influential *topoi* in Western culture. Rich in edenic connotations (Fagiolo, Giusti Cazzato [1999]; Fenner [2022]), it has been used in various cultural and historical contexts throughout the ages to think of utopic spaces where different, sometimes even contradictory qualities were supposed to meet. As such, it has been also conceived of as a sort of ideal landscape, be it natural or man-made. Thus, it has also served as a useful metaphor describing the whole world as bountiful and harmonious, a world where people live in peace and enjoy the fruits of their labor, and where at the same time nature is allowed to flourish (Pietro-

grande [1996]). As a result, gardening, understood as planning a garden as well as cultivating it, has been recognised as a model of how landscapes should be designed and managed. Since one of the 18th-century landscape architects was said to have leapt the fence and seen that the whole world was a garden (Hunt, Willis [1988]: 313), gardening has been frequently pointed at as a reference for landscape architecture. Even if in its origins the reference was mainly aesthetic, it has nowadays acquired mainly environmental tones. Let's turn our planet into a garden! – such is an adage that is often offered as an indication how people should approach the environment in the Anthropocene. In fact, it seems that the concept of Anthropocene has reinvigorated the old idea (Di Paola [2017]; Diogo et al. [2019]). It is then no wonder that the garden metaphor has been used with regard to cities (Spirn [1984]), and cityplanning has been discussed in terms of gardening (Berleant [1992]).

At the same time, however, garden may be interpreted as a *topos* in a fully material sense, i.e. as a material space that has, in fact, been designed and cultivated in line with the meanings and values associated with the idea of the garden. Gardens may be conceived of as effective utopias or heterotopias (Foucault [1986]). This holds equally true for medieval herbal gardens, early modern gardens, as well as for private back yards, allotments or community gardens.

The fact that all gardens are inevitably *topoi* in the metaphorical, as well as literal sense of the term – their design and maintenance require as much theory as down-to-earth practice – is their strength and weakness at the same time, since it makes them desirable on the one hand and threatening the “non-gardenesque” *status quo* on the other. An illustration of this tension may be found in the words of Rudolf Giuliani, former mayor of New York City. During a debate on the future of urban gardens in the city, he claimed that «if you live in an unrealistic world, then you can say everything should be a community garden» (quoted in: Light [2000]).

Even if one may be skeptical about turning cities into community gardens, the beneficial role

of urban green spaces is beyond discussion. No matter whether they are historic gardens, public parks, squares, allotment gardens or community gardens, they have important cultural, social, political and environmental functions. Even if the idea of a garden-city is nowadays mainly a historical concept, it is hard to imagine a contemporary city – no matter how large – without green spaces of one sort or another, or without urban green programmes. It is then understandable why much attention has recently been paid to these issues by the academics who quite unanimously appreciate green spaces, including community gardens, as determinants of city dwellers' physical and mental well-being.

It is noteworthy, however, that it is this perspective precisely that defines how contemporary urban gardens are usually interpreted and appreciated. If gardens of the past – from Renaissance villas and Baroque formal gardens to English landscape gardens and 19th-century city parks – are seen as having various cultural, social and political functions, as well as aesthetic or artistic values, today's private yards, gardening allotments and community gardens, playing similar roles, seem largely devoid of aesthetic qualities or lacking any conspicuous aesthetic qualities. Even if, philosophically speaking, the idea that gardens are art works is debatable (Leddy [1988]; Miller [1993]; Ross [1998], Salwa [2014]), it is widely acknowledged within garden studies that they are. Nonetheless, this belief is largely limited to grand historic gardens and sophisticated contemporary landscape designs. It is as if it did not make any sense to think of urban gardens, that is, gardens belonging to and cared for by ordinary people, in terms of works of art. In order for a garden to be considered a contemporary artwork it has to be either designed by a professional landscape designer (historically speaking, landscape architecture evolved from the art of gardening), or an element of an artistic agenda realized by a professional artist or an art institution. In fact, it is land art that is mentioned as the offspring of the gardening art (Ross [1998]). One could also here add ecological art, since many “ecoventions” (Spaid [2002]),

[2017]) are based on gardening practices. If modest urban gardens are approached as art, they are tentatively analyzed as vernacular artworks, that is, vernacular works whose artistic qualities still have to be reckoned and acknowledged. (Hunt [1993]; Sheehy [1998]).

