

## **Silence Prevails: East Village Community Gardens during the Pandemic**

Aki Onda

*Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*

Volume 13: Silence/Presence (Spring 2022)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/onda>

Published online: April 2022

### **Published by:**

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

### **Editors:**

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

### **Production Editor:**

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## **Silence Prevails: East Village Community Gardens during the Pandemic**

Aki Onda

In November 2019, I had a solo performance at Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in Asheville, North Carolina. The day before the show, their director, Jeff Arnal, kindly drove me to the Lake Eden campus of Black Mountain College thirteen miles east of the city.

I was standing in the dining hall—a historical place where numerous events happened in the '40s and '50s, including the legendary concert series organized by John Cage for Erik Satie's compositions, which culminated in a production of "The Ruse of Medusa" involving participants such as Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and other Black Mountain community members. Another notable event was *Theater Piece No. 1* in 1952, one of Cage's first large scale collaborative, multimedia performances, which was later known as a "Happening."

Right there, a full array of radical and unorthodox experimentations catalyzed the evolution of a unique community. Considering the vast and enduring inspiration these activities at Black Mountain College held for both contemporaries and later generations, the school can be seen as one of the crucial loci for the twentieth-century avant-garde.

After the closure of Black Mountain College in 1956, the building has served as a kitchen and dining room for Camp Rockmont, a children's summer camp. Architecture-wise, it's kept almost as it was. A large cozy, wooden room with a terrace facing the beautiful lake. I visited in the off-season: nobody was there and sheer silence hovered, which allowed me to imagine the visuals, sounds, and energy that filled the room more than a half century ago. The aura is still there and has not fully dissipated yet. There was a feeling of presence and absence simultaneously floating in the air.

Jeff told me that "Camp Rockmont is friendly to [the museum] and understands the importance of this historic site. So, we collaborate at times. But what would happen if the land were bought by a real estate developer? It could be gone forever." It was a bit surprising to consider, given the cultural significance of that place. But, it's in North Carolina, which offers few legal protections for preserving such a site.



Aki Onda, Fireman's Community Garden, 2020

Later, in April 2020, just after New York City became the epicenter of the Covid-19 crisis in the United States, I started working on a different project, *Silence Prevails: East Village Community Gardens During the Pandemic*, which consisted of field recordings, photographs, and texts I gathered and made in the gardens on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

In the 1970s, the city fell into a severe financial crisis and that neighborhood, with its many low-income residents, was among the hardest hit. Landlords began abandoning their own buildings and setting them on fire for the insurance money. The city seized land but didn't do anything, which resulted in rampant drug dealing, prostitution, and garbage dumping. Streets became more dangerous and crime was commonplace.

Living in a traumatized neighborhood, the local garden organizers were driven by a desire to create sanctuaries for neighbors to safely rest and relax in; for children to play; for gardeners to cultivate vegetables, herbs, and flowers; for works of art to be exhibited and performances staged. Many gardens were already over fifty years old when I started this project, but the ethos of the community garden movement seems still the same. That said, there is always a struggle to survive. Although some gardens have attained permanent legal status, others have to renew short-term license agreements with city authorities, leaving their future uncertain and highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the real estate market.



Aki Onda, Le Petit Versailles, 2020

For some reason, while working on *Silence Prevails*, I had that experience of visiting the dining hall at Black Mountain College in the back of my mind. I wondered if it were possible to hear the sounds of the past. Maybe by firing up the imagination,

tapping into an intricate network of knowledge, or experiencing things first-hand and putting one's sixth sense to work?

During the lockdown, GreenThumb, the NYC Parks community gardening program, made a decision to officially close the gardens in the city to all except members, fearing the spread of the virus. This meant I had to contact individual gardens directly, get permission to enter, and spend the time alone in the almost empty gardens. Stillness spread in these spaces, not least because the city itself was much quieter than usual.



Aki Onda, De Colores Community Yard & Cultural Center, 2020

I felt at these moments as if I were thrown into a void, amid the global scale chaos. There was a sense of almost Zen-like meditation and contemplation, and it certainly helped to alter my awareness and consciousness. I tried to sharpen my perceptions and sense the aural and visual presentation beyond the surface.

As I sat considering the accumulation of countless events which had ultimately formed the current gardens—signs of the past everywhere—I thought I was listening to what could be called an environmental sound, a tiny moment of the continuous drone that is topographically and historically attached to a place. It was an act of conjuring relations to memory, connecting past, present, and future.



Aki Onda, Lower East Side Ecology Center Community Garden, 2020

Cage said: "One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments." The world is filled with noises even amid silence. Let them flow and let them speak for themselves.