



# Aki Onda: Silence Prevails: East Village Community Gardens During the Pandemic 2020

Is it possible to hear the sounds of the past? By firing up the imagination, by tapping into an intricate network of knowledge, by experiencing things first-hand and putting one's sixth sense to work? This question may be an unexpected one, but I decided to try just that, by standing in the community gardens of the East Village and listening closely.

Strolling through the East Village neighborhood of Manhattan, you will find oases of greenery all over the place. These are known as "community gardens," and they are used for diverse purposes: as places for neighbors to rest and relax; for children to play; for gardeners to cultivate vegetables, herbs, and flowers; for works of art to be exhibited and performances staged. Some gardens were created with materials scraped together by neighborhood residents and have a very DIY feel, while others are elegant and impeccably designed. Some are run democratically by dozens of members who hold meetings and make joint decisions, while others have a single organizer giving shape to his or her own vision. No two are alike, and each has its own unique charm. However, while their goals may vary, they are all managed independently, by and for the neighborhood.

I began traveling to New York City frequently in the mid-1990s. Before gentrification drove rents skyward and artists moved to other boroughs in search of more affordable housing, this area was home to many creative people, and it was here that I always stayed. Unlike today, Alphabet City (the part of the East Village where the avenues are lettered rather than numbered) was known as a dangerous part of town. Walking around, you had to stay alert to stay safe. At the same time, the free-wheeling feeling of a genuine bohemian community was in the air. It was in this period that I became aware of the community gardens, and I was especially fond of La Plaza Cultural on the corner of East 9th Street and Avenue C. In the 1970s, Buckminster Fuller worked with local organizers to build his signature geodesic domes to meet the needs of poor communities and explore alternative methods of housing. One such dome was erected in La Plaza. In 1977 Gordon Matta-Clark and others erected a hemispherical amphitheater-style event space here. Yet despite these notable episodes from the past, the garden itself was rough around the edges and unpretentious. Nonetheless, I found it a cheerful and festive space. It was not until much later that I learned that those experiments had been organized by CHARAS, an organization supporting local Latino and Latina residents and founded by local activist Carlos "Chino" Garcia and associates. The movement was rooted in activism, in the promotion of educational activities for local people involving architecture and art. Incidentally, Garcia and the poet Bimbo Rivas named the area "Loisaida," a Spanish pronunciation of Lower East Side. As the name came from actually spoken language, it caught on quickly with the neighborhood and is still used today.

The terminology is confusing here, and I would like to explain this perplexity. The East Village was known as the Lower East Side until the 1960s, when the artists getting priced out of Greenwich Village moved into the area, which had been populated mostly by working class immigrants. The East Village, as a term, came about through the real estate market in an effort to shake perceptions of the area as gritty and crime-filled. Because of this, many of the residents of Alphabet City / Loisaida / East Village referred—and continue to refer—to their neighborhoods as the Lower East Side / Loisaida.

Jumping forward in time ... Over 15 years ago I heard a fascinating story from the experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas at the Anthology Film Archive (AFA) on the corner of East 2nd Street and Second Avenue, where I was a frequent visitor. It was about his second experimental filmmaker Harry Smith, who was an expert on cultural anthropology and ethnology and well versed in the occult, as well as deeply committed to the downtown scene. In the late 1960s, Smith stood on the streets of the Lower East Side and recorded urban soundscapes on cassette tapes. He carried out this project street by street, and numerous tapes are in storage at the AFA. Mekas knew that making field recordings on cassette was part of my artistic practice, and that I was interested in Smith's work—this is why the subject came up ... An idea occurred to me. Why not stand in community gardens and preserve the sounds I heard on tape? Could I then hear the echoes of the sites' past? Following Smith's methodology, would I, too, be able to pass through reality and access something universal, limitless on the other side?

As I investigated Smith's project, I came to understand a number of things (though many are still veiled in mystery ...). It was called "Materials for the Study of Religion and Culture in the Lower East Side or Movies for Blind People," and it was his last project before his death. Launched in New York, the project continued in Boulder, Colorado. The many varied soundscapes include a Haitian open-air market, homeless people coughing and praying on the Bowery, poetry recitations by Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg, ambient noise in Tompkins Square Park, and much more.

