

HIGH PERFORMANCE

Contemporary Issues in Art, Community and Culture



Rites of Spring

Procession to Save Our Gardens

by Phyllis Rosser

The African drums and conch shell trumpets grew louder as the female bearers entered the garden. Seated on their palanquin was a vine-like statue of Gaia, the ancient Greek earth goddess, veiled in gauze and encircled with flowers. (Gaia also refers to the New Age religion that considers the entire planet a living organism.) She was escorted by a priest in flowing African robes and colorfully costumed figures representing earth, wind, fire and rain. Carried above her head on poles were two votive angels of protection. Behind the pole carriers were huge fantasy puppets representing beneficial garden spirits and other costumed figures such as Ka, god of compost; a Trash Monster made of plastic bags, and two Mud People wearing round masks and loin clothes, their bodies completely covered with caked mud. These mysterious figures, who resembled the tricksters of Native American tradition, moved silently through the festivities, symbolizing the earth wandering through the city.

When the 50 people in the procession had entered the ritual space at La Plaza Cultural, a New York City garden at 9th Street and Avenue C (one of 60 small gardens in the East Village and

Lower East Side), the priest invoked a blessing for the garden, holding aloft a tulip bulb taken from the goddess' body, and a ritual pen. The garden's representative used the pen to ceremoniously mark the garden's location on a 6' x 5' fabric map being carried in the procession. This ritual corrected the city map given to private developers, which does not indicate the gardens. Communities were later able to use this large map along with an 8' x 4' book of photos and garden histories (compiled the previous year) to lobby City Hall to save their gardens.

The procession began at 8 a.m. at Norfolk and Stanton Streets on the lower East Side of Manhattan and looped through a twelve-block area before proceeding to an eight-block section of the East Village between Avenues A and D. It circled through the Loisaída (Spanglish for Lower East Side) Block Festival several times to enhance its visibility and provided a celebrational mood in an area better known for its garbage and drug-ridden streets.

Gardeners responded at each of the 30 gardens being blessed with their own rituals. Members of the twelve-year-old La Plaza Cultural garden performed a short pageant symbolizing the birth



Gardener wearing Latino-Mayan-Balinese costume for "Garden Party Dream" performance at 9th Street and Avenue C garden

Opposite page: Daffodil Head at 9th Street and Avenue C garden. Part of "Garden Party Dream" performance directed by Mari-Claire Charba

of Gaia. In other gardens poems were read, dances were performed by adults and children, or a political statement was presented to enthusiastic applause. The procession continued for 12 hours, adding new celebrants as it progressed through the warm May Sunday.

This profusion of vest-pocket gardens began in the 1970s as blocks of buildings in low-income neighborhoods on the Lower East Side were destroyed by fire, possibly on purpose, and their rubble-strewn sites became havens for drug addicts. Neighborhood groups removed stones and bricks, needles and, in a few cases, dead bodies, to create their gardens. One of the earliest, the block-long "Garden of Eden" designed by artist Adam Purple embodied the beauty and the anarchy inherent in this community movement. Although its swirls of multicolored flowers were featured in *The National Geographic*, the garden was destroyed when Purple refused to let the City replant it at another site in order to develop the land. As people appropriated vacant lots and the gardens "grew," the City felt a loss of control. Operation Green Thumb was created to lease city lots to neighborhood

organizations for \$1.00 a year with the stipulation that it could reclaim the land for development in 30 days.

During the 1980s, property in the East Village skyrocketed in value as artists moved in and galleries opened. Private developers who wanted to build middle- and high-income housing flocked to this last frontier of vacant land, often putting up luxury condominiums on the prime corner lots where large gardens were located. The gardens began to disappear. Although some of the land was earmarked for much needed low-income and elderly housing, residents who were eager to save their gardens began lobbying the City to rehabilitate existing buildings and develop empty lots first.

As a result, this celebrational procession created by performance artist Felicia Young in 1991 has gradually become more political. It provides an opportunity both to bring neighborhoods together to reaffirm the value of gardens in peoples lives and to organize community efforts to save them. Besides fulfilling the basic human need for a nurturing connection to the earth these gardens also serve as a refuge, a creative outlet, a source of food, a place for community gatherings and a setting for ethnic religious services.

Felicia Young putting flower offering from a gardener on Gaia's palanquin. Statue of Gaia created by artist Julianne Schwartz.



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Young says joy and celebration must be part of what she does so she takes a playful approach to the rituals of various religious traditions. This was evident in the East Village as she mixed elements from Catholic processions with African, Native American and Balinese traditions. The whimsically costumed participants played their parts lightly but with an awareness of its serious purpose. "The audience isn't really important," she says. "It's the doing of it" that matters. For the observer, it was amazing to see this ceremonial cooperation in a city whose residents rarely agree on anything.

Young began organizing and financing the processions four years ago with \$2-\$3,000 she raised through benefits. Consolidated Edison, the power company, gave her \$500 the third year and this year she received \$25,000 from a private donor, which allowed her to work full time.

