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David L. Johnson's Critique of NYC Community Gardens

Johnson's own garden raises questions about restricted access to public spaces.



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Installation view of *David L. Johnson: Community Garden* at Art Lot (photo Daniel Polonsky; all images courtesy the artist and Art Lot)

At the intersection of Columbia and Sackett Streets, on the cusp of Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens and Red Hook neighborhoods, sit three gardens. Two of them, South Brooklyn Children's Garden and Human Compass Garden, are city parks that operate as community spaces. The third is a temporary art installation, David L. Johnson's [*Community Garden*](#), in which 11 street planters, each containing wild bergamot, stand inside a fenced-in gravel lot. Known as Art Lot, though it contains no permanent signage, it has been used for outdoor art exhibitions since the early 1990s, when its owners and benefactors, James and Roberta Vaughan, gave sculptor Ursula Clark

curatorial control over it. Six other artists, including Florence Neal and Jim Osman in earlier years, have passed on the curatorial baton since then.

The current co-directors, Lina McGinn and Jacob Jackmauh, took over in early 2022 from Aimée Burg and Natalia Zubko, after the latter pair featured the former in a two-person exhibition. “We had two goals when we started,” Jackmauh explained to *Hyperallergic*, “to develop an exhibition strategy and to compile an archive of prior exhibitions.” Both goals seek to honor what’s unique about the site and its history. “It’s a rare opportunity to access land in New York City and use it with few limitations,” McGinn enthused, adding, “we’re learning the boundaries as we go.”

Their recently organized exhibitions negotiate those boundaries with thoughtful concepts and materials. Johnson’s spare artistic garden responds to the limited public hours of the two nearby community gardens, raising questions about access through its repurposed planters (examples of so-called “hostile architecture,” intended to restrict human behavior) and its cheeky inclusion of an “unlocked gate” on its materials list. Eva Roberts’s springtime installation, *What’s Going on Here?* (2023), likewise called attention to the apportionment of urban space. Prominent scaffolding, draped with colorful debris netting, occupied almost the entire lot, transforming it into a buoyant construction site, whose publicity materials exaggeratedly promised to “make New York a better place to work, live and visit.”



David L. Johnson, “Community Garden,” (2023), removed street planters, wild bergamot, soil, unlocked gate (photo Daniel Polonsky)

The chipper language of real estate development, parodied by Robarts, contrasts with Art Lot's DIY ethos. For over a generation, artists have organized and participated in informal exhibitions here through networks of friends and acquaintances. "It's been a word of mouth thing for so long," Jackmauh recounted, "whose continuity speaks to its necessity." The site participates in the rich tradition of artist-run alternative spaces, from A.I.R. Gallery to Artists Space to 112 Greene Street (which became White Columns) in New York City, yet circumstances often force such spaces to cease or evolve. In the past decade or so, realtors have rebranded Art Lot's micro-neighborhood, wedged between the Brooklyn Queens Expressway and New York Harbor, as the Columbia Street Waterfront District, the kind of spiffy gloss on a historically industrial area that often portends gentrification.

Regardless of what the future holds, McGinn and Jackmauh are working to make the record of Art Lot's past more available. They've created a website and Instagram account, and are compiling an archive of the site's exhibitions. "The archive presents a challenge," McGinn elaborated, "because the exhibition information has no centralized location and much of it predates today's Internet and digital cameras." For now, the archive-in-progress lives on the website; in the future, they hope to publish the completed documentation as a book. McGinn actually experienced bits of that early history herself when, growing up in nearby Carroll Gardens, she would occasionally walk past the lot and puzzle at its contents. One installation she witnessed, a sculptural arrangement of large wooden sticks, turned out to be the work of her childhood friend's father, Jong-il Ma, but McGinn only discovered that personal connection as an adult digging into the site's artistic history.

Serendipitous encounters will always occur within urban arts communities thanks to residents' proximity to one another. But the kind of artistic and interpersonal encounters that Art Lot facilitates feel particular to artist-run spaces. The person-to-person recognition, the spirit of openness and possibility, vary from that of many online arts communities and well-resourced art institutions. It's tempting to romanticize, to claim this or that place or time is more or less authentic than others, but most of what it amounts to is that different kinds of art spaces excel at different things. Art Lot excels at providing artists a sliver of no-frills private land to play with in public, a usage that is less remunerative than real estate development but no less necessary to make New York a better place to work, visit, and live.



Installation view of Eva Roberts, "What's Going On Here?" (2023), industrial scaffold, debris netting (photo Mekko Harjo)

David L. Johnson: Community Garden continues at Art Lot (206 Columbia Street, Columbia Street Waterfront District, Brooklyn) through September 10. The exhibition was curated by Lina McGinn and Jacob Jackmauh.