



## Making My Own Garden

Diversity, Ecology, Care and (In)Visibility in Academia

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the other garden, a practice-based, research-led artistic initiative I launched together with my students at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) in 2021 to create an interdisciplinary, inclusive, and ecological learning space. Motivated by personal experiences of exclusion within institutional frameworks, the project reclaims visibility for marginalized voices—human and non-human alike—through artistic and collaborative practices. It explores how artistic research can intersect with ecology, care, and diversity to rethink academic environments. The garden acts as both metaphor and method, integrating theory and practice, and positioning alternative pedagogies at the heart of social and environmental change..

### KEYWORDS

*Artistic research, other, weeds, neofit, The Other Garden*



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## MAKING MY OWN GARDEN: DIVERSITY, ECOLOGY AND IN(VISIBILITY) IN ACADEMIA

I have been working at Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) since 2017. Although I research and teach in English, during my first years I have found it very difficult to be included in the infrastructure of the institution. This is due to several factors: first, German is the main language of communication at the university, including all postal and email communications, institute meetings, lectures, public discussions, and especially bureaucracy. Even though I learned German quickly, the language of academic bureaucracy was hard to filter through. The second reason was lack of diversity and inclusivity programs in our faculty, which virtually excluded non-European perspectives. We lacked a critical platform, which would enable both the students and faculty members meet and discuss these topics together, especially involving students, faculty and researchers of non-European backgrounds, who are underrepresented. Finally, social space is lacking, such as a café, a dining hall or an architectural structure in our building, where students and staff could come across, socialize and talk to each other. Our building did not and still does not meet any of these criteria.

Due to all these factors, I felt like other in my work environment. I felt like an outsider. Yet, I also knew that I was not the only person feeling this way, there were other faculty members and students who are not necessarily from other geographies, but still shared the feeling of otherness. I wanted to propose a project that brings together my personal experience at the institution, which is shared by many people like me, together with a theoretical framework and an artistic practice. As Sarah Ahmed says, I believe "personal is theoretical" (Ahmed, 2017). This is also another reason for why in this research exposition, I start writing first from personal experience.

In 2021, I decided to move from these personal experiences into a practice-based form and proposed a project that would bring together art, research, community, ecology, diversity and inclusivity. Bringing together my pedagogical philosophy based on equity and equality and my strive for a more open and inclusive university, I proposed to establish a garden in the backyard of our university building..



View from my office into our backyard, Fall 2021, Photo: Işıl Eğrikavuk

Introducing my initial idea to a group of MA students, I started collaborating with them in designing the garden's concept. We decided that this garden would not only be a green area where we would grow plants, but a living research space, which would place *otherness* into its focus. In this space, together with my students, we wanted to hold classes, organize talks and lectures on the intersection of art and ecology, as well as grow wild plants, namely weeds, which are often considered *others* in gardening. Our focus has been to grow "neophytes", a certain kind of wild plants that are not native to a geographical region, yet are introduced through human influence. In our first year, we found eight different plants from different geographies who had migrated to Germany hundreds of years ago through world fairs, wars and colonization. By involving them as our collaborators in the garden, we wanted to create a bio-diverse space in which we would include plants, insects and other living forms and search for ways of possible collaboration. We also wanted to look for ways of collaborating with our neighbors in our university district.

After negotiating with the university's regulations, we succeeded in establishing 'the other garden' in early 2022. Our garden has been functioning actively since the last two years. We have been growing many different kinds of neophytes, joining climate days, holding artist and researcher talks, classes, lectures there as well as functioning as a garden and a social space. Some examples from our talks included an artist who works on making bio-plastics from potato skin, an academic/researcher who works with immigrant communities and their relationship with their plants which they brought from their homeland, or a workshop on making food from foraged food..



Building *the other garden* beds, Spring 2022. Photo: Işıl Eğrikavuk

Through *the other garden*, we also connected with different departments within the UdK, as well as other like-minded people from Berlin. I have been holding my summer term classes in this space and the students enjoy the experience quite a lot. Some students defined the garden as their "safe space" where they can discover and enjoy new experiences or others defined it as "a fun and deeply engaging learning platform." These are elements that are fully related to artistic connectivity, which are our need for mutuality, reciprocity and urgency for a shared understanding.

