

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE



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University of the Peloponnese

2025

Margins, Edges, Borders and Botany

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8385](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8385)

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Margins, Edges, Borders and Botany

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Abstract

This presentation outlines the development, process and aims of the Botanic Laboratory Garden [Bot] [Lab] at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. This performance and space for research hosts an ongoing programme of curated research projects exploring the relationship between the ecology of urban land use, landscape(ing), well-being spaces and plant species specifically grown for use and harvest in scenographic and performance practice – dyes, pigments, textiles, scent and sound.

I will focus on the slipperiness of plant species and the crossing of borders with what Jessica J. Lee describes as “out of place” species. This is defined through Latin taxonomy and how we can explore migration of plants as “native” and “invasive” species within a shifting global migration, geopolitical boundaries and environmental climate. I argue this curatorial approach operates in an open dramaturgical form, rather than a fixed and completed architectural space, with porous borders - a fluid and shifting programme of performance research, navigating the integration of botany, edaphology and scenography of landscape. The transience or ephemerality of scenography in a botanic laboratory, in its very nature as a research centre, can challenge intentions of landscaping and cultivation as a colonial, constructivist human intervention.

Keywords: Trans-scenographies, liminal geographic margins, biodiversity, naturalisation, urban land use, transformation.

Margins, Edges, Borders and Botany

I come from an estuary - a place of slipperiness, a liminal place not belonging to the bucolic seascape or the land of gentle river and streams. Often an industrial place of fishing, ship or boat building and shipping routes between land masses. It is a trans place, not defined, a bit mucky and a place with which I have the same slippery identity in my practice, through

the environments or performance spaces I lean naturally into – the undefined, ambiguous and uncontained.

It is this sensibility I hold in my DNA that has informed my practice over the arc of my career. It is the transgressing boundaries from one space to another, slipping between but also drawing together as a multiplicity of materials and sensations ... not a singular encounter but a rhizomatic one, if we consider Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome to describe nonlinear, nonhierarchical and acentered networks. One that sits in an uncontained space of atmosphere, experience and affect. Translating this rhizomatic approach to curatorial strategy might suggest a focus on connectivity, where meaning is made through relationality and multiplicity. It is this curatorial strategy I want to outline when exploring the slippery scenography of land, landscape and botany. Rachel Hann refers to worlding or world making, as a shorthand for expanded contemporary thinking of scenographic practices. In her 2018 publication *Beyond Scenography*, she argues: "scenography isolates how an accumulation of material and technological methods 'score' ongoing processes of worlding" (Hann, 2018, p.2).

Figure 1

Essex estuary marshland (Sandys 2021).



This emancipation of scenography as an activated space is not a new discovery (considering the rise of relational aesthetics and Bourriard's socially engaged practice with and for audiences), but Hann describes the temporal assemblage of things that forms a series of scenes, in a state of flux, rather than "set" (she deliberately plays a pun on set as a fixed entity and set as a set design). It is anything other than set, as we are afforded the

acknowledgement in the visual and sonic dramaturgy scenography to so many environments or “worlds” we create. “Scenography sustains a feeling of the beyond where the crafting of a ‘scene’ – inclusive of the orientating qualities of light and sound as well as costume and scenery – encompasses a range of distinct methods for atmospheric transformation” (Hann, 2018, p.2).

It is the slipperiness of these worlds, where my practice in landscape has settled in military, industrial and marine, but has never left the botanic land. The act of landscaping, planting and growing being the ultimate in transformation of space, or what could be considered slow design. Transformation is not just in the planting though, it exists in the ground, what the ground consists of, how it is managed and the edaphology: the study of science of soil for growth.

Figure 2 shows [Bot][Lab], or Botanic Laboratory Research Garden at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, a research space for slippery transformation and scenography at the centre of my research.

Figure 2

[Bot] [Lab], ready for planting, at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London (Sandys, 2024).



The ground is where we return to the slipperiness of the estuary as an artery for transportation, transition, travel. This ground is the seam of London clay that runs from the mouth of the river Thames, through, under and in London, with many of its 19th century brick houses built in the early industrial revolution from this clay – the unmistakable buff bricks of North London. I live at the other end of the estuary, near Beth Chatto Gardens, famous for harnessing the attributes of seemingly hostile growing environments in 1960.

