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Digging into soil, the senses, and society in Utrecht

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Vincent Walstra

It is a sight that summons questions and joy: a hen wallowing in a hole of dirt. Do chickens do this? It seems more like a pig's habit. But the hen enjoys it, and so it makes me smile. I have seen videos of big machines shovelling hundreds of chickens around in overcrowded barns of factory farms. This hen, however, will see no such future for it is walking and playing in the urban garden 'Koningshof' in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Together with her fellow chickens, she shares a chicken coop, and because the coop is always open, her terrain includes the entire farm. The eggs they lay are eaten by Koningshof's gardeners, but the chickens need not worry about being fattened and butchered, as they are living here. I recognise myself in the hen's lightheartedness for it reflects the soothing ambience at Koningshof. Both the hen and I enjoy a spacious environment here, where we dwell each at our own pace. Koningshof offers the hen an environment where she can enjoy sensuous experiences like wallowing in dirt, instead of commodifying the chicken as a machine for producing eggs and meat. Gardeners at Koningshof experience the same. They, too, engage in sensuous interactions with plants, birds, insects, soil, people, and themselves. Why do we see urban agriculture appear, not only in Utrecht, but globally? Why, in a society where preparing food can be cost- and time-efficient, do people prefer to engage with this slow process of food production in their own gardens?

This chapter aims to show how urban gardens in Utrecht enhance the sensorial instead of economic qualities of food. I will argue that the industrial food system, which is built on a rational and economic approach to food and nature, lacks appreciation of sensorial experiences beyond consumption, and hence, the trend of people turning to what I call 'holistic gardening' reveals a societal desire to reconnect with nature and food through the senses. This chapter is based on three months of fieldwork in 2017 with various urban agriculture initiatives in Utrecht, the Netherlands, followed by a year of participation at the Koningshof garden in 2018. My aim in this chapter is to contrast modern standards of food procurement in the Dutch urban environment with new forms of engaging with food and nature. Therefore, besides using qualitative methods of participant observation and interviews to understand the socio-cultural phenomenon of urban gardening, I apply autoethnographic elements to deepen the understanding of the societal impact of gardening on urban

dwellers. Having been born and bred in the Dutch urban environment, my personal introduction to the ecology of food production proved to be a valuable experience in understanding the societal impact of encounters between the modern urban dweller and holistic agricultural activities.

In the first part of this chapter, I will contextualise the meaning of urban agriculture in Utrecht by giving a historical overview of the meaning behind both *urban* and *agriculture* and the roots of the Koningshof urban garden. In the second section, I will explain how urban gardens confront urbanites with the limited nature of their mainstream worldviews. Thirdly, I aim to show how sensorial engagements within the garden environment enables urbanites to reconsider conventional worldviews by taking on personal experiential knowledge. Finally, I will bring all this together by theorising the societal impact of urban agriculture through its physical presence in the urban landscape.

Towards 'modernity' in urban and agriculture

The separation of food production from the urban landscape can partly be allocated to technological developments enabling mass production and the domination of a capitalist ideology of accumulation, transforming non-urban areas to spaces for agro-industrial production (Harvey 1978; Barthel *et al.* 2015). The shaping of this landscape traces back to the age of Enlightenment that laid the foundations for what we now call modernity. During the Enlightenment and onwards into modernity, Western civilisation developed an ontology in which nature was mastered by humans, passion by reason, and the body by the mind (Harvey 1989). This utilitarian approach to human and natural resources caused a subjection of the physical to the hegemonic idea of growth (Tsing 2013). The growing dominance of the capitalist market accompanied by strategies of commodification and commercialisation in the twentieth century accelerated this process of modernisation. In time, everyday life became subject to constant processes of commodification and the economic valuing of resources and practices, reducing all life to a 'logic of capital' (Rigi 2007: 56).