In the summer semester of 2023, I held a class in the garden space called Artistic Research with a focus on ecology, in which we looked at artistic practices that are interdisciplinary within these fields and the students created their own research projects. I also lead a special interest group with MA students from our department in this space, in which we do readings, and lead discussions on gardening practices in urban city contexts.



During my class at *the other garden*' Summer 2023. Photo: Işıl Eğrikavuk

Our research comprises of several components: a. Creating and conducting an interdisciplinary research practice that brings together social sciences with

artistic and creative practice around critical and timely issues, such as climate crisis and community engagement; b. Conducting research that recognizes and gives voice to those who are often silenced and underrepresented, research that practices care beyond the gender-biased, patriarchal, colonial and mono cultural representations; c. Creating an intersectional understanding of art and research and bringing it together with issues of ecology, diversity and biodiversity; d. Being open to innovative research forms, such as artistic research that bring together theory and practice; e. Being open to non-hierarchical collaborative practices and contribute to society; f. While collaborating with others, viewing possible conflicts, problems and confrontations as part of the research process and involve them into the research instead of ignoring them.

I truly believe the power of collaboration and co-creation, because I believe there is a need for more socially engaged, creative, innovative and connective research in today's universities. I believe that many universities will benefit from such a program due to its socially engaged and creative propositions and connecting with different communities. And that is why artistic connectivity holds significant importance. Connective practices can provide a participatory and collaborative atmosphere by collaborating with students, supporting teachers as well as researchers and facilitating students in innovative and interdisciplinary ways as well as engaging with local groups, and that is where the potential for change lies..

Meanwhile, connectivity, co-creating and collaboration has many challenges. While establishing 'the other garden', we also had conflict and confrontations. Our first confrontation was with the university management. They strictly opposed our idea of digging into the ground, and we had to negotiate by agreeing to have high beds instead. They were also very careful with what kinds of wild plants we could grow there. We had to carefully select, plan and present what we would grow there beforehand to the university management. Still, we chose to view them as collaborators into the process instead of opponents.

On the other hand, collaboration and co-creation has a huge potential to grow fast and unexpectedly. Through 'the other garden' we represented our project in several conferences, classes and workshops. Through our social media, many like-minded people connected with us from within Berlin. We also created a social space in our department, for coming and gathering together.



Artist talk by Gülşah Mursalıoğlu at 'the other garden'. Summer 2023. Photo: İşıl Eğrikavuk

### Artistic Research as Methodology

Since 2017, I have been teaching artistic research as a methodology class at the UdK. As explained above, artistic research proposes to lead research as a collaboration between theory and practice. In my 6 years-experience at the UdK, I have observed that students learn quite immensely through practice-based research. In the summer semester of 2023, some student projects

involved researching Berlin's forageable food paths and making digital maps, researching and experimenting with soil fertility through discarded cigarettes or finding out the history of trees in Berlin and designing a card game. These projects do include a written paper accompanying the practice-based part and reflect related literature and theories within their subjects.

I view *the other garden* as an artistic research platform as well, where students learn from the practices of guest artists and researchers as well as from hands-on growing neophyte plants and observing the soil throughout the year

On a larger level, *the other garden* is both a physical and a metaphorical space for re-thinking our positions and interconnectedness, among each other, with the less visible living beings, and to the world, by critically raising the questions above and practicing them. It is a space that is open to new and creative ways of thinking, challenge existing structures and house theoretical discourses as well as living beings, without hierarchy among species. As art historian TJ Demos (2020) says:

For system change to actually be a compelling politics, it has to be systemic and comprehensive, climate solutions have to be one with sociopolitical ones. Decarbonization has to be linked to anti-racism, to economic justice and equitable access to technology, to clean air, water and soil, to democratization and political inclusion. These are all environmental concerns according to an intersectionalist ecology.

In our age we cannot think ecological and sociopolitical issues separately. Yet, as an artist and academic I would specifically point to how artists and creative thinkers can contribute to awareness of climate related problems. The artistic practice here also lies in building stronger dialogues and relationships not only with the students but also with artists, communities and groups in the neighborhood area and thus enlarge our connectivity with larger and diverse groups and beings. This brings us once again to the ideas of artistic connectivity, which include recognizing our need for a sense community, belonging and safety. And in this space lies our potential as humans to grow, just like our neighboring plants

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