From Wasteland to Flower Bed:
Ritual in the Website Communication of Urban Activist Gardeners

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to explore the website communication of urban activist gardeners by focusing on the concept of ritual as a heuristic category. In contrast to the majority of those doing research on ritual, I use a systems-theoretical approach in applying the concept of ritual to communication processes. I explore the role played by ritual in communication in order to answer questions such as, "What is specifically unique about the ritual mode of communicating?" and, following from this, "What function do these rituals serve in communication?" My subject, urban garden activism, is thus addressed from the perspective of media- and communication research.

First, I briefly describe urban activist gardening and how communication is usually structured on their websites. Second, I present an outline of some theories and concepts of communication and ritual within media studies, and give a brief account of the systems-theoretical approach that I use. Third, I define some areas of ritual – that is, ritualized patterns of communication found in the urban activist gardeners' empirical material – so as to provide answers regarding the means and function of ritual in communication

Keywords: Ritual, communication, systems theory, urban activist gardening

Urban Garden Activism

> Oooh, that was so beautiiiiiiifuuul. We sowed peppers, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, kohlrabi, corn and celery. [...] Therefore 50 people came with planting bowls, soil donations & bottled water and became godparents for our seeds. Thanks to all for this!!!! (March, 6th 2012 www.opflanztis.wordpress.com/).

This quote is one of several entries on blogs and homepages which emphasize the great pleasure of doing collective gardening in urban areas. Urban activist gardening is practiced in almost all cities in the world, and can take many forms. In general, it involves the temporary transformation of vacant construction sites – such as wasteland, abandoned car parks and vacant rooftops – into urban farmland and green meeting places. In recent years, the guerilla garden movement has appeared as a kind of an ad hoc transformation of wasteland or neglected areas (McKay 2011: 157), which can involve cultivation of tree pits, or moss graffiti on rocks, logs, pots or statuary. It is a special form of activist gardening, namely "the illicit cultivation of someone else's land" (Richard Reynolds, cit. in McKay 2011: 183). In contrast to community gardens, guerilla gardening takes the form of "the overnight transformation of a neglected patch, or the sprinkling of seeds on waste ground for a subsequent seasonal surprise, without permission" (McKay 2011: 184). Here, doing gardening without permission has its own attraction. It is the attraction of constantly available cracks, spaces and even wasteland that can be transformed into green oases.

This apparently singular movement of urban gardening has a long history. Its roots can be found in the allotment movement for the urban working class. It expresses a general "critique of private property interwoven with a statement of communal interest, mutual aid and cooperation" (McKay 2011: 155). The community garden movement began in the early 1970s in the USA, in cities such as New York. Gardening was done in vacant lots, or on land that was considered to be neglected or abandoned by its legal owners. In Germany, the engagement in urban alternative forms of farming is associated with the rise of the environmental movement in the eighties (Rosol 2006), when the first urban community gardens appeared. In Sweden, community gardening is relatively new, having its beginning in the early 21st century, when the discussion of climate change gained momentum (Larsson 2009: 13). Some of these gardening movements belong to the European network "Reclaim the Fields", which was founded by young people in 2007 in connection with the anti- G8 mobilization in Rostock (Germany) in an effort to introduce new ways of farming (www.reclaimthefields.org).

The gardening movements are often driven by a group of activists and visionaries who share a passion for turning neglected spaces into vibrant gardens or green spaces, and who take direct action in order to transform land. These movements express the rise of eco-consciousness in urban areas, and express a desire for sociality in the neighborhood, as well as pleasure in doing physical work. Concurrently, the green space of the garden and the common act of gardening are

symbolic, and address "a multitude of contemporary questions such as access to, and ownership of, land, food production and consumption, biotechnology, the environment, sustainability, slowness and modernity, grassroots politics and empowerment" (McKay 2011: 192). They stand for an anti-capitalist orientation aimed at mobilizing alternatives and questioning consumer lifestyles in the industrial cities.

If the actions of transforming land were not communicated, we would know nothing about these movements. We might have noticed some transformed tree pits or vegetables planted in flower pots, but without therefore associating them with a global movement or placing them in a wider context. The theoretical approach of Niklas Luhmann effectively shows the importance of communication:

> Fish may die or human beings; it may cause illness to swim in lakes and rivers; no more oil may come from the pumps; and average temperatures may rise or fall, but as long as this is not communicated it does not have any effect on society (Luhmann 2008: 41).