Figure 3

Beth Chatto Garden, Essex (Sandys 2023).



Beth Chatto was practicing and documenting her thinking around horticulture planting for a changing climate, in the UK, before the Keeling curve or NATO establishing the conference of matters related to global warming. What Chatto explored in her ecological planting schemes was “right plant, right place.”

This philosophy of horticultural practice has become more than garden design, forming the necessity and backbone to every responsible horticulturalist, with sustainability in the agenda of public spaces and preservation of natural reserves. In February 2024 UK government legislation placed a mandatory measurement of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) on all new developments to ensure: “habitats for wildlife are left in a measurably better state than they were before the development” (GOV.UK, 2024)

The biodiverse farming across the island of Ibiza, this has evolved from self-sufficient farming of 1960’s eco-tourism to form a backbone of carefully specialised agriculture, using regenerative methods of rotation and companion planting.

This planting is highly curated, where Hann (2018. P.111) describes “scenographics result from the orientating qualities that the curation of a garden sustains and provokes.”

Returning to self-sufficiency and horticulture as the rhizomatic and relational, communal and political orientation were the motivators green spaces in the New York Lower East Side. Community gardens were created in derelict parts of a city for the benefit of the community. These spaces weren’t planned but became.

Figure 4

Dry Garden, Beth Chatto Garden, Essex (Sandys 2023).

**Figure 5**

Cas Gasi Biodiverse produce garden close up companion planting, Ibiza (Sandys 2024).



Figure 6

Cas Gasi biodiverse produce garden curated layout, Ibiza (Sandys 2024).

**Figure 7**

Cas Gasi biodiverse produce garden labelling system, Ibiza (Sandys 2024).



Figure 8

New York City Community Gardens Compost Project, Lower East Side, NY (Sandys 2024).

**Figure 9**

Community compost site, Lower East Side (Sandys 2024).