There are at least two inter-related reasons for the reluctance to think in artistic terms of gardens that are neither noteworthy works of landscape designers nor planned and cultivated by artists themselves. First, gardens, if approached as works of art, are compared to works of “paradigmatic arts” (Saito [2007]: 18-28) such as painting, sculpture, architecture, sometimes poetry and music (Hunt [1998], [2000]; Miller [1998]) and analyzed accordingly, that is, in terms of form (style) and content (meaning). What is more, approaching them as art is less of a classificatory act and more of a qualificatory one – certain gardens are thought to be artworks because of their excellence (Assunto [1988]). Second, aesthetic qualities of gardens are thought to be analogous to those one can find in paradigmatic arts, beauty being the most desired one, which implies, among other things, a contemplative mode of aesthetic experience. Hence, there may be little doubt that ordinary or vernacular gardens – sites less of contemplation than physical labor – more often than not do not meet the abovementioned artistic or aesthetic criteria. In other words, allotment and community gardens fall prey to what may be termed art-centeredness.¹

At the same time, it is difficult not to agree with Michel Conan who writes:

Why does contemporary Garden Art receive so little attention from art critics, even less than Land Art, Earthworks or Landscape Design? This is somewhat extraordinary since gardens have been more numerous and ubiquitous in contemporary western cities over the last fifty years than at any previous time in their history [...]. One may say that gardening is one of the very few arts that has been practiced on a large scale

by amateurs, as opposed to painting, sculpture, or any of the new visual arts during the last forty years, and sometimes with a degree of success that earned their authors local or even world-wide recognition. (Conan [2007]: 3).

One way to introduce gardens into the field of art and to approach them in terms of works of art that Conan has in mind is to change the artistic references. It is not painting, sculpture or architecture that one should take into consideration, but public art. This holds especially true for community gardens. And there are good reasons to make this move.

Above all, it may be claimed that all gardens, even private ones, are at least partly public, since «the garden is an interface between the privacy of the house and the civic property of the street. It is a space onto which others can look, examine and judge» (Taylor [2008]: 6). However, there may be little doubt that certain gardens are more public than others, and this is the case not only of historic gardens or city parks, but also of community gardens.

Just as paradigmatic arts may seem to be the evident context in which one should place gardens of the past – statues and buildings were frequent in gardens, whereas paintings offered iconographical and compositional motifs used in them – so is contemporary public art for urban gardens, even if for reasons other than iconography or style, 20th and 21st century city parks are public spaces *par excellence*, so it is quite self-evident that they should be considered in the context of public art. Yet, analyses have hitherto mainly focused on them either as works of landscape architecture that have an inherently public character (the public character, though, has been usually analyzed as having nothing to do with their artistic qualities) or as spaces where monuments or statues («cannons in the park» (Baca [1995]: 131)) are placed. Undisputedly, such a view is justified and may be fruitful, but it does not quite apply to community gardens because they differ so much from other urban public green areas in their looks and functions. A closer context for community gardens

¹ In this respect they share the fate of nature (Carlson, Berleant 2004; Carlson 2009) and the everyday (Leddy 2012; Saito 2007, 2017).

may be found in the already mentioned land-art or ecological art, both public genres, too, and ones that have tried in one way or another to overcome the paradigmatic arts, and in doing so have raised issues that are crucial also for community gardens (e.g. the relationship between people and nature). There is, however, another form of public art, with which it is possible to juxtapose community gardens and what seems to be the closest artistic framework they may be put in. Namely, new genre public art.