Since the Industrial Revolution, city populations boomed globally (Smart and Smart 2003), the number of people living in urban areas today exceeding the amount of people in non-urban areas. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) explain how industrialisation triggered mass migrations towards factories or harbours as areas of labour concentration, from which many cities grew or emerged. Interestingly, factory work has, for the most part, been outsourced from Western cities to other countries and continents in the twenty-first century (Ong 2006), whilst the urban population in the West keeps on growing. Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that physical labour has become decentred, with the urban space increasingly dominated by a network economy focused on social interaction and characterised by the displacement of production. They explain that where the process of industrialisation resulted in a homogenisation of physical labour along conveyor belts, the shift towards an information society is characterised by the increase of desk jobs behind a computer or at

home (Hardt and Negri 2000). What this shift shows is that physical, embodied occupations have been reduced to a minimum while computer-navigated, economically rational work are gaining significance. Increasingly, everyday life is dominated by such economically rational control. This development is central to Annemarie Mol's (2013) argument that contemporary society is dominated by a Western notion of controlling the body's dangerous desires by the rationality of the mind. In this chapter, I argue that sensuous experiences of gardening oppose this ontological standard of modern society. But first, allow me to contextualise the previous analysis to the case study of Koningshof in Utrecht.

In his book about the development of Utrecht's urban food landscape, Frank Stroeken (2012) explains how urbanisation accelerated about 150 years ago. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the areas surrounding what is now the historical city centre became part of the urban area (Stroeken 2012). This occurred during the Industrial Revolution when the mechanisation of agriculture created a fundamental shift in the Western food supply chain, and the Netherlands specifically (Van Otterloo 2013). From this moment, local agricultural business began to decline in response to a growing preference for large-scale international trade. Together with technological developments in the food industry, a cultural shift redefined the meaning of 'good' food (Mol 2013). New measurements such as hygiene, nutrition, and a long shelf life became important. Anneke H. Van Otterloo acknowledges that food became valued for convenience (2013), placing economic function over sensorial appreciation. The history of the Koningshof urban garden echoes this transition in Western, and specifically Dutch, society.

For over two centuries, the Jongerius family maintained their horticulture farm at the place where we now find Koningshof. On a piece of land of about 13,000 square metres, Robert, Jos, and generations before them cultivated diverse crops to feed people in Utrecht. During our conversations they told me how cultivation traditions were taught by father to son. However, for father Jos and son Robert, things were handed over slightly differently. Jos grew up sitting on the back of his (grand)father's tractor going to the regional market and auction to sell their harvest. He tells me that they used to sell their harvest at what is called the *Jaarbeurs* ('trade fair'). Nowadays the *Jaarbeurs* is known for its big cinema and for hosting events. Its history of food trade, however, is demarcated by the names surrounding the area: the street named *Veemarktplein* ('livestock market square') and the restaurant *Korenbeurs* ('grain exchange'; over the course of writing, the restaurant was renamed) are reminders of earlier days. Jos explains how, in the 1970s, their harvest would determine what people would buy and eat. During his youth, this producer-consumer relationship gradually started to shift. Food supply chains and industrial farming boomed, and small-scale farmers like the Jongerius family increasingly had to compete with low-cost foreign produce that responded to consumer-driven demands for food. From the 1970s onward, the situation worsened, but for a while Jos could stay afloat by changing from horticulture to selling flowers. Eventually, around the turn of the new millennium, he had to quit farming and shift occupations.