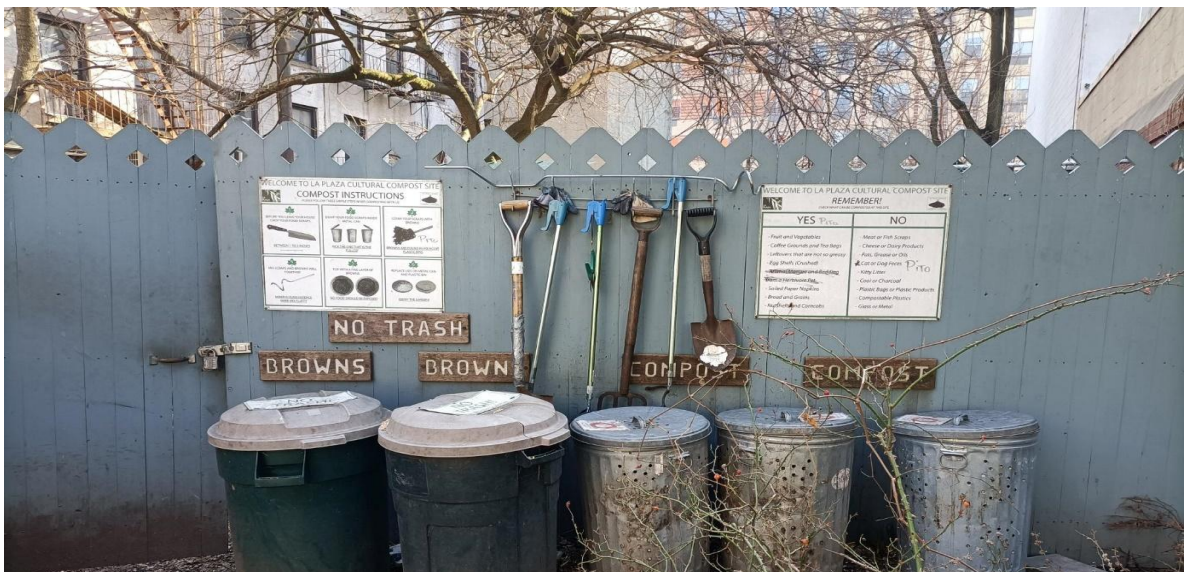
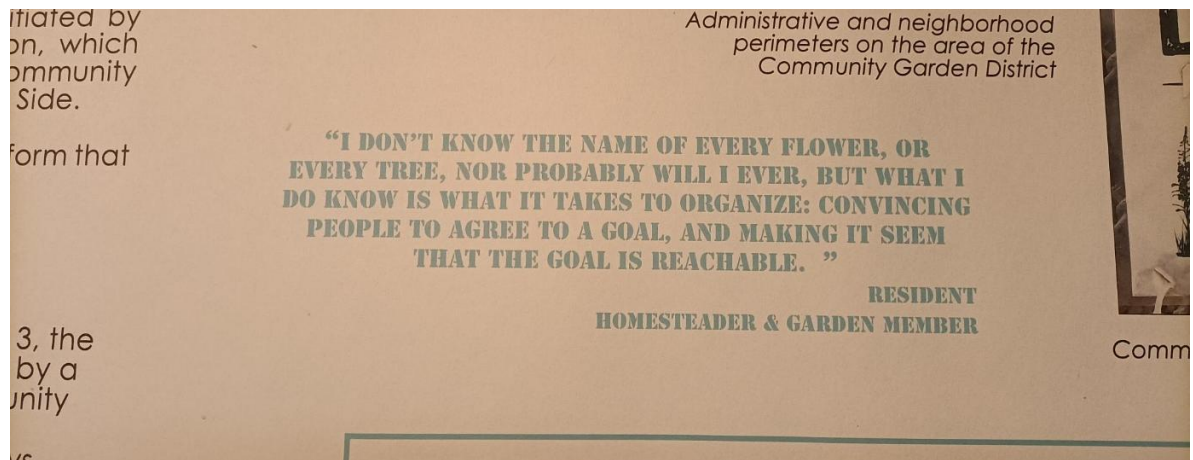
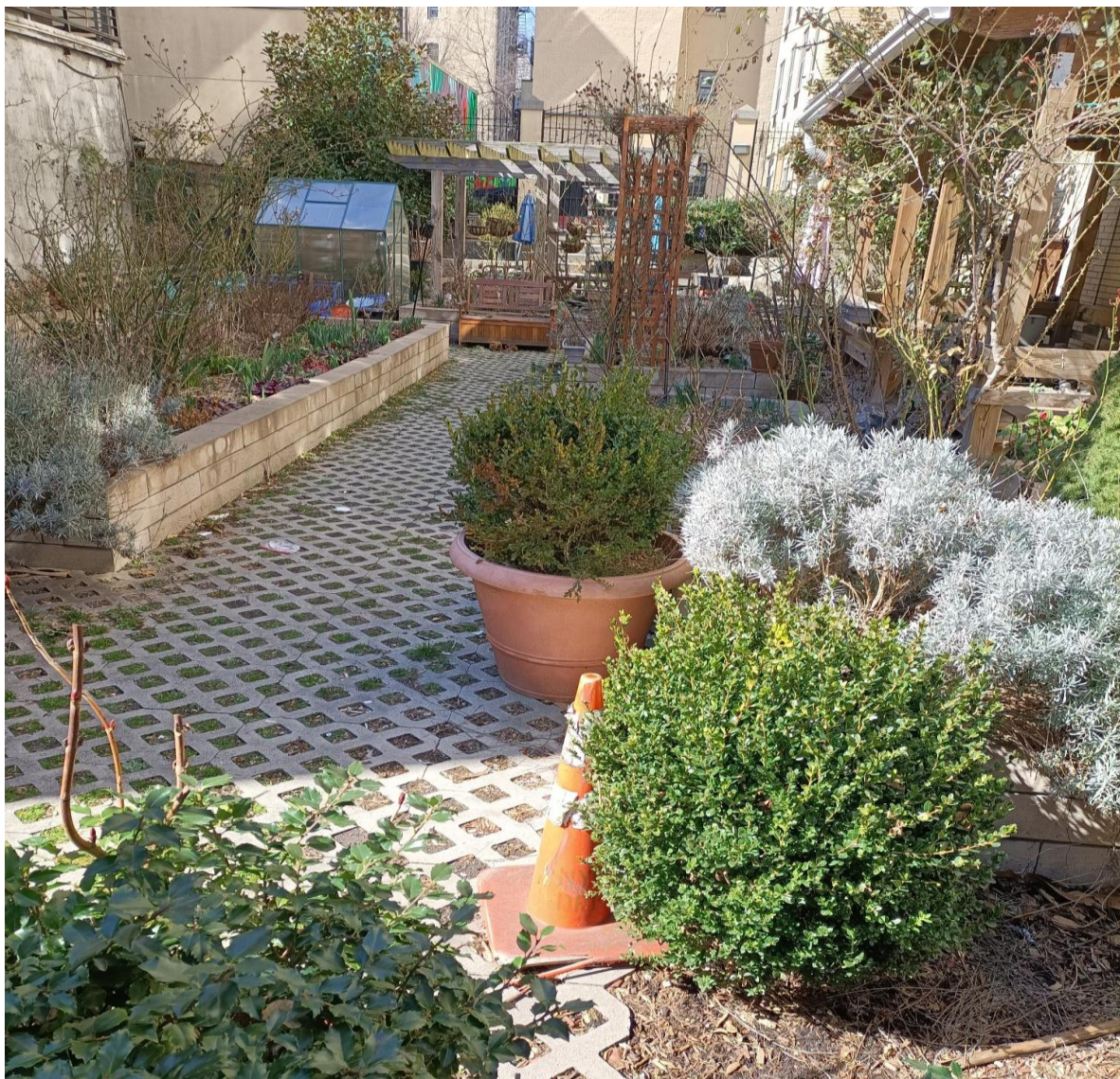


