

# EOE

## (Equal Opportunity Eating)

### POP-UPS

Susan Leibovitz Steinman

#### EOE—Equal Opportunity Eating

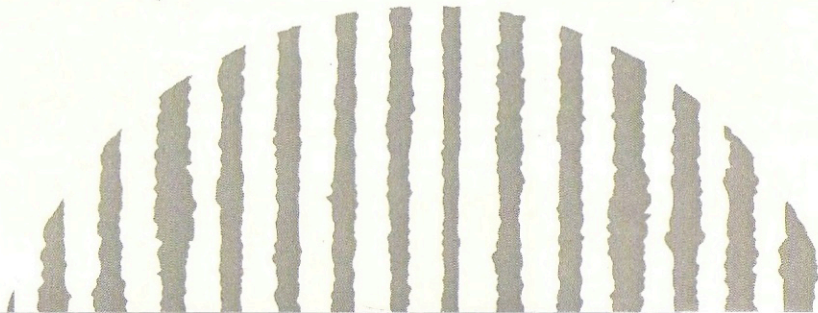
Working with diverse groups of local stakeholders, I conceive of, design and collectively create conceptual gardens that meld art, ecology and community action. I've been doing environmentally based artwork since 1989–90, when there were few models for this particular work and little to no interest in "urban food as art."

Historically, my artwork is rooted in Joseph Beuys' social sculptures, Allan Kaprow's "art as life" and Arlene Raven's "art in the public interest." Politically, it comes out of 20<sup>th</sup> century civil-rights and environmental-justice movements and borrows heavily from the public performance and community organizing techniques feminist/activist art movements of the seventies. Not "Land Art," this is rather "Art for Land."

EOE projects are living sculptural installations manifested as organic collaborative gardens. They model how to grow healthy food with little money and less land—critical survival skills for ecologically and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Counterintuitive to art world propriety, my EOE projects are most successful when disseminated, copied, adapted or emulated.

Streetfront or in schoolyards, EOE works provide more than healthy food: They are a meeting place, an oasis and a point source for initiating economic organizing and revitalization for the larger community.







## POP-UPS

A pop-up space is a temporary venue, a unique environment that engages an audience and generates feelings of relevance and interactivity.

—Wikipedia

The term “pop-ups” didn’t exist when I began creating ephemeral garden projects, but in retrospect, it’s a good fit, precisely because mine are art projects — large scale, highly visible (on main thoroughfares, medians, near freeways) and aesthetically intriguing. They draw the attention of passersby, inviting them in, to experience, participate and even take ownership. It’s the “Tom Sawyer’s fence” theory of art.

Intentionally pragmatic, low cost and low tech, EOE artworks model ecological strategies for sustainability: local organic slow food, bioremediation, conservation, reuse, soil/ water/air revitalization, increased canopy, green economics, environmental integrity and social justice. Permaculture farming affords more food with less land, less water, no pesticides, increased biodiversity and crop variety with little labor and greater success.

## Community Organizing As Performance Art

Each project is designed to answer a specific stakeholder-identified problem.

Building on feminist performance art of the seventies and eighties, the “real” artwork is the myriad conversations held over time with a diverse group of deeply involved stakeholders. The stakeholders are the “community,” clients, producers, collaborators and “art collectors” — they are the performers and, with the habitat, the audience.

## Ownership & Ecology

I am an artist, a well-read generalist who works with experts: master gardeners, ecologists, scientists, civic government, historians, educators and local organizers. Collaborating with vested long-time residents brings access and validity.

I am the guest/itinerant artist. When I leave, the community owns the project, not me. Community-based ownership is critical to the collaboration, the design, the final artistic, ethical, ecological, social and economic intent of what it’s all about.

Hardscape materials are gleaned from local waste streams — found, donated, recognizable, inexpensive familiar household and salvaged industrial materials. The land may be loaned for temporary use or public land temporarily reclaimed for public use. This landscape is usually damaged and/or underutilized (median strips, at railway stations, under freeways), its value for public good underestimated.

Food, farms, gardens, communities are potent visual metaphors, equal to the most important aesthetic contexts since the beginning of time. What is life, why make art, who is it for? Whose vision? What survives and lives, and what is lost? In times of ecological calamity, EOE art asks these questions.



## Sample EOE Outcomes



*Food For Thought: Urban Apple Orchard, 1994–95, San Francisco California*  
Sponsor: San Francisco Art Commission

On Market Street, the city's main downtown artery, under an inner city, earthquake-damaged freeway, I worked with neighbors, teenagers, homeless people and an urban garden action group to transform unutilized, degraded land into a "demonstration" antique apple orchard. Twelve varieties from twelve countries tied biodiversity to immigration. Not only did we demonstrate that apples grow on trees, but we also increased the urban canopy, beautified the site, renewed interest in dismantling the freeway and proved that locally grown food could replace food deserts. The trees were replanted in two neighborhood schools and a nearby park, remodeled by residents inspired by the orchard. Today the freeway is gone; the original site remains revitalized with trees, and the adjacent "free food" garden flourishes.



*Gardens To Go (G2G), 2001–02, Oakland, California.* Potrero Nuevo Fund Award.

G2G was perhaps the first permaculture garden in economically stressed West Oakland. Portable raised beds demonstrated how to grow healthy food with borrowed land and little money. Community organizers, vested locals, teens and City Parks & Recreation Department staff participated. A "Master Gardener" taught teens urban farming during a "Learn & Earn" summer program.

Highly visible and popular, the project was evicted when the owner feared the city might reclaim his land. Moved to a less visible site, gardeners waited while negotiators sought a small slice of community center land. Two years later, G2G closed when permission was denied, but its success as a model has grown throughout Oakland. Within blocks, past the freeway underpass, another artist-produced community garden that was inspired by G2G has persisted for 5-plus years. Today, West Oakland has flourished since G2G with more than a dozen successful ecologically based gardens and food-distribution projects.





*Gardens For All & Kitchen Table Diplomacy, 2009, Hamburg, Germany*

In three parts: two plantings and one performance. Designed to meet goals expressed by existing garden group hoping to attract new immigrant members. I designed and oversaw all construction, working with gardeners. With locals, I did community and government organizing and planning and advertising of events.

I. *Gardens for All*. We installed two gardens, one week apart, in the Wilhelmsburg neighborhood, near the central train station plaza. The first one was a pop-up garden featuring plastic containers planted with seedlings and fruit trees. Signage and flyers invited passersby to the second event: "Come plant a 'permanent' cross-cultural community garden in reclaimed raised beds." All were invited to eat from the garden "there for them." The station site increased the garden group's visibility to immigrant families in nearby housing. The local government permitted use of the plaza since it couldn't afford routine weed and trash



removal. Gardeners provided beautification in exchange for the use of planting beds. The cross-cultural conversations taking place during the garden's collective installation demonstrated the strategy's success.

II. *Kitchen Table Diplomacy*. An outdoor "kitchen" installation held outside the exhibition hall. We posted flyers inviting all to come to the table to eat food from local gardens and meet gardeners (the performers), who shared their harvest stories and inspired others to take up gardening. The program's table was in use as a meeting place all summer long. ■

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Since 1993, artist-farmer Susan Leibovitz Steinman has inspired others to plant mostly edible community artscapes.<sup>TM</sup> Because her portable farms are designed to be mimicked, one can only imagine that she is one of the mothers of the urban farm movement, whereby thousands of communities have recently embraced raised-bed gardening.