Considering Smith's project prompted more historical wondering: How did the East Village's community gardens, the setting for my project, come to be? The area was historically a slum inhabited by a succession of poor immigrant communities, including Italians and Jews from Eastern Europe who began arriving in the 19th century, and Puerto Ricans after World War II. In the 1970s, New York City fell into a severe financial crisis and began slashing budgets for public services, including the police, sanitation, and fire departments. Areas with many low-income residents were the hardest hit, and many descended into ruin. Landlords began abandoning their own buildings and setting them on fire for the insurance money. The city seized the land due to landlords' tax delinquency but left vacant lots unattended and uncared for, resulting in rampant drug dealing, prostitution, and illegal garbage dumping. The area was becoming more dangerous, crime was commonplace, and the everyday reality residents faced was desolate. The homeless population kept rising, and streets were infested with huge numbers of rats. This was the environment in which most community gardens emerged. Living in a traumatized neighborhood, the first garden organizers were driven by necessity, by the need to improve their lives and find sources of hope.

In 1973, a group of volunteers led by activist Liz Christy took control of a vacant lot along Houston Street and began creating a garden. Calling themselves the Green Guerrillas, they sought solidarity with gardeners and distributed seeds and fertilizers, gave advice, and expanded the movement. What made Christy extraordinary was that she also advocated at the political level. In 1974 she approached the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and acquired rights to use the land for \$1 per month. The following year she launched the Open Space Greening Program as a part of the Council on the Environment of NYC (CENYC). As the movement gained momentum, the number of gardens grew. In 1978, HPD created the GreenThumb, the NYC Parks community gardening program, which rents land for \$1 a year to groups who manage gardens on city-owned, vacant lots. And that is not all: federal grants were secured to distribute soil, fertilizer, seeds, and gardening utensils and to start conducting gardening workshops. Today, many gardens are still licensed through GreenThumb.

However, in 1994 the newly elected Republican mayor, Rudy Giuliani, announced that he would auction off many community gardens to make up the city's budget deficit. While the land was owned by the city, it was residents who had volunteered to maintain and beautify the abandoned lots. To reclaim and redevelop the land as soon as land prices rose due to gentrification was a deceptive and underhanded tactic. Garden organizers united in protest, but many gardens were plowed under by bulldozers. Aghast at what was going on, the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), spearheaded by singer Bette Midler, and the environmental organization Trust for Public Land (TPL) made a deal with city administrators to purchase the land beneath 112 gardens. These gardens are now guaranteed permanent protection, but they often receive short-term license agreements, and their future remains uncertain and highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the real estate market.

Moving ahead to the present day, the COVID-19 crisis struck just as I was about to start this project. The pandemic swept the globe, and as of March 2020, New York was its epicenter and under full lockdown. GreenThumb made a decision to close the East Village's community gardens until further notice. Only members were allowed to enter, and my project ground to a halt. However, I began contacting individual gardeners directly, thinking that documenting their state during this extraordinary time would add a new layer of significance. As the project got underway, these layers only continued to appear. After the death of George Floyd, protests by Black Lives Matter (commonly abbreviated as BLM, a movement to end violence against African Americans and systemic racism) spread nationwide, and streets were flooded with people in the East Village. Starting in July, individual gardens were permitted to decide whether to admit visitors, but many kept their gates closed. There was a growing number of homeless people on the streets, and although the lockdown was gradually eased, many stores went out of business, with the storefronts remaining shuttered until a looming recession. The summer saw the COVID-19 crisis in New York abated somewhat, but public anxiety was only increasing due to political turmoil ahead of the presidential election in November. It has been a year of one shock after another. Under these circumstances, spending time in the gardens was truly comforting. Not only are they sparsely populated outdoor spaces where there is low risk of catching the virus, but they are also places of repose for the spirit, reflecting their origins as "green oases" that sprang up amid urban decay.

The following is a record of what I heard and saw (and possibly experienced with senses beyond the usual five) during my explorations of East Village community gardens between April and August 2020.

## 1. Relaxation Garden

Corner of Avenue B & East 12th Street  
I remember passing by this garden on the corner of East 13th Street and Avenue B more than ten years ago and seeing a large number of colorful mobiles and animal ornaments, which looked like the kind of thing kids would love, swaying in the breeze. It was a delightful garden, where neighborhood residents gathered ... However, when I stop by again at the end of this summer, the scene I see cannot be more different. The garden was temporarily closed due to construction work on the building next door: It was overrun by rats, heaps of garbage were thrown in, and, although NYC Parks Department staff cleaned it up a few years ago, it's still in wretched shape. A group of Latino and Latina residents, who say they are former members, have gathered around something on the sidewalk outside the fence. Looking down, I see a dead rat with its head torn off. They tell me, "Every evening, a baby hawk that lives nearby in Tompkins Square Park flies in and hunts rats. We're really grateful for that." Like any garden, it can still survive with constant care from members. When that is gone, it goes back to being a wasteland before you know it.

