

Farming the Urban Core

Linda K. Johnson spells out the answer to neglected spaces--in corn.

Amid seven lanes of asphalt, a mere chain-link fence away from the inhuman hiss of Interstate 5, the question bore a certain Orwellian resonance. "What are they going to build here?" passersby asked performance artist Linda K. Johnson as she jabbed a shovel into the haggard grass covering one of Portland, Oregon's drabest locales. No doubt they had mistaken Johnson for a worker from the Oregon Department of Transportation, the custodian of this long-vacant lot, a one-fifth-acre traffic median just south of downtown. "They figured that I was building a gas station or a parking lot," says Johnson. "Something ugly."



In fact, she was readying the soil for rosemary, thyme, basil, and carrots. Her politically charged piece Tax Lot #1S1E4ODD was just starting to bloom. Between April 2000 and April 2001, before an immense car-bound audience, Johnson is farming the median--hoeing and raking and weeding in an effort, as she puts it, "to make people rethink the possibility of unused urban space." Her garden will yield a bounty of produce for Portland soup kitchens, but it's more about concept than crops. The wood-chip paths between the lettuce rows are scattered with metal No Parking placards ironically repainted to read "Smell," "Touch," "Taste," and "Breathe." Looming above the orange and magenta sunflowers is a street sign that underscores Johnson's argument

that life can thrive in the gray urban core. "City Ctr.," it says; the business district is less than a mile away.

Tax Lot is a logical outgrowth of the 38-year-old Johnson's work to date. A lifelong modern dancer, she decided in 1991 to take dance off the stage and explore choreography's central problem--how the body relates to space--outside, on the lush, increasingly crowded landscape of her native Oregon. That year she produced *Finding the Forest*, setting dancers and musicians loose in Portland's 5,000-acre Forest Park and implicitly encouraging locals to find wonder in that vast woodland. Eight years later, in 1999, Johnson produced and starred in a performance piece about metropolitan Portland's urban-growth boundary. In *The View from Here*, she camped at seven spots along the boundary in a dwelling she created for the piece. Surrounded by cul de sacs built on what was once forest and marsh, she engaged visitors in chats about the changing landscape and regularly reconfigured her home's muslin walls to suggest that residential architecture has become mindless.

"What we need instead," insists Johnson, who exudes both a dancer's muscular poise and a conceptual artist's taste for pronouncement, "is considered spaces, spaces that don't squander land but still allow people to affect the environment." Tax Lot, it seems, is just such a space. Strangers have clandestinely dropped off packets of seeds there. Couples have asked Johnson if they can get married in the garden amid the traffic and smog. And perhaps most significantly, the four panhandlers who work the nearby freeway-exit ramp--grizzled men who hold blunt begging signs such as, "Why Lie? I Need a Beer"--have become loyal guardians of the garden, protecting it against vandals. "It's a good thing," explains their leader, Russ, a camo-clad Vietnam vet who knows these dismal environs more intimately than anyone. "I mean, I saw it going in--saw the little vegetable plants and all--and I thought, eYeah, this is what we need here." --Bill Donahue

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