The farm lay fallow until 2012, when his son Robert, together with four friends who met during their study of landscape architecture, decided that this land and its identity needed to be revived. They started the foundation *Koningshof* ('Kingsyard', referring to the street it is located on, called *Koning-sweg*), aimed at reconnecting the area, local citizens, and anyone interested in the historical identity of the farm, the food, and the region. Their goal was to raise awareness of the unsustainability of the 'modern' food system and to educate people about the meaning of and engagement with natural resources like plants, insects, animals, and the elements. Hardly 30 years ago, growing local food proved to be unfeasible in a globalised food system, but nowadays, there is a waiting list for citizens who want to pay to grow food themselves. What has changed? In the next section, I focus on *Koningshof* as a place where urbanites are confronted with a lack of gardening skills and become skilled in gardening at the same time. I focus on this transition in particular because it is the principal purpose of *Koningshof* and puts urban gardening within a wider societal spectrum as opposing modern conventionalities. I will demonstrate the societal value of the *Koningshof* in breaking through urban and rural, and human and nature, dichotomies.

Beyond dichotomies: holistic gardening

On a Saturday morning, I leave my home near Utrecht's central station to cycle to *Koningshof*. A ten-minute ride brings me to the city's edge where I park my bike next to the farmer's house and walk towards my garden plot. Passing by the fruit orchard and picnic area, I greet Roeland and Robert, who are standing outside making quiches with freshly picked vegetables for lunch, and Akke, who is in the kitchen inside the greenhouse. Two of my fellow gardeners have already started weeding and hoeing the legumes section of our private 50-square-metre garden, which we have divided into six sections to maintain an organic crop rotation system. As has become our habit, we proudly observe that our sunflower has now grown over a metre tall, even though Matthias accidentally planted it too early in the season. 'That won't last', Jos had assured us. Since then it has become Matthias's and our project and pride. Although we are proud that our sunflower survived our early enthusiastic mistakes, we take Jos's advice to heart. Most Saturdays at the garden involve a chat with Jos, asking for his opinion about our garden, often resulting in a critical analysis of our and others' gardening habits. 'I see people drown plants in water, whilst you should tease them; otherwise they get lazy', Jos explains to us. 'If a plant feels it is dying, it will think of reproduction to maintain its existence. So what do you think will happen? It gets energetic to produce an offspring, which serves us with the parts we want to eat'. Once again, I am astounded by the logic gardening entails. 'Why do you think a carrot grows large? It searches for water deeper in the ground. If you keep the soil moist at the surface, do you think it will have to dig deep to get water?' The logic of plants is so obvious – one

might even say natural – that it makes me aware of my lack of understanding of such basic ecological processes.

In his article about 'industrial gardening' in Great Britain, Thorsten Gieser argues that a contemporary inhibition of enskilment due to time pressure is the result of a lack of interest in caring and learning. Today's generation is concerned with 'doing what we are told to do' as quickly as possible so as to have spare time after finishing the task (Gieser 2014: 143), a poignant analysis considering my own research at *Koningshof*. When I started fieldwork, I simply did what the garden coordinators told me to do and was merely concerned with doing research and much less with caring or learning about gardening. Only when I got my own garden plot after fieldwork did I begin to actually understand the processes of plants, soil, seasons, weather, animals, humans, and the most important aspect: the necessity of harmony between them. The significance of understanding this harmony is explained by a gardener from another urban garden in Utrecht:

When Mao Zedong was ruler of China he ordered all sparrows to be killed since they ate too much of the grain. His order was followed, and the sparrows extinguished from the land. However, this created an imbalance in the ecology of the land. As a result, insect populations were disturbed and now there is a lack of bees and other pollinators. Consequently, people now have to pollinate orchards by hand.

Symbolic stories like these serve gardeners with a fundamental understanding of the interrelatedness of life processes. To describe the importance of appreciating the process rather than the completion of work, Thorsten Gieser (2014) mentions Tim Ingold (2011). As a recurring theme in his writing, Ingold persists in delivering a fundamental message that seems to grow ever more important: there is no distinction between humans and nature, and life is a continuity, a process without beginning or end (Ingold 2005: 504). In the process of enskilment in the practice of gardening, such ontological lessons are learned through experiences. But this does not mean that all modes of gardening achieve the same outcomes. Gieser distinguishes between 'enthusiastic expert gardeners' and 'industrial gardeners' (2014: 146). The latter are concerned only with finishing a task and have a 'temporal horizon' (ibid). The former cherish and care for plants, developing relationships throughout their engagement. Whereas the idea of fulfilling a task creates a linear mindset, emphasising process instead allows people to experience life as a circular system. It is the latter approach that is experienced in Utrecht's urban gardens. In a linear mindset, harvest as an end-product would matter in the process of food production. But when one of the gardeners tells me her strawberries were eaten by a bird, it does not cause disappointment or anger. Instead, she tells me: 'If the birds ate my strawberries, then that is what they needed to do'. Statements like these are not rare amongst urban gardeners in Utrecht when confronted with the loss of harvest. The