## 2. El Sol Brillante

522 East 12th Street  
The spacious grounds of this garden are full of carefully tended plots. One of the members says that, due to the lockdown, "Many of our garden members have had more free time to fill with gardening and maintenance of the garden." Another member tells me: "Many hours of swing labor have been spent making it the oasis of serenity it is today." As I stroll around the garden, I feel it is pervaded by an atmosphere that soothes visitors. The name, El Sol Brillante (Spanish for "the brightly shining sun"), testifies to its cheering effect. As a community garden where the gardeners themselves, with the help of the Trust for Public Land (TPL), acquired the deed to the land, it is rarely in New York. Perhaps having permanent rights to the land and not constantly fearing its loss contributes to the tranquil ambience ... On East 12th Street, outside the metal fences and gates with cutout letters and patterns designed by Julie Dermansky, every Saturday there is a moving sight: a food pantry run by a charity on East 11th Street provides canned goods, and a long line forms, stretching across Avenue B to East 12th Street. Garden members on the premises tell me they have never seen it so long. For some reason most of the people in line are of Chinese ethnicity. Their conversation reverberates in the garden, as does the rolling sound of the carts they are all pulling. Is this a soundscape unique to the time of the pandemic?

## 3. Campos Community Garden

640-644 East 12th Street  
Stepping into the garden I find rows of plots, thirty-one of them, extending into the depths of the five-thousand-square-foot site. Summer vegetables and herbs are flourishing and flowers are in full bloom. This garden gets a lot of sun and is well suited for growing things. The midsummer sun beats down, and I can hear the splashing sound of a hose, while the tinkle of wind chimes hanging from a tree makes it feel a little cooler ... Christopher Batenhorst, who serves as leader of this community garden, tells me: "It's 2004

## 4. East Side Outside Community Garden

11th Street Community Garden  
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## 5. Toyota Children's Learning Garden

603 East 11th Street  
This garden site was purchased by the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), a non-profit organization dedicated to creating more green spaces in the city. The current garden was designed by architect Michael Van Valkenburgh in 2007 with support from Toyota. It is quite different from other gardens in the area, serving as a place for relaxation that has nothing to do with gardening. Its gates have stayed closed since the lockdown began, but Magari Rees, a member living in the building next door, tells me. There are no sounds other than the rustling of bamboo in the wind and the drone of an airplane

## 6. La Plaza Cultural de Armando Perez Community Garden

6th Street and Avenue B Community Garden  
This garden is still managed the garden himself, with help from his friends. Inside the vividly colored white arched entrance, the sound of scissors clipping fruit that hangs from a grapevine trellis, the fluttering of water carrier pigeons in a giant bridge, and the booming voice of members installed on the ground and mounted on the wall. After returning my ears to the quiet for a while, I notice that there is another lot in back of this one. On entering I find a dry space—about the size of a cat's forehead, to paraphrase the Japanese expression—surrounded by bare fences, overgrown with weeds, with a ragged and run-down look in contrast to the beautifully maintained site facing onto the street. There are many works of art here as well ... This block, East 7th Street between Avenues C and D, was once nicknamed "Political Row," and was home to many politicians (unusual for the East Village, there are a large number of grand, ornate old buildings). The garden is named for Sam Koenig (A politician in the first half of the 20th century. It's said he once served as Secretary of State of New York) and his wife Sadie, who lived in the building next door, but it is shrouded in mystery and it is not clear just what first inspired the garden was abandoned for some time, but Kathy and other members revived it in 1984, and while it seems it has been through various ups and downs since then, one thing is clear: friends and neighbors living nearby have been helping one another care for it lovingly over the years.

## 7. 9th Street Community Garden Park

This is one of the largest gardens in East Village. I take a walk around an early one morning. There are more than twenty plots for growing vegetables, herbs, and flowers; a golfish pond; a large number of communal spaces: a barbecue area, beehives in one corner, and spaces for a variety of purposes, all organically arranged. Each time I pass through each area, different sounds enter my ears. But nearby on Avenue C roadwork is in progress, and drags pummeling asphalt make a racket that occasionally drowns everything out ... I first visited this garden more than twenty years ago, and its overall design and laid-back atmosphere have not changed since then, except for one major difference: the giant weeping willow that was its crown jewel is now gone. The tree was planted in 1977 by two activists, Liz Christy and Chino Garcia, before the garden's establishment in 1978. It put down roots in the rubble-covered ground with the garden, and watched over all the changes taking place around it. Then in 2012, Hurricane Sandy pulled contaminated water from the East River and flooded the garden, eroding the tree's roots and causing it to wilt, and a few years later it was cut down and its rotting trunk uprooted. When I visited the garden, however, I was amazed to see a little willow tree in its place. Upon asking a member about it, it was told that "the new one sprang up from the roots of the old one after it was chopped down." The great cycle of life: half a century from now, will a giant weeping willow stand here once more?