What follows, then, will be a sort of analogical reasoning that is supposed to lay foundations for acknowledging that community gardens are public art. Lucy Lippard once stated that «the park is probably the most effective public art form there is – the park itself as an ongoing process, the domain where society and nature meet» (quoted in Hergreaves [1983]: 63). It seems that it is possible to make an analogous statement about community gardens.

2. NEW GENRE PUBLIC ART: FROM SITE-SPECIFICITY TO COMMUNITY-SPECIFICITY

Public art is an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, it may be said that «no art is “private”» (Hein [1996]: 1) and that «no one asked for art to privatized. It has always been part of our collective commons, the means by which the fruits of imagination are plowed back into shared experience. [...] There is no such thing as “public art.” Either it’s art or it’s not» (Gormley [2016]: 30). On the other hand, the concept of public art may be limited to a family of art forms that emerged in the second half of the 20th century and have «conceptual links with such traditional art forms as the medieval cathedral and the mural and temple ruins of ancient Mexican and Latin American civilizations» (Hein [1996]: 1), as well as statues or gardens, but which at the same time differ from them in some respects.

However, even in this narrower sense, public art is hard to characterize in terms of form and content. As Patricia Philips claimed «though pub-

lic art in the late 20th century has emerged as a full-blown discipline, it is a field without clear definitions, without a constructive theory, and without coherent objectives» (Philips [1998]) and so «public art can take any form or mode of encounter» (The New Rules of Public Art [2013]). As a result,

a clear definition is elusive because public art is simply difficult to define. Under the vast umbrella of public art one finds permanent works, temporary works, political activism, service art, performance, earth-works, community projects, street furniture, monuments, memorials, and—let us not forget —“plunk” and “plop” art. Temporary works can be site-specific and memorials can exist as interventions; the practice of public art weaves in and around itself, existing in layers. Public art can incorporate a single object or an entire streetscape. (Cartiere [2008]: 9)

Notwithstanding these reservations, it is possible for Cameron Cartiere to define public art. It is to be located «1. in a place accessible or visible to the public: *in public*; 2. concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: *public interest*; 3. maintained for or used by the community or individuals: *public place*; 4. paid for by the public: *publicly funded*» (Ibidem: 15). In other words, the public character of art stems as much from the place it is to be found in, as «from the nature of its engagement with the congested, cacophonous intersections of personal interests, collective values, social issues, political events, and wider cultural patterns that mark out our civic life» (Philips [1988]). Public art, then, is public insofar as it is located in a public space, but more importantly, it it becomes public «when it is intended to engage or address the public» or «it becomes public through the public’s engagement with it» (Palmer [2016]: 210). As such it may be «site-specific, i.e. a product of artistic creativity designed and intended for a specific, publicly owned location [...] It may also be place-specific, a creative product resulting from collaboration between artists and a community» (Fisher [1996]: 43).

In the history of the 20th-century public art, it is possible to distinguish three models, which

Miwon Kwon termed phenomenological, social (institutional), and discursive, as well as three “paradigms”: art-in-public-places, art-as-public-spaces, art-in-the-public-interest (Kwon [2002]). Even if, she claims, these models or paradigms are not historical phases in the evolution of public art, it is possible to notice a significant shift that took place over the years. Site-specificity, understood as a relationship between a work of art and its location has been replaced by community-specificity (Kwon [2002]: 112). As a result, the “publicness” of public art is not so much rooted in the fact that is located in a public space, as in its relations to «the sphere we share in common», a sphere based on «individual consciousness and perception» (Philips [1998]). Public art, then, has become more focused on relations, and

since relations exist in the eye of the beholder, the audience (before it too was eliminated) became a necessary ingredient in the work of art, rendering it public in a new and non-ceremonial sense. Public art became vernacular, having to do not with a spirit that magnifies as it collectivizes, but with ordinary, unmythicized people in ordinary places and with the ordinary events of their mundane lives. At the same time that it became more abstract, public art also became more explicitly communitarian. The audience no longer figured as passive onlooker but as participant, actively implicated in the constitution of the work of art. (Hein [1996]: 3)