egocentric idea of resource extraction is substituted for a holistic understanding of giving and taking between human and nature.

The lack of such a holistic view in contemporary society is demonstrated when Robert quotes a child saying: 'I won't eat that; it was laying on the ground!' On Saturdays, Koningshof is open to visitors to buy food from the garden inside the greenhouse, maintained by the Koningshof initiators. It serves the purpose of letting people walk through the garden and greenhouse and harvest their own products as opposed to shopping from supermarket shelves. By doing so, people get a sense of where the food comes from, how it grows, and who farms it. Hence, through awareness, Koningshof aims to educate people about processes that precede the end products we consume. This quote illustrates the relevance of this engaged shopping as an educational process, especially for younger generations, for this is the response of a child shopping at Koningshof after he realises the lettuce he and his mother harvested will later be served to him at dinner. The encounter confronts the child with the reality of lettuce being a plant, instead of a ready-made product on the supermarket shelf. By facilitating this confrontation, Koningshof contributes to understanding human-nonhuman relationships that relate to food consumption.

In the previous paragraph, I explained how the period of Enlightenment laid the foundations for the modernist interpretation of humans dominating nature. This ontology is built on dichotomies between humans and the world, which, according to Ingold (1993), are unjustified imaginations of reality. This section demonstrated how urban gardens in Utrecht are interacting with the broader nonhuman environment, providing experiences that break through human-nonhuman dichotomies. In the next section, I clarify how holistic gardening is induced by sensorial experiences, integrating the social and ecological and synergising body and mind.

Appreciating sensorial experiences

I don't know that much about plants, but I learn more here than I could have ever learned from any book.

Martine, urban gardener in Utrecht

Using the theory of social innovation, Jean Hillier (2013) claims that people respond where societal structures fall short to fulfill essential human needs. In other words, innovations are responses to societal *lacks*, which can be traced back to a meshwork of tacit dynamics in society. I argue that the appearance of urban agriculture in the Netherlands is a response to the dominance of economic efficiency over sense in experiencing the everyday. Interestingly, in the English language, 'sense' refers both to embodied perception and reason. It stresses the synthesis of the body and the mind in sensorial experiences. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock (1987) argue that the capitalist ideology dominating Western society has alienated the rational mind from the

material body by separating manual and mental labour. In what follows, I will show that urban gardens in Utrecht respond to a lack of balance between mind and body and reconnect manual and mental labour through holistic experiences of the senses.

I am working in the Koningshof greenhouse when I notice Joris digging up plants and putting them in a wheelbarrow. The plants are about half a meter long with many green leaves. On top of the plant there is a purple-white flower not much larger than the tip of my thumb. I don't know the flower, so I ask Joris about it. He explains that the flower is edible, and they use it in salads, after which he picks one and offers it to me. Together we taste the flower. It feels strange to put a flower in my mouth, and I wonder if I have ever consciously eaten a flower before. The structure is soft, the taste is sugar-sweet, almost honey-like, and the aesthetic of the flower affects the experience of eating and tasting its beauty. Joris explains that, as far as he knows, from this plant we can only eat its tiny flower.