## 8. Flower Door Garden

135 Avenue C  
This garden's story begins in the '70s when Santos Matos, a Puerto Rican man living in the neighborhood, created a garbage-filled vacant lot. Today he is still managing the garden himself, with help from his friends. Inside the vividly colored white arched entrance, the sound of scissors clipping fruit that hangs from a grapevine trellis, the fluttering of water carrier pigeons in a giant bridge, and the booming voice of members installed on the ground and mounted on the wall. After returning my ears to the quiet for a while, I notice that there is another lot in back of this one. On entering I find a dry space—about the size of a cat's forehead, to paraphrase the Japanese expression—surrounded by bare fences, overgrown with weeds, with a ragged and run-down look in contrast to the beautifully maintained site facing onto the street. There are many works of art here as well ... This block, East 7th Street between Avenues C and D, was once nicknamed "Political Row," and was home to many politicians (unusual for the East Village, there are a large number of grand, ornate old buildings). The garden is named for Sam Koenig (A politician in the first half of the 20th century. It's said he once served as Secretary of State of New York) and his wife Sadie, who lived in the building next door, but it is shrouded in mystery and it is not clear just what first inspired the garden was abandoned for some time, but Kathy and other members revived it in 1984, and while it seems it has been through various ups and downs since then, one thing is clear: friends and neighbors living nearby have been helping one another care for it lovingly over the years.

## 9. De Colores Community Yard & Cultural Center

Corner of East 8th Street & Avenue C  
In May, during the lockdown, local artist Rolando Politi re-adorned the garden fence along Avenue C with a group of sculptures made from discarded materials. Entitled *Winter Flowers*, it consists of more than 200 brickwork pieces, produced by cutting up old aluminum cans and plastic containers and decorating them in vibrant colors, resembling flowers. Last year, the garden dismantled a rusty, sagging wire fence and installed a splended new iron one in its place. The *Winter Flowers* had been there for approximately twenty years, and while they were removed during work on the fence, they are now back in place. Silence has fallen over the garden, but there were many truly vibrant lots in our area. Gardeners wanted to divide gardeners and confuse the community with the false "housing or gardens" dichotomy. The gardeners knew the truth, and Giuliani wanted us to. By spring, several of us who were displaced from ABC started to help beautify a site across 8th Street alongside the current gardeners of that space: Carol, with her white rose bush, Cuba, who grew vegetables, and Ralph, who stored a big orange boat there painted with barricade-like teeth on the prow. Strawberry bushes grew in the underbrush. It was pregnant with my daughter, but I helped move heavy rubble into dumpsters. It was nerve-wracking because there were a lot of springs strewn about. We covered our central area with soil shoveled out of a trench Con Ed had dug to do work under the street. There were planted a big plot of that took room by May, and that's how we became a community yard. De Colores is named after a popular Spanish-language song that group set up as a base in what was a vacant lot, but Bangladeshis had been growing things in it. This site planned to put the plot up for auction. Gardeners organized, won the support of the local community board, and testified at the Department of City Planning (DCP), which finally decided to recommend the garden for a GreenThumb lease. All kinds of community events have been held here, including concerts, performances, political gatherings, weddings, birthday parties, memorials, and yoga classes. Events are not always planned—sometimes they just happen. "Our apartment is very small and crowded, so we have been an extension of our family's living room for my daughter and our friends and pets. Even in winter, we come here a lot to make snow cretators and hot cider, or even to read and play music on sunny days." Considering the housing situation in the tenement buildings of Loisaida, this makes a lot of sense. A garden is a space that helps meet people's everyday needs.

## 10. La Casita Garden

530 East 8th Street  
To counteract the spread of the coronavirus, most East Village community gardens remain closed to the general public by order of GreenThumb at this time. Only members are allowed entry so they can tend plants and clean up. However, at La Casita on East 8th Street, the gates stand open. Two middle-aged Puerto Rican guys in masks converse in Spanish. In rows of wood-bordered rectangular plots, freshly



I enter the garden, open my ears, and hear stillness befitting a symbol. In the back of the garden, there is a shed, painted black, and hung on its walls are several flyers of jazz concerts and neighborhood gatherings held here in years gone by. Gazing into the park, I seem to hear the echoes of music that once filled this space.