The result of the abovementioned shift was what Suzanne Lacy famously called “new genre public art”. She wrote:

for the past three or so decades visual artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility. Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time—toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity—a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. The source of these artworks’ structure is not exclusively visual or political information, but rather an internal necessity perceived by the

artist in collaboration with his or her audience. (Lacy [1995]: 19)

The art Lacy has in mind is also denoted by other terms: community art, dialogical art, littoral art, participatory art, socially engaged art. Concepts like relational aesthetics, connective aesthetics are also applied.

It will not be a gross oversimplification to state that new genre public art – as difficult to define as public art – is a form of art that addresses a wide range of cultural, economic, social and environmental issues specific for a certain community, that is, issues that are experienced as important by members of a particular group. In this sense, it is public in a very local way (Baldini 2019). In doing this, this kind of art is based on collaboration with the people to whom it is directed in the first place, thanks to which they participate in making it. New genre public art – contrary to art-in-public-spaces or art-as-public-spaces – is rooted in the “collaborative turn” (Lind [2010]: 177-204) and it willingly employs the do-it-yourself, do-it-together, or use-it-together strategies (Lowndes [2016]).

As far as the aims of new genre public art are concerned, it is very often seen as a means to create a social change by, among other things, empowering people, creating communities or enhancing those that already exist, offering people a possibility and tools to express themselves and represent what is important or problematic from their point of view. To put it differently, art is understood as a form of a “social practice” based on “social interaction” (Helguera [2011]). Despite that new genre public art may be seen as resulting in alleviating social or political tensions or in creating harmonious relations among people, such “ecumenical intentions” (Philips [1998]) are not indispensable. Quite the contrary, they may be unwelcome, since they imply an unrealistic and dangerous vision of a community free from antagonisms. As Patricia Philips states in the context of American public art,

it is important to consider that the most public and civic space [...] was the common. The common represented the site, the concept, and the enactment of

democratic process. This public area, used for everything from the grazing of livestock to the drilling of militia, was the forum where information was shared and public debate occurred: a charged, dynamic coalescence. The common was not a place of absolute conformity, predictability, or acquiescence, but of spirited disagreement, of conflict, of only modest compromises—and of controversy. (Ibidem)

If new genre public art is equated with community art, it is possible to follow Patricia Philip's claims that «public art is about the idea of the commons», while «the space of the commons» was once meant to «articulate and not diminish the dialectic between common purpose and individual free will» (Philips [1989]: 333). In other words, what makes new genre of public art new and public is the fact that it addresses and engages in the common understood as a space – real or imagined – where various meanings and values converge or conflict and so do particular experiences of the people who are engaged in an artistic activity.

Not only does new genre public art redefine site-specificity by accentuating the fact that public space may be understood as a sphere where various individual experiences meet, but it also changes the way in which the temporal dimension of public art is understood. On the one hand, it rejects the perpetual character of art in public space as epitomized by monuments or other art works that are supposed to be immutable and permanent. On the other, it is far from being ephemeral because in order to effectively cause the desired social change, it has to last as a social practice. In this respect, new genre public art is meant to „express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective” (Ibidem: 332).

3. GARDENS AS ART AND NON-ART

Even if, as it has been noticed above, every garden may be regarded as at least partly public, some of them are undoubtedly public in the sense that they are by definition open to general public. In the light of what has been said in the previous

section, they may be seen as art-as-public space. They fulfill Cartiere's criteria – they are “in public”, “of public interest”, “public space” and “publicly funded” – and are regarded as art in the sense that they share certain characteristics of such artworks as architecture, paintings, or sculptures: they are skilfully designed, have certain aesthetic qualities and carry meanings. This is how historic gardens, city parks or botanical gardens are usually thought of and presented in general historic accounts, manuals, coffee table books or tourist guides. Yet, there are other urban public gardens, which are public in the same sense of the word and to the same extent, but are not regarded as art: allotments and community gardens.