Now that I've been made curious, I ask Joris if the flower next to it is edible too. It is a yellow-orange flower looking like a miniature sunflower. At this moment, one of the gardeners, Tom, passes by, and Joris calls him. Tom used to own an organic food store in Utrecht. Without answering my question, Joris asks Tom to tell me about calendula. Enthusiastically, Tom explains the healing power of calendula, which is an ointment or oil used for skin irritation or scratches. When Tom finishes his story about having used it against saddle sore when cycling, Joris adds to the story that the yellow-orange flower is calendula. Tom and his daughter respond with a satisfied nod and proceed to their garden. Then Joris turns to me again and clarifies with a grin: 'Every plant has its own story', after which he continues digging up the plants.

Gardeners like Tom rent their own 50 square metres of land at the Koningshof. But the gardening is far from an individual process. The idea behind this initiative is to provide gardeners with a 'Workshop Koningshof'. This means that from the beginning of the season at the end of March, every Saturday throughout the year, Robert, Joris, Roeland, Gijs, Akke, and Jos, the six who initiated Koningshof, invite gardeners to visit their plots and spend the day together. What they offer the gardeners is a place, material, and knowledge. Place entails both the physical gardens and a community for sharing seeds, food, experiences, and more. The material they offer are tools like spades and wheelbarrows, but also compost, water, and other crucial gardening elements. Finally, knowledge is constantly transferred in short conversations like in the previous example, but also through workshops of tasting and processing food. The purpose of offering these facilities is to create an atmosphere in which people can physically engage with their environment. When I overhear the coordinator of another garden explain to someone the main function of the garden, I hear him say: 'That people feel connected with the earth, soil and the plants. Then awareness will find its way, because once you have eaten something from the garden, you won't want anything different'. Peter, one of the gardeners, confirms the importance of eating from the garden, explaining it

as 'going back to the basis of being human'. Besides experiencing taste, physical interaction with the soil often recurs as a sensorial experience that urbanites appreciate about gardening. One of the Koningshof gardeners, reflecting on her occupation as civil servant, distinguishes between 'abstract' work behind a desk and working in 'the physical world'. Chuckling, she adds: 'I like to stand in the clay, literally. I enjoy getting dirty'. In contrast to her work behind a laptop at a desk, the touching of the soil is experienced as more real because of its physical component. The same goes for experiencing the sound of buzzing bees, which does not cause panic and swinging limbs aiming to kill the insects, but rather the opposite: 'They amaze me, they form an essential part of this garden', one of the garden coordinators proclaims when he shows me the gardens' beehives, which house tens of thousands of bees. Similarly, heaps of manure do not raise ugly faces and complaints about stench but instead are spread over the field with care and appreciated for their crucial function as fertiliser. Dirty hands, buzzing insects, nasty smells – they do not belong in the modern urban environment. However, for urban gardeners, they comprise a healthy and desirable environment that modern society has failed to offer them.

The Koningshof initiative offers a place where people learn by doing. The embodied practice in a personal garden enables the gardeners to engage with the process of gardening and develop skills. At the same time, the farm's community, both the initiators and fellow gardeners, share knowledge and practice and hence teach and learn together. In her conceptualisation of enskilment, Cristina Grasseni (2007) uses both an embodied and a social dimension to explain its meaning. Enskilment is embodied in 'material and social learning experiences' (Grasseni 2007: 11), whilst the social dimension of apprenticeship gives practices and experiences a contextual meaning. The integration of both body and mind into skilled practice is emphasised by Ingold, who says that 'skilled practice entails the working of a mind that, as it overflows into body and environment, is endlessly creative' (2018: 159). This process of acquiring and knowledge through enskilment is well described in Gísli Pálsson's (1994) ethnography on Icelandic fishers. He explains how body and mind interact in the skill to read the landscape and 'see' (Pálsson 1994: 910) the fish, something Icelandic skippers have learned both through practical engagement with the environment and by working as apprentices with an experienced skipper. Urban gardening in Utrecht encompasses a similar process of enskilment through personal engagement with plants, soil, materials, and elements, whilst farming experience is transferred between people in apprentice-teacher relationships.

