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A sign at the "Diggers" garden at Enchanted Lake explains that the plants are meant to be a community project.

Sowing the seeds of awareness

Two Kailua artists send a message by planting a garden on public land

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OK, so you vote, and you feel your vote counts. Maybe there's something more you can do with your frustration, your fury, your sense that nothing ever shifts the balance between the haves and have-nots. If you're an artist, a surfer or some other type who has learned to think outside the box, the source might be as simple as the ground beneath your feet.

Kailua artists Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma were jogging near their rented flat in Enchanted Lake three years ago when Chan, a photography professor at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, remarked that it was a shame the weedy land around the lake was not better used.

Sharma, now a professor of ethnic studies at UH, had been reading about the 17th-century English anarchist group called the Diggers, who protested the loss of their common lands by planting crops in defiance of land reforms that eventually would pave the way for industrial capitalism.

"I found it so beautiful that their resistance was planting food," Sharma said.

The pair decided to take inspiration from the Diggers and plant papaya seedlings, herbs and vegetables on a strip of land between the sidewalk and lake (Kaelepulu Pond) that is technically state-owned but managed by Kamehameha Schools. They hung a sign saying everyone was free to care for the plants and reap the harvest, a point driven home by their nearby Free Store put up a year later, where anyone can take or leave what they like, from furniture to empty soda cans.

What happened next is documented in the artists' 32-page booklet "Eating in Public," part of a growing franchise of publications, Web pages and even an academic journal article explaining the theory behind their modern-day Diggers experiment. They just started a garden at the UH Art Building, where Chan is chairwoman of the department, and have erected Free Stores there and in art venues such as First Friday in Chinatown.

Rewind seven years to a similar scenario that played out at the rock wall overlooking the surfing spot called Cliffs. Long-time dawn patrollers Gilbert Lum, Soyu Kawamoto and Rich Jackson -- who had just spent two years clearing the weedy slope to improve their view of the ocean -- tried rinsing their feet in the now-naked dirt to see if anything would grow.



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Gaye Chan, left, and Nandita Sharma started the project in 2003.

The patch sprouted green, and the rest is surfer legend. Today, the garden tended daily by Lum, an 81-year-old retired utility worker, has blossomed into a lush near-acre of grass, paving stones, flowering plants and trees where tourists stop to eat lunch and take photos. Lum said Islands magazine named it the prettiest spot on the south shore.

"The city cannot do that -- and for free, with so few people," he said last week, pointing out a nearby planting by city contractors grown weedy from neglect.

Both the artists and surfers planted on state land, and in both cases the land managers ended up allowing the gardens because of strong public approval. The artists' garden, however, has something specific to prove.

"We want to make it clear that we're not goodly people out to give our neighbors food," Sharma said. "It has a much broader purpose."

In challenging what is allowed on public land, Chan and Sharma say they are trying to raise awareness about what is meant by "public" interest. The artists say Kamehameha Schools cut down the papaya trees initially, whereas spokesman Kekoa Paulsen said last week that the landowner has no problem with the project unless the trees overhang the sidewalk, in which case their contractor is supposed to cut them down.

According to their booklet "Eating in Public," public lands historically were created at the expense of common lands, jointly organized around a communal way of life -- in Hawaii the ahupuaa, in England the commons.

"Public" land as defined today, they note, is restricted to recreational activities, so that "public" refers only to people who already have access to private property to conduct the business of life -- sleeping, working, growing food -- which all become criminal acts in public space.

In this way, the booklet concludes, the modern nation-state that claims to operate by "public" consent obscures the history of how these states were actually formed "in the struggle over land,

labor and life -- a struggle lost by those who fought against capitalism and for common ... property."

Theory aside, anyone can testify to the appeal of food plants growing where everyone has access to them. What surprised the artists, however, was conversations they overheard in the neighborhood about the garden and the drama around whether it would be cut down -- as threatened in an anonymous note two months after the planting.

"There's surprisingly a lot of talk about capitalism," Sharma said.

"Or, if not the term, they express their frustration with the way the system is not working the way they want," Chan added.



FILE PHOTO / DECEMBER 1999

Gilbert Lum tends the garden at the surf spot "Cliffs" that he began planting seven years ago.

Signs at the garden and at their Free Store encourage such associations by pointing out, for example, that Free Store donations are not tax-deductible because the project does not subsidize the state or military, but is truly "free."

Through their store and Web site Freebay, Chan and Sharma also distribute seedlings, including cuttings (huli) from ancient taro cultivated by a Hawaiian group working with activist Danny Bishop to restore traditional taro ponds.

"These huli can be used to reclaim land and water from either private or public usurpers of The Commons," reads the accompanying tag. "Plant wherever you can."

Hawaii's Diggers say their project is no less relevant here and now than the English Diggers movement,

which ended in brutal suppression, or the San Francisco Diggers, who reigned at the heart of the Haight-Ashbury summer of love. In Hawaii, land ownership underlies conflicts ranging from ceded lands to genetically engineered plants, from overdevelopment to homelessness.

People don't realize how much politics enters into their daily assumptions about food and property, Sharma noted.

"If you look at upper-middle-class homes, there's very little food growing. It's something that immigrants and poor people do -- something you do in the back yard and not the front yard," she said. Yet almost anything will grow in Hawaii if you stick it in the ground.

Sharma insists their project is not meant to be symbolic. Yet its theoretical aspects clearly take it a step beyond providing free food -- or landscaping, as at Diamond Head -- to occupy that obscure territory between art and politics.

Chan has a history of creating artwork with political content, but in recent years has branched further outside the gallery into the realms of publicity, including Web sites, coffee table books and even tourist souvenirs.

"What it taught me was I could have my work anywhere," she said, to reach audiences "who don't have all these expectations that art has to be this or that."

While avant-garde performance art forms have not been especially prominent in Hawaii, where Asian and indigenous traditions tend to emphasize the beautiful, useful object -- as local art critic Marcia Morse points out -- "I think projects such as the Diggers and the Free Store are important precisely because they push at the boundaries of 'art,' and at the notion of art as commodity," Morse said, "while also opening up new spaces in which creative subversion reigns."

"I do think it helps artmaking to be interrogated by new forms that don't fit comfortably within established categories."

Among those categories, one of the thorniest for many artists is the issue of ownership and compensation.

At Diamond Head, Lum says his objective was simply to bring a little beauty into the world, to give back.

"It's not that I have to do it. I want to do it," he emphasizes, adding that he will give away plants to anyone who asks.

His pursuit of beauty, being totally free, could be called a form of art.

The Diggers add a consciousness-raising element to their giveaways by framing them within a vision of "creating cultures that are not reliant on capitalism," as Sharma put it. "Deserving" is not factored into ownership, she says. Everyone is free to take, and to take part.

"We're basically doing the same project as the 17th-century Diggers, and Danny Bishop who's doing the Waiahole (taro-growing) project, and after us people will be doing the same project," she said. "So it's not *us* doing anything."

"Our job," Chan added, "is to make it bigger."

Freebay, an online classified section of free items

www.nomoola.com

"Eating in Public," with a link to a free copy of the booklet

www.nomoola.com/diggers

For free taro cuttings

info@nomoola.com