The reason of such an approach lies not in these gardens themselves – in many aspects they do not differ at all from gardens recognized as art – but in the way art is conceived of. Indeed, they hardly trigger associations similar to those one may have in a historic garden or a city park appreciated for its style, overall message or historic significance. Such a view seems to be largely characteristic of not only amateur gardeners or garden lovers but also of garden scholars.

Garden studies, combining perspectives of various disciplines, art history, anthropology, sociology, biology, ecology etc., cover all sorts of gardens. Despite that in its beginnings it focused on historic gardens, it gradually included other green spaces that could be labelled gardens. In fact, it is now assumed that the garden is an open concept, because «the range of places that can be envisaged within this category is enormous and various, and it changes from place to place, and from time to time» (Hunt, Leslie [2013]: XII). It is, however, equally important that «this diversity does not wholly inhibit us from knowing what it is we want to discuss when we speak of the garden» (Ibidem). In other words, «there are many definitions of gardens [but] there seems to be a kind of agreement about the term “garden”» (Gröning [1997]: 221). John Dixon Hunt cunningly suggests a pragmatic criterion, useful in establishing whether a green space is a garden or not: «you know a garden or garden-like space when you see one or enter into

it» (Hunt [2015]). Yet, at the same time, he offers a very useful definition of a garden:

a garden will normally be out-of-doors, a relatively small space of ground. The specific area of the garden will be deliberately related through various means to the locality in which it is set; by the invocation of indigenous plant materials, by various modes of representation or other forms of reference (including association) to that larger territory, and by drawing out the character of its site (the genius loci). The garden will thus be distinguished in various ways from the adjacent territories in which it is set (Hunt [2000]: 14).

It goes without saying that a garden is ‘made of’ natural materials: plants, stones, water and the like, which are usually, but not necessarily, combined with various artifacts. Hunt underlines that the reasons why gardens are created are «practical, social, spiritual, aesthetic – all of which will be explicit or implicit expressions or performances of their local culture» (Ibidem: 15). Interestingly, he also adds that a garden is a physical site, as well as «a place experienced by a subject» (Ibidem).

The above definition works very well not only for historic or botanical gardens and city parks, but also for gardening allotments and community gardens. It is due to the fact that no reference to art is made in it. Yet, when Hunt or other scholars discuss gardens or garden-like spaces, they very often place them in the context of art by approaching them in a manner very similar to that in which they would analyze and interpret visual arts or architecture. As a result, gardens are seen as works that are based on a complex, well-thought design created by a skillful professional who had a clear intention and consequently, as works that have a particular style, convey a particular message and have particular functions. In other words, gardens are treated as ‘cultural objects’ that represent meanings and values that can also be found in literary works, paintings, sculptures and buildings. What makes them different is their medium, partly consisting of animate and inanimate elements of nature. Seen in this way, gardens are

to be appreciated in the way works of other arts are appreciated. Their appreciation requires from their owners or visitors not only certain cultural capacities but also an ability and possibility to experience them in a distanced, disengaged way, even if such an experience takes place only when one has already entered the garden.

Such an approach necessarily privileges gardens that were and are meant to serve representative functions and/or are or were pleasure grounds. As a result, utilitarian gardens, e.g. kitchen gardens, that is, gardens requiring physical labor and agrarian skills, seem to be devoid of artistic or aesthetic qualities because these cannot be possessed by a garden that is not supposed to be contemplated and interpreted but only used a place where plants are cultivated. If these gardens are cultural objects, it is not because they are fruits of cultivated soul (*cultura animi*) meant to cultivate or please other spirits but because they are sites where cultivation is practiced in the most literal and down-to-earth manner (*agricultura*)².