For the Jongerius farm, the industrialisation of the food system meant the end of generations of family horticulture. But the place has been revived, albeit in a different form. David Sutton (2001) in his 'anthropology of food' discusses the contemporary deskilment in society when it comes to food-related practices. With technology increasingly replacing human practice, bodily and cognitive skills are being lost. Opposed to cooking with machines like blenders or microwaves is the cooking of food with feeling. In line with examples given by Sutton showing how a 'disdain for technology here goes with a disdain for

measurement and precision, seen as part of the alienation of modern life' (Sutton 2001: 133), I argue that urban agriculture is about reengaging with feeling, or rather sensing, the process of food production. In the next and final section, I conclude by arguing that urban agriculture impacts society by altering the urban landscape.

Urban agriculture: reinventing food practices

The green and tranquility work therapeutically, they create an oasis in the desert.
Rashid, urban gardener in Utrecht

We should not underestimate the societal impact of the simultaneous disappearance of agriculture and food production from everyday urban practices and the constant growth of urban populations. Food is an essential element of life, and with an increasing outsourcing of practices to technology, people are losing the skills to grow and prepare food, consequently losing autonomy to those who wield production machines (Sutton 2001). At the same time, however, its gravity should not be overestimated. Similar to Molly Scott-Cato and Jean Hillier's study of transition towns as spaces of hope and change (2010), the study of urban agriculture is one of opportunity for it demonstrates how society adapts to remedy its fallacies. Urban agriculture in the first place is a 'reinvention' (Grasseni 2013: 40) of food production in the urban space through the (re)adaption of agricultural practices to an urban physical and social environment. Through an 'education of the senses' (Pink 2008: 98), urban agriculture advocates a worldview that counterbalances the modern standard of rational and economic reading of food and nature with oases for sensorial experiences. In line with other research on urban agriculture (Barron 2017; McIvor and Hale 2015; Premat 2009), I argue that urban gardening contributes to a wider cultural movement of contestation and empowerment against dominant ideologies of economic efficiency and the centralisation of knowledge and skill.

Multiple times now I have mentioned the oneness of body and mind, citing various researchers who have claimed the importance of seeing both as inseparable elements of being human. The quote opening this conclusion confirms that the embodied experiences of the urban garden environment soothe the mental state. But it does not only affect the gardeners. By emphasising the physical contrast of the green with the rest of the urban environment, Rashid makes me aware of the wider societal impact urban gardens have. By offering unconventional sensorial engagements in the urban space, these gardens affect how cities are experienced (Pink 2008). In his ethnography of the urban space in Bangkok, Claudio Sopranzetti defines the urban landscape to the ethnographer as a 'canvas' on which one can see the layeredness of urban space (2018: 36–37). Several types of architecture that can be recognised in the urban space of Utrecht reflect stories of different periods in human history. For instance, remnants from the Roman period tell us about the first settlers, whilst the

medieval cathedral and parts of the city wall trace back to the beginning of its urban formation. There are typical tiny houses and areas from the nineteenth century, whilst at the same time, entire neighbourhoods of concrete apartment buildings from the 1960s shape the surrounding urban areas. Nowadays in the central station area, shining high-rise office buildings are being built by the dozen. Each of these architectural developments signifies societal transformations. For Rashid, quoted at the beginning of the conclusion, the 'desert' consists of the tall, concrete, and dense structure of the city, combined with a demanding and rushed atmosphere. In contrast, the garden serves as an 'oasis', a converse environment. Gardening works 'therapeutically', generating a sense of mindfulness and place by engaging oneself within the physical environment. This experience symbolises a key function of urban gardens in Utrecht, which now have carved themselves into the urban canvas as sensorial alternative environments, signifying yet another movement in contemporary societal transformations.

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