Her aim is to provide a conceptual framework that leaves room for improvising and has an element of chaos that makes everyone feel comfortable about joining in. Neighbors from many ethnic backgrounds participate—Chinese, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Filipino, Native American, African American and Nigerian. At one point the procession converged with the Loisa Festival Parade with its traditionally uniformed marching bands, baseball teams and baton twirlers. Later in the day, the musical beat for the garden procession was provided by Tony VC, a Dominican band blowing didjeridu-style sounds into PVC tubing, as it snaked through the streets following the patterns of a rope that was continually re-laid on the ground by its leader.

Young believes she is helping the communities create the new myths that Joseph Campbell said we needed, using local history and combining cultural traditions of the many groups living there. This year the celebration was presented as a five-part myth. The "Birth of Gaia" through a 100-foot pink fabric birth canal was followed by a Balinese fantasy where the Developers kidnaped Gaia and expelled the garden spirits and community from the garden.

In fact, one of the most prominent features of this year's pageant was the truckload of Developers wearing suits and misshapen black masks who harassed and chased members of the procession until they were transformed into friends.

In "Community Enlightenment Under the Tree of Life," local children plucked and read apples of hope as a giant iridescent plastic butterfly made by a local theater/music group, Gargoyle Mechanique, "flew" into the garden on a wire from a tall building across the street. The Saving of El Jardin del Paraiso (a neighborhood-owned garden bought with a grant from New York City) was reenacted symbolically by the Ninth Street Theatre with a battle scene of industrial dragons and flaming flags ending with the transformation of the developers (they received butterfly wings) and the return of Gaia to the garden. In the "Closing Ceremony" the gardeners were united in a Collaborative Garden Poem and inaugurated a new garden by releasing 60 live butterflies, one for each of the Lower East Side gardens.

Beyond its celebration of nature and community, this procession/pageant has brought significant political attention to the gardens. Last year as part of the pageant Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger gave the gardeners of El Jardin del Paraiso the \$250,000 needed to buy their land at a reduced rate from its owner/developer.

Three days after this year's procession, Young received \$30,000 from the New York Foundation for the purpose of organizing the East Side communities to save their gardens. This grant, which is usually a three-year commitment, may eventually become \$90,000, she says. She plans to work with the Trust for Public Land to create scattered site land trusts similar to projects in other parts of the country. For example, "one-inch plots" of land may be sold to individuals to raise the money needed to buy the entire garden area or people may be asked to "adopt an acre" as they did in the Brazilian Rain Forest.

Right: Mud people performing in vacant lot on 8th Street

Below: Gardener at 9th Street and Avenue C garden accepting a "Votive Angel of Protection" painted by artist Beth Ames Schwartz to protect this garden that is threatened by development



She does not think art is a better way to address community/environmental problems than a politically activist stance but says it is the only way she knows to organize people. "Art connects people through their hearts: their need to express themselves transcends cultural boundaries," she says. Although she was pleased with the positive social effect of her celebrational art, she began to wonder after four years of raising money, planning and producing this event whether her efforts were actually saving gardens.

Young called the New York Foundation repeatedly but was told they were not interested in art and artists. They wanted innovative approaches to organizing the community. She finally realized her organizing for this event broke down barriers between classes and races and allowed people to work together for their neighborhood. She found the process of holding monthly planning meetings, presenting free art workshops in schools to fabricate puppets and costumes, and coordinating the diverse groups of people involved was the most interesting part of what she was doing. After four years of writing grant proposals she finally learned how to sell her organizing skills.

Young became interested in making art that touched peoples' lives in a direct way as an art history student at Skidmore College. Dissatisfied with the marketplace approach to art, she left an internship at Christie's to find a place where artists were allowed

to control aspects of how their work was used. She created a Day of the Dead parade on the subject of homelessness for the Alternative Museum, collaborating with women in battered women's shelters and patients in AIDS clinics. But she felt the museum's shows were "preaching to the converted" when only artists attended their exhibitions.

She was inspired to create celebrational events by her experience in India where she documented festivals while visiting relatives (her mother is Indian). She was also highly influenced by the community art of the Mbari from Igboland in Nigeria. Members of the community sacrificed family relationships for five years to become community artists who created dances, processions and music about drought, infant mortality and other shared problems in order to heal the community. She saw how these celebrations brought people of all classes together in a way that gave the powerless new status.

Carrying the garden celebration into her personal life, she was married in an East Village garden in June. One of the gardeners made her bridal wreath, another her bridal bouquet and another brought rose petals. She was attended by Earth, Wind, Fire and Rain and burned golden papers inscribed with her (and her husband's) wishes. She and her husband then stepped into the ribbon-streamered hula hoop used for the Birth of Gaia ceremony in the Rites of Spring Procession. As it was raised over their heads, everyone threw popcorn. The symbolism was perfect for Young, who is already married to these gardens. ■

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