The same holds true for allotments and community gardens, which are, to a large extent, utilitarian, even if they are also sites of amusement. Given the social and political significance of the former and growing social interest in the latter, they have been quite extensively studied. Particular attention has been paid to the history of allotment gardens (Bell et al. [2016]; McKay [2011]; Nilsen [2014]). They have been discussed mainly from the point of view of cultural studies and sociology, that is, perspectives that recognize them as sites rich in practical functions (e.g. providing fresh food for working-class families, fighting shortages of food during times of war), as well as social and political meanings (e.g. empowering workers, creating worker’s associations as stakeholders). If the aesthetic values of allotment gardens have been taken into account, they have

² It may be useful to introduce here the concept of artification (Andrzejewski [2015], *Contemporary Aesthetics* [2012]) and to state that some gardens are approached as art, some are artified, i.e. seen as if they were artworks or were similar to artworks, while some are definitely treated as non-art.

been usually thought of as accessory and expressing a longing for beautification according to the class tastes. So, if it is possible to speak of “the art of the allotments” (Crouch [2003]), it is more of a honorific gesture aimed at recognizing the value of these modest utilitarian gardens as places towards which people feel affection, than a fully-fledged recognition that they may be interpreted as artworks.

Allotment gardens are often juxtaposed with contemporary community gardens. Community gardens are usually urban gardens cultivated by a group of people who do it individually, being responsible for a plot assigned to them, or collectively, sharing duties. The space where communities gardens are created may be either appointed by the local authorities or be occupied illegally or semi-legally by the gardeners. Community gardens may also vary in terms of their functions (food production, creating a good neighbour community, setting a space for local cultural activities, improving urban environment, teaching lessons to children, expressing people’s identity, resisting neoliberal economy, etc.), all of which are not exclusive and, more often than not, overlap. «Community gardeners garden in community. [...] People come out of their private dwellings to create and tend the gardens in common» (Nettle [2014]), which requires co-operation, self-help, applying for financial resources, looking for support on behalf of the city authorities. Even if community gardens belong in one way or another to people who take care of them, they are usually also open to visitors from the outside, even more – they tend to be organized as enclosed spaces inviting visitors to enter them and take advantage of their functions.

In fact, gardeners, as well as scholars and local policy makers who run urban green programmes tend to see community gardens as contemporary embodiments of the edenic idea of the garden, as sites where various city-dwellers’ needs may be negotiated and satisfied, while gardening as a practice which is «a labor of love that combines the best of environmental ethics, social activism, and personal expression» and thanks to

which «one learns not only practical skills associated with gardening – the steps necessary to nurture seed to fruit – but also the civic mindedness» (Lawson [2005]: 301).

Contrary to other public gardens, whose paradisiac aspect is closely linked to their artistic qualities, community gardens are approached as urban paradises that are too earthly, too common, to be considered works of art.

4. COMMUNITY GARDENS AS COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC ARTWORKS

As *topoi*, community gardens do not differ from other public gardens or other garden-like spaces. They are heterotopias: clearly defined spaces, created and maintained according to an ideal, but at the same time reflecting relations, hierarchies and tensions typical of the surrounding environment. The factors that make them different is their collective character, as well as persons who create and grow them, and ideas, aspirations and needs these people have. It is mainly the latter that give these gardens their vernacular character and make the idea of associating them with art seem almost preposterous.