Figure 10

Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space display board, New York (Sandys 2024).

**Figure. 11**

Community garden on Avenue B, Lower East Side, New York (Sandys 2024).



Supported by the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space and subsequently the New York Mayor's office, these gardens in the lower east side grew out of activism from 1978, with the Green Guerillas protests against gentrification in the face of increasing homelessness. They have grown with and around the people and the community formed the identity of their residents, a borderless scenography in the community.

Figure 12

Gordon Matta-Clark tribute in a Lower East Side community garden (Sandys 2024)



This community of the lower east side has a history of activism forced by their need to push against oppression, as a predominant community of migration: German and Polish Jewish and Puerto-Rican diaspora. Echoing this, the language of migratory plants is commonly used in relation to the “out of place” plants, outside of the curated garden. We name them weeds. As Richard Mabey suggests in his 2012 publication: *Weeds: In Defence of Natures Most Unloved Plants*: “Weeds [are] those plants that obstruct our plans, or our tidy maps of the world.” (Mabey, 2012, p.1). This depends on what we mean by weeds. They are defined by their cultural history, where we use language such as “native” and “invasive” species.

Figure 13

Wild plants naturalising in unused railway line, Plaistow, London (Sandys 2024).



They slip into places that naturalizes them through the conditions and environment suitable to which they thrive in, returning to Chatto’s philosophy and the arteries and estuaries through which plants self-propagate and evolve to survive their environment.

This was adopted with Piet Oudolf’s design of the *Highline* gardens along the stretch of disused railway line in Lower West Manhattan. Planted through Oudolf’s matrix style of planting (now renamed New Perennial Movement) with species naturally finding their new homes in the abandoned margins, forming their own ecology of nutritional support

In her 2024 publication – *Dispersals*, Jessica J Lee says: “Through religion and social institutions, we had a system for ordering the world, a symbolic order ... so when we label a plant a “weed” - or to use the term more deployed in ecology and conservation, “invasive” or “alien” – we are not just labelling that plant. We are implying a desired order for the world

at large” (Lee, 2024, p. 188). However, what are we suggesting around notions of nativity, when plants are roaming to suit their climate?

Figure 14

Highline public gardens facing West across Manhattan, New York (Sandys 2024).



Figure 15

Highline public gardens, New York, showing new perennial planting structure (Sandys 2024).



The plant collectors of the late 19th century curated their gardens based around the idea of the exotic as a spectacle or a souvenir to admire within the carefully managed formal gardens. This was supported by the Latin taxonomy of organisms categorized by appearance, origin and formation, created by Carl Linneaus in 1735, followed by Hewitt Cottrell Watson (1847), John Henslow, Alphonse de Candoline and Charles Elton (1958). Interest in Elton's book rose in the 1990's with a new discourse in biodiversity and language of "invasion ecology".