These remarks express the late-modern tenet that "communication became the basic concept for describing the most elementary units of social life" (Thomas 2006: 322), and that therefore human behavior and attitudes towards the natural world are mediated by communication (and not by action).

To reduce communication to action, as many scholars do (e.g. Habermas 1987), does not suffice to adequately describe a social phenomenon. Action, which is connected to an agent, can also take place when nobody is watching, or when there is nobody there to react to this action. Luhmann gives the example of brushing ones teeth, which one does for oneself, knowing that it ought to be done. He concludes: "However, in principle, action can be conceived of as a solitary, individual operation that has no social resonance" (Luhmann 2013: 54). The concept of communication, however, is specifically tailored for sociality: At least one person has to react if we speak of communication as a *social* phenomenon (otherwise we are faced merely with information transmission). In this sense, I want to apply the concept of ritual to communication processes, rather than reduce it to action, since actions must be communicated if they are to become visible to society. In this sense, I also want to incorporate the concept of ritual in communication, and not reduce it to action. This may seem a bit unusual, as ritual traditionally is associated with action, but the approach has a tradition; it was developed already during the seventies by Roy Rappaport (e.g. 1971, see Thomas 2006: 327). In the following section I want to give a brief overview of how communication and ritual is discussed within media and communication research.

The Concept of Communication and Ritual

Within media and communication studies, the concept of ritual has widely been used to examine various forms of media production, texts and audiences. We may

begin with Carey's model of communication as ritual from 1975 (Carey 1975; see Thomas 1998: 146ff). In his article "A cultural approach to communication", he contrasts his view of communication as ritual with the common view of communication as transmission. Carey claims that the deeply rooted view of communication as transmission originated in religion, since the moral motives behind the age of exploration and discovery were actually religious – that is, to establish and extend the "Kingdom of God". The same applies to communication technologies such as the telegraph, which was seen as an ideal device for spreading Christian messages (Carey 1975: 3). Consequently, he goes back to the roots of commonness and community, and offers a ritual definition of communication which "is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith" (Carey 1975: 6). Thereby, he indicates the social role of communication, in that messages can only fulfill their function when they communicate shared beliefs. This means that society becomes possible because of the reproduction of common symbolic forms of reality. According to Carey, communication serves the purpose of constructing and maintaining "an ordered meaningful cultural world which can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey 1975: 6). He understands communication as a process of commonness, that is, of common beliefs, agreement and like-mindedness. However, he ignores processes of plurality, unfamiliarity, strangeness, otherness, etc. His harmonizing, normative view of communication becomes problematic when he claims that communication strengthens social bonds. There are many examples, in the past and present, of the opposite being the fact.

The Durkheimian view of rituals – that is, as holding together society – is still paradigmatic in media and communication research. A great deal of research is therefore focused on the impact of media rituals. Scholars such as Schudson (1986) are convinced that media serves a religious function in a secular society, since mass media has become the only social institution that strengthens the feeling of togetherness. However, Alexander (1981) notes that the impact of media rituals is less certain and determined than were religious rituals, and he therefore does not follow a naive Durkheimian application. However, Alexander notes that in contrast to the religious rites of pre-modern societies, the impact of media rituals is uncertain and undetermined. Alexander thus rejects a naive Durkheimian approach. According to Alexander, media rituals are a sort of horizon of understanding, to which the audience can relate (Thomas 1998: 169). Couldry (2003) also tries to avoid a Durkheimian reading, by focusing on transcendent values produced through media rituals. He defines media rituals as "formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values" (Couldry 2003: 29). These rituals are formalized actions. They include the changed behavior shown by people who are being e.g. filmed or photographed, a change determined by the "ritual nature of the studio situation" (Couldry 2003: 126) – that

is, when media or media celebrities are present. Hence, his approach also deals with media's impact on humans and society, but with special focus on media power. In his own words, he tries to shift "the emphasis in ritual analysis away from questions of meaning to questions of power", that is, the media's power to "influence the representation of social 'reality'" (Couldry 2003: 12, 19). He assumes that there is a special media logic which changes action into ritualized behavior, and which is determined by the media. However, he mentions various forms of media behavior only casually. These find no place within his model, which is a weakness of his approach.

However, my approach is not to address the manner in which ritual interacts with the recipients, or how media, including the internet, interacts with the users according to ritualized forms of communication. Rather, I wish to examine *how rituals are used* in communication, specifically in websites, as a means of handling the complexity of communication.