However, if we compare the agenda of new genre public art and the agenda of community gardens, the similarities are strikingly obvious. In both cases the stake is acting in a public space conceived of as a site, as well as a sphere where different experiences cross, and offering an occasion and means to make it accessible to those who otherwise may be excluded or dominated. Such an action is supposed to be based on co-operation and dialogue involving audience to whom it is addressed and who play an active part in it. As a result, either the members of a community may find an adequate expression of their identities, or a new community centred on shared meanings and values is created. What is more, if such an action is to be effective, it has to be sustained in such a way as to avoid ephemerality and, at the same time, leave room for dynamic changes and conflicts. In fact, seen in this light, community gardening turns

out to be a genre of new genre public art, whose specificity lies in the fact that it is based on cultivating nature, which is both a social and environmental action. It is then no wonder that some artists and art institutions create community gardens.

The abovementioned similarities make it possible to think of community gardens that have nothing to do with the artworld as public art. Indeed, the only difference between them and the artworld-run community gardens lies in the fact that they are not created by an artist and, thusly, are not a part of an artistic agenda. However, given that lots of new genre public art projects are social actions that are supposed to bring about a social change and that the artist often acts as «an individual whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity» (Helguera [2011]: 3), their artistic status is purely institutional. Setting the institutional umbrella aside, a community-garden-as-art may be perfectly like a ‘mere real’ community garden. In fact, it is, since it is a community garden after all. So why not think that a community garden may be like an art work? Or that is an art work? If an artist may be someone who initiates a community garden, then someone who creates a community garden may be seen as an artist, even if a non-professional one.

There are at least two reasons why approaching community gardens as new genre public art may be fruitful. First, aligning community gardens with contemporary art is honorific, in the sense that it shows that they may be considered in another way than seeing them only as vernacular art, significant because of its social and political dimension, but at the same time shaped by the uncultivated tastes of the gardeners who crave for a nice environment. Regarding community gardens as new genre public art allows one to approach them as fully-fledged artworks, whose vernacular character is decisive for their aesthetic qualities, which cannot be subsumed under the label “beautification”, as they are much more than that. In other words, one may notice that community gardens have various aesthetic qualities resulting from what these gardens are, namely sites created and maintained thanks to a collec-

tive effort based on a constant collaboration and dialogue, not always peaceful and harmonious, that are the reactions to people’s everyday needs (Moraitis [2020]).

Just as new genre public art questioned many assumptions as to what art – or good art – should be like or what aesthetic qualities it should have as art, community gardens undermine numerous common beliefs about what a garden as a public space should look like and what purposes it should serve. The lesson we may learn from community gardens is that contrary to what someone acquainted with historic gardens and public parks may think, a garden does not have to have the qualities that paradigmatic artworks have. Community gardens may be said to “deactivate aesthetic function” (Wright [2014]: 19), so pivotal for paradigmatic arts, in the sense that they promote a sort of “aesthetics of engagement” (Berleant [1997]), that is, a way of experiencing them which does not consist of contemplating them, but of being fully immersed in them and physically active. In other words, the approach suggested here may help one discover the aesthetic qualities of community gardens as qualities similar to those which are characteristic of new genre public art, and which are not those traditionally associated with art. Only when the aesthetic function is deactivated is it possible to notice that the be-together-work-together-use-together policy may produce distinct aesthetic qualities that are the vehicles of social or political meanings and values.

The other reason why the suggested approach may be useful is the fact that in spite of their allegedly edenic character, community gardens are very often contested spaces. Inevitably, there are tensions among gardeners, as well as between gardening groups and other residents who are not interested in participating in their activities, or between gardeners and decision makers in city councils. Such conflicts may be sparked by, among other things, the community garden aesthetics that – as has been said above – does not necessarily fit the general expectations as to what public space, be it a garden or not, should look like and what functions it should have.