The purpose of [Bot] [Lab] is to consider the curatorial concept, adopting a plot of reclaimed land and how the landscaping and planting will reflect the political context of the environment we wish to foster. The research site hosts an ongoing programme of curated research projects exploring the relationship between the ecology of urban land use, landscape(ing), well-being spaces and plant species specifically grown for use and harvest in scenographic and performance practice – dyes, pigments, textiles, scent and sound.

In its incubation period of growing in nursery beds, for quick harvest, we will be looking to establish a rhizomatic approach to the curation of planting, activity, research and conscious actions in the space. In doing so the following needs to be considered in the consciousness of choices to preserve connectivity and multiplicity, decentering and interconnectedness, challenging ideas of linearity and hierarchy: "Curation is ... an explicit negotiation between discrete things, as well as the atmosphere that these assemblages maintain. Scenographic curation is representative of questions of intention that are typically assigned to the human agent" (Hann, 2018).

How to maintain the slipperiness and space in order the curation is not contained and held too tight. I'll hope the estuary blood is strong enough.

Figure 16

Unmanaged plot of land in front of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama campus, London (Sandys 2021).

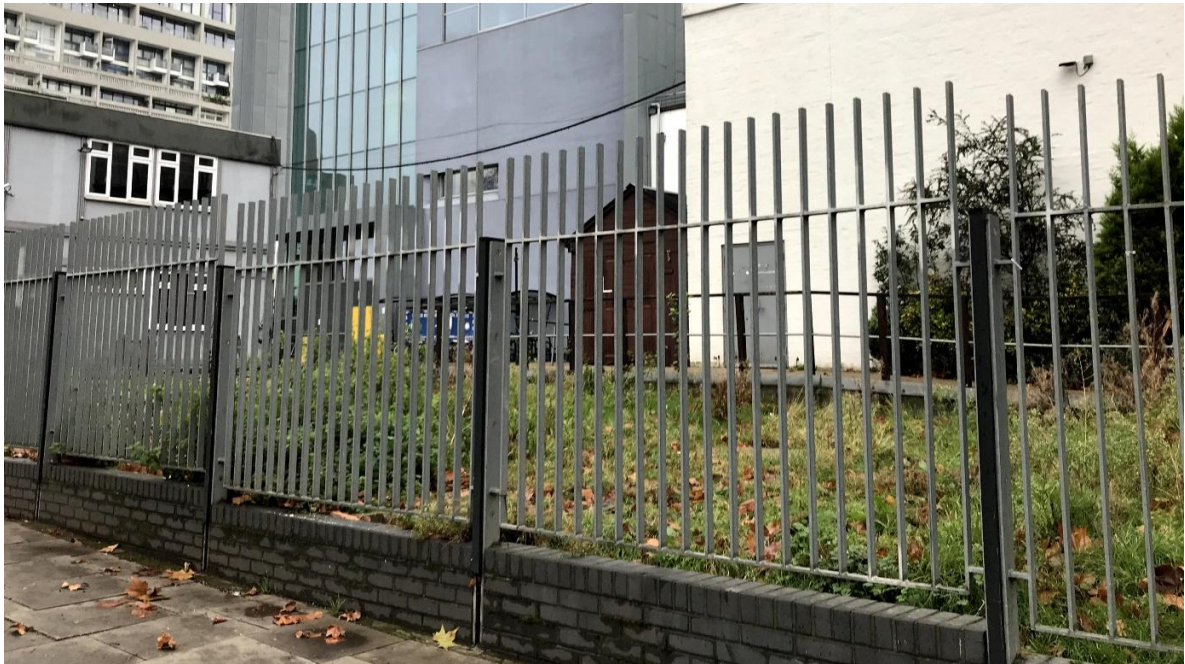


Figure 17

Plot landscaped for planting of the Botanic Laboratory Garden [Bot] [Lab] (Sandys 2023).



Figure 18

First planting and watering of [Bot] [Lab] specimens used for natural dyes (Sandys 2024).

**Figure 19**

Student verbatim performance in the [Bot] [Lab], working with community gardening group. (Sandys 2024).



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