The Systems-Theoretical Approach to Ritual in Communication

In order to make my point of departure clear, I must explain the systems-theoretical approach to communication. Luhmann's conception of communication departs from the phenomenological tradition that emphasizes selectivity. Communication is the union of three selections: *information, utterance and understanding* (Luhmann 2013: 212ff). *Information* is – in line with its standard definition of Shannon & Weaver (1949) – a selection from a repertoire of possibilities. It is a selection meant to communicate this and not other information, in short: what the message is about. *Utterance* is the selection of a form of communication, or in other words: how the information is to be communicated. In face-to face communication, you can whisper or shout information, in website communication you can choose the form of language, you can make your information visible with the aid of images, and you can add films etc. *Understanding* is simply about reaction, and the meaning that is generated: is the/a meaning selected, if yes which one?

Here, understanding is not a psychological concept. It is not concerned with understanding rightly or wrongly. It is not concerned with what a message, or the author behind the message, really means. Here, Luhmann also abandons the concept of doubling meaning intended by the sender. One is tempted to imagine that the information transferred is the same for both sender and receiver. However, it sometimes looks as if this identity is determined, rather, by the quality of the information. The systems-theoretical perspective states that meaning is only constituted in the communication process, not by the message as such. The identity of the information must also be thought of as something that can mean very different things to the sender and the receiver (Luhmann 1987: 193-4). It is only in the connecting communication that it becomes clear how the difference between information and utterance has been understood.

This communicative approach differs from the framing theories that have become popular within media research, especially in the fields of news media (Mc Quail 2005: 378) and social movement research (e.g. Johnston & Noakes 2000). Here, as well, the issue is information selection and forms of information expressions, as well as information effects. However, highlighting components can be added by considering the "bias" and "angle" of a message, especially when it aims at studying the effect of a communicative strategy (such as that of activist groups). According to the frequently quoted scholar Robert Entman,

> [t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993: 52).

Frames as schemas for interpretation add a special story line to information such as to "define problems", to "diagnose causes", "make moral judgments" and to "suggest remedies". As such, they serve as guidelines for "*receiver's* thinking" (Entman 1993: 52). According to Entman, it is about the power of a text: It is assumed that a certain frame, a highlighted piece of information, would cause a certain meaning according to the intention of a text.

Here, we can see the problem entailed in this approach: it overemphasizes the quality of a message, and does not consider the contingency and, hence, complexity of communication. From a phenomenological point of view, a highlighted piece of information has no power as such. The power and influence of a text is constructed in a dynamic communication process and therefore uncertain. In line with systems theories, frames such as rituals can only be understood as a horizon of understanding, and they serve the purpose of reducing uncertainty in communication processes, as explained below. In this sense, frames have a relational value: they serve to support meaning production (or not) on both sides (sender and receiver). They help make sense of events and to communicate them as a story line by highlighting something and darkening something else. In times of surplus of communication, e.g., offered via Internet, there is a risk of not reaching recipients. In order to gain attention, frames support organizing events and, hence, a schema for understanding.

However, frames do not guarantee success, success of communication here meaning that recipients take the communicated information as a premise for their own actions and meaning production (Luhmann 1987: 218). Given the separateness and individuality of human consciousness, that is, given the mutual opacity of human minds – it is by no means self-evident that one person understands what another person says – as mentioned above. Meaning can only be understood in a context, and context is what ones consciousness and perception contributes to the meaning produced (Luhmann 1987: 217).

As mentioned above, the success of communication is uncertain and the process of understanding, in particular, becomes highly indeterminate when a larger

group is addressed. Here, rituals, as frames, can fulfill an important function: According to Thomas (2006), risks are improbabilities of communication which can be changed into probabilities through the cultural form of "ritual, even though ritual is not the sole form" (Thomas 2006: 331).

According to Luhmann, rituals function as an internal communication schema (Luhmann 1987) within communication systems, and deploy the strategy of supporting coordinated understanding. They are structured in such a way that they appear to provide no major alternative when it comes to information, utterance and understanding; that is, they reduce the selection possibilities and therefore facilitate the process of recognition. It is scholarly common sense that rituals represent a code for a limited communication without an alternative (Luhmann 1987: 613). It means that a special kind of information and utterance are transmitted in order to enhance the recognizability of the posted information/image, and finally to gain attention from a desired group of people. In Thomas' words, "Preformed and more-less fixed sequences of utterances eliminate the contingency of the selection in understanding […] No misunderstanding can disturb the proceedings" (Thomas 2006: 333). In order to reach the intended recipients, rituals are also used for attracting people by "drawing the people *to* the message" (Thomas 2006: 335) instead of merely offering messages.

Rituals, here, have the capacity of marking out a difference in communication by *attraction*. Reference to this notion can be found in Douglas's early discussion of rituals that focus attention and hence direct perception (Douglas 1966). In line with this approach, rituals can be described as special, presupposed frames for managing attention, and also perception. This is different to the above-mentioned framing theories, as the uttered information says more about how the activist group wants to be recognized (and what they think will attract their audience) and less about how the messages are understood and how they influence others.

What is *not* ritualized communication in this sense? From the observational point of view, we cannot draw a distinction between ritual and everyday life as many scholars do (e.g. Couldry 2003). We must approach the question from the perspective of the complex process of communication. Communication is connected to expectations (e.g., what is and is not expected of a website communication) as well as selections made from a reservoir of information and utterance possibilities. These selections are made with the help of what can be described as a "synthesis of a plurality of possibilities" (Luhmann 1987: 405). They regulate communication or, in other words, to create a kind of expected order. Rituals, thus, greatly support "coordinated understandings" by bypassing reflexive communication (Thomas 2006: 333). Hence, ritual and non-ritual communication can be distinguished by their relative degrees of indeterminacy.

To summarize, how can we describe these forms of ritual in website communication? These forms of ritual are characterized by a *prefigured stream of website entries,* which are "more or less fixed" (Thomas 2006: 333), and are characterized

by their *repetitive character*. The website entries communicate *transcendent values and metaphors*. Rituals in communication can be applied to verbal entries as well as to images, as I will illustrate with examples below.

Communicating Urban Gardening Concepts

Communication can take many forms. It may take place as face-to-face communication, as a direct way of addressing people, but it can also be mediated, that is, disseminated through brochures, policy papers, posters, flyers etc., particularly through mass media (the topic of urban gardening has received some media attention), and on Internet homepages etc., which is my field of study. Websites can be characterized as self-descriptions which relate to multiple environments: meta-communicative utterances directed both toward their own group and toward the public. Through their various pages, websites structure communication, and hence offer a social dimension (links to other sides, discussion possibility), as well as a topical (treated themes) and time dimension (time line). In this article, the focus lies on the topical dimension, which shows the group's constructions of reality.

The activist gardeners' communications studied here include fifteen German and five Swedish activist gardening websites/blogs as well as five individual English-language guerilla gardening blogs. All are open to the public and updated fairly regularly. The entries analyzed were mainly posted between 2011 and 2012. We should distinguish between blogs and websites. Some websites have their own blogs, where in a diary form, with the latest entry being on top, gardening activities and connected events are communicated, and possibilities for comments are provided. All websites studied here have an "About us" page, some have an archive, a page with planting and harvest information, a calendar, and a special page for images, as well as links to other activist groups and information about gardening etc. Some websites offer debate forum, where connecting communication takes place. Access to these is often limited to subscribers.

Using the systems-theoretical approach to communication, I explore how activist gardeners communicate their messages on their websites. Which information (topics) and forms of utterances (entries) are selected? By looking at entries or comments that refer to earlier entries, I can see how the difference between information and utterance has been understood. The almost complete lack of comments on various entries has kept me from exploring the process of understanding. Instead, I focus on entries' topics and forms – that is, how they are posted from the angle of ritual.

In order to understand the topical context, I briefly describe the groups' points of departure as expressed in their "About us" pages. A comparison of a number of "About us" pages shows that the activist gardeners, to a large degree, have followed a communicative frame that we recognize from social movement research. There are certain recurring "master frames". One begins with the *postulation of a*

problem, the "diagnostic framing" (Benford & Snow 2000: 615). For example, we are informed that urbanites face a wide range of ecological problems which challenge modern life. More concretely, the German non-profit organization "Nomadisch Grün" [Nomadic Green], which organizes the inner-city community garden "Prinzessinnengärten" [Princess garden] in Berlin, explains that these problems stem from modern society's emphasis on consumption at the expense of nature (www.prinzessinnengarten.net). The Swedish network Mykorrhiza [Mycorrhiza] also highlights the ecological problems caused by the modern lifestyle and "unsustainable methods in farming" (www.mykorrhiza.se). Another group, the Stockholm based network "Tillväxt" [Growth] blames the politicians who do not react to these problems, and therefore, are a part of the problem:

> The politicians have not understood that the cities of the future must produce more or less most of their own food, and not be dependent on oil, transport, meat from and land in other countries (www.tillväxt.org).

Some homepages highlight the *social relevance of the problem* in order to place the movement in a larger context and thus appeal to everyone: It is not only an issue for gardeners but also for the entire city. For example, we can read on the homepage of Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin: "The city of the future should be a climate-friendly, pleasant place to live, where every care is taken to conserve our natural resources" (www.prinzessinnengarten.net). The Swedish network Mykorrhiza goes further in its argumentation, by including the living conditions of all people in the world: "This contributes in turn to the destruction of the environment and suffering of people around the world" (www.mykorrhiza.se).

Finally, a *solution* is offered through an "action mobilization" frame (see Bender & Snow 2000: 615) which explains what can be done and why it is worthwhile to participate or to support the activists: It is about sustainable gardening and living in urban areas. For example, The German group Nomadisch Grün offers a site with the motto: "Eine andere Welt ist pflanzbar" [Another world is plantable]:

> Prinzessinnengärten is a new urban place of learning. It is where locals can come together to experiment and discover more about organic food production, biodiversity and climate protection. The space will help them adapt to climate change and learn about healthy eating, sustainable living and a future-oriented urban lifestyle. With this project Nomadisch Grün intends to increase biological, social and cultural diversity in the neighborhood and pioneer a new way of living together in the city (www.prinzessinnengarten.net).

The motivational frame of the Swedish network Mykorrhiza is more hands-on, offering the following solution: "What is needed is more small-scale farmers, and our aim is to inspire and help those who want to run small-scale organic farms, live in a more self-sufficient way or grow crops in the city" (www. mykorrhiza.se). The same goes for the Stockholm-based group Tillväxt, according to which "There is only one [type of] sustainable growth, and it is organic, biological

growth." In concrete terms, we can read: "We are planting edible plants in Stockholm" (www.tillväxt.org). In other words, we can take direct action to change our life style by cultivating our own food.

Looking at individual blogs, and exploring the reasons for activist gardening, we can find more personal motivations. Take the example of one guerilla gardener: He has neither garden nor allotment, but he loves gardening, so he does it on "neglected traffic islands and tree pits near me" (www.pimpyourpavement.wordpress.com). For him, these neglected places offer important possibilities for recreational gardening, and simultaneously they fulfill a political function. He concludes that "we can make a very tangible and welcoming contribution to improving our local environment, both ecologically and socially" (www.pimpyourpavement.wordpress.com).

The communication of these above-mentioned concepts, aided by a clearly defined frame of argumentation and often illustrated by photos, serves to define the identity of the group or the individual and thus attract the "right" people. That means that the text turns, primarily, to those who already share these ideas and are open these arguments. The self-descriptions on the "About us" pages are not, thus, meant to convince people hostile to gardening in urban areas. Nevertheless, they function as a kind of relation management in the communication process. For instance, they simplify the complex realities of food production, thus inviting communication and, eventually, guiding towards joint action.

These "About us" pages should, thus, probably be characterized as frames rather than ritual communication. They are strategic, insofar as they are meant to help one understand the websites' topics of communication. They are not meant to draw people to the message. They are a customary way of presenting the group and its goals. In short, they are not ritual as such. However, within them, we can find patterns of communication which I want to mark as ritual.

The Form of Ritual

In the next section, I take a closer look at examples which I define as ritual in communication. These include *preformed and fixed repeated pattern of entries* on websites as well as the *transcendent values* communicated on websites.

Preformed and Fixed Patterns of Utterances

A repeatedly used pattern of urban garden activist communication is the past-and-present narrative. Where an action takes place, that is, a neglected area of a city is being transformed, images of "then and now" or "before and after" are often used in the communication. Utterances such as: "Previously, it was a dog toilet. Now it is a flourishing tree pit with sun flowers", or, "previously it was wasteland and now a green oasis" are following a script that conforms to what Bird (1995: 27) describes as ritual action of successfully transforming and ordering nature. Those

statements are clear, and coordinated understanding can be expected. Often, the post has images illustrating and confirming this transformation, the functioning as physical evidence of the claims. It is almost impossible to misinterpret the message. Whether you like the transformation or not is another question. Retelling this over and over again is done more often on guerilla garden web sites than on websites involving community gardens, since guerilla gardeners deal with an over-night transformation of neglected areas, and retelling tends to reinforce