## 11. Fireman's Memorial Garden

358 East 8th Street  
In mid-May, spring has finally sprung, and the well-tended vegetation here is already lush. There is a lawn covered by a flowerbed and a walkway. It's said the inspiration by Adam Purple's Garden of Eden on Eldridge Street that was demolished in 1986. A graying, middle-aged man and a young woman in charge of garden management are planting seedlings and cutting grass. I ask if I can come in, and I'm told to go right ahead. I sing, puppies frolic, the sound of shoveling soil reverberates off the walls of surrounding buildings. The numbers of people testing positive for and dying from COVID-19 are on the rise, yet despite the extreme tensions gripping the outside world, a peaceful vision and aural landscape spreads out before me ... There is a large wooden sign with words carved on it: "Firefighter Marty Celis Memorial Park." The garden is dedicated to firefighters who died in the line of duty and is named for a young firefighter, Marty R.C. Celis, who was stationed at a fire department on the Lower East Side. In 1977, an arsonist set fire to an apartment building on this site. The building was engulfed in flames, and the firefighters working to extinguish the blaze were trapped on the fifth floor and died in the fire escape, where they were rescued by cherry pickers. Celis, however, lost his footing and fell the ground, dying at the hospital eight days later. The building burned to the ground, and residents who had been tending gardens on adjacent lots expanded them to occupy this site. The middle-aged man told me, "There's no end of bricks from that collapsed building under the ground. If you dig down you may hit brick after brick, so we use them to make borders for flowerbeds." The man and his wife and other members are all true trading gardeners, suspended above the scorched rubble of the past.

## 12. Green Oasis Garden

378 East 8th Street  
The sky seems to be weeping rain, and the sound reverberates as I walk over wet fallen leaves around "Gibert's Sculpture Garden," a part of this larger community garden. Carved wood and stone sculptures by Gibert Ingram, who lived in the next building next door, are strewn around as if forgotten. At a red-painted hexagonal garden, the symbolic face of the garden, organic vegetables are distributed by CSA (community supported agriculture) farms and LUNXS (Loisaida United Neighborhood Gardens), an organization that supports community gardens in the area, and neighborhood residents appear one after another. After chatting for a while they depart with bags stuffed with vegetables, at a cost of ten cents ... In 1981, four young men and their partner, Raynald Rivas, began planting and tending this vacant lot but turned it into a nursery for children in the neighborhood to play and for artists, poets, and performers to present their works. Raynald would sometimes put on plays for children (There is a stage even now). There were events for neighborhood residents ranging from wedding ceremonies to the Puerto Rican religious holiday Fiesta de Cruz Festival of the Holy Cross. Normand and Raynald have both passed away from AIDS, their ashes scattered on the grounds of the garden, but their shared spirit lives on.

## 13. Carmen Pabón del Amanecer Garden

115 Avenue C  
A "Green Up Day" is underway, coordinated by the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS) and Time's Up!, organizations that promote urban activism, including the community garden movement. Volunteers have gathered to take care of the garden. Under the direction of Bill DiPaola, one of the founders of MoRUS, about ten young students replace soil in flowerbeds, prune overgrown flowers and trees, and spray water with hoses. The garden has been closed during lockdown, but now that people have finally returned, the soundscape is a lively one. Bill says, "It'll be good if a few of these people stay interested in what we do." The organizers at the core of the garden movement are aging, and opportunities to reach out to young people and build bridges to the next generation of participants are needed ... Just to the left of the gate is a carved and painted relief mural made in 1984, the year the garden opened, with the inscription "One Generation to Another La Lucha Continua" (the last part meaning "the struggle continues" in Spanish). It depicts two children, appearing to be African American or Puerto Rican, walking hand in hand with a map of Loisaida in the background. This garden was established by Carmen Pabón, who immigrated from Puerto Rico and was a foundational presence in the garden movement in the 1970s, in the late 1980s under the Giuliani administration, however, two-thirds of the site was sold to a real estate developer and the remainder was closed for seventeen years while a building was under construction. It was more than a bit ironic that the garden was reopened by Donald Capoccia, the controversial developer who bulldozed part of Puerto Rico and was a foundational presence in the garden movement in the 1970s, in the late 1980s under the Giuliani administration, however, two-thirds of the site was sold to a real estate developer and the remainder was closed for seventeen years while a building was under construction. It was more than a bit ironic that the garden was reopened by Donald Capoccia, the controversial developer who bulldozed part of Puerto Rico and was a foundational presence in the garden movement in the 1970s, in the late 1980s under the Giuliani administration, however, two-thirds of the site was sold to a real estate developer and the remainder was closed for seventeen years while a building was under construction. 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