Similar controversies are often present within new genre public art, which may be easily accused of being “unaesthetic”. There may be little doubt that applying the criteria used in paradigmatic arts to it is useless. This, however, raises the question of how to appreciate this genre of public art. Following Vid Simoniti, one can state that new genre public art is not an autonomous form of art, that is, it is not to be «evaluated by its own standards», but heteronomous, that is, it has to «be evaluated by standards of other fields, such as politics, religion, ethics, and knowledge» because in it, «artistic activity [is aligned] with political action to a level virtually without precedent» (Simoniti [2018]: 74). This means that the artistic value of this kind of works of art lies in their impact on people and they should be appreciated accordingly. In other words, what makes this public art so new is the fact that it does not have any qualities that it would not share with non-artistic actions. As a consequence, these artworks need to be compared to non-artistic actions that had or have a similar impact – a good work of new genre public art is one that brings the desired social change in a manner that cannot be attained by non-artistic actions and that is responsible for its effectiveness (Ibidem: 80-81).

What, then, makes a new genre public art work a good one is the fact that in all its heteronomy, it cannot be replaced, since it is unique not because of what it achieves – after all, it serves extra-artistic purposes that may be realized in other ways, too – but because of how it achieves it. In order to be able to evaluate the artistic value of such artworks, one may ask the following questions:

Is it good work, according to its type: art, urban design, or community project? 2) Does it improve or energize its site in some way—by providing an aesthetic experience or seating (or both) or prompting conversation and perhaps social awareness? 3) Is there evidence of relevant or appropriate public engagement or use? (Senie [2003])

Harriet F. Senie, who suggested the above questions as leading to a “responsible criticism”,

believes that «successful public art has to score on all three [standards] or it isn't» (Ibidem). A good work of new genre public art has to meet these three standards, for it is their combination that makes it irreplaceable.

The perspective sketched here on where and how to look for artistic qualities in new genre public art is useful when community gardens are concerned. When applied to community gardens, it allows one to appreciate them as works that have certain qualities that can be recognized and evaluated when one thinks of these gardens not in terms of their visual attractiveness, environmental impact, food production efficiency etc. but in terms of their social and political effectiveness, that is, in terms of how a community is created and sustained in them. This is the perspective from which other qualities, such as the abovementioned ones, are to be judged.

It seems that successful community gardens are sites or environments that cannot be substituted by anything else, just as community gardening is an action that may achieve social and political goals in such a way that cannot be found in any other actions. And yet, it is all about gardening in the most down-to-earth sense of the word, a sense that has nothing to do with art, unless we think of it as new genre public art.

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is an old concept that has been widely used in landscape architecture, namely “genius loci”, the spirit of the place (Hunt, Willis [1988]; Nollman [2005]). Originally, it referred to natural conditions of a site where a garden was supposed to be set up. Today, it denotes also and above all the character of a place built out of values and meanings associated with it by the people who live in it (Jackson [1994]; Relph [1976]). It seems that what makes community gardens so particular as gardens is their genius loci, resulting from their publicness. One way to recognize and appreciate it is to treat community gardens as works of new genre public art. Only then can one see that com-

munity gardens – together with their harmonies and disharmonies – may create a social reality in a manner that cannot be encountered elsewhere. And this makes them like the gardens whose artistic status has never been questioned. At the same time, their edenic character is rooted in different aesthetic qualities and this is why they may offer «the emancipation, assertion, and gratification of sensuous or aesthetic needs that are qualitatively different than those available in the established order» (Nun [2013]: 664). At the same time, the emancipation, assertion, and gratification of these needs «are both a means and an end of social transformation» (Ibidem).

Suzi Gablik opts for what she terms “connective aesthetics”. According to her «we need to cultivate the compassionate, relational self» and «to go beyond our culture of separation—the gender, class, and racial hierarchies of an elite Western tradition that has evolved through a process of exclusion and negation» (Gablik [1995]: 86). In terms of art, this amounts to making art that is based on «the reciprocity we find at play in an ecosystem» and entails «the old specializations of artist and audience, creative and uncreative, professional and unprofessional—distinctions between who is and who is not an artist—begin to blur» (Ibidem).

Of course, connective aesthetics may be promoted in many ways and in many places, but it is hard to think of any that would be more effective and more fitting than community gardening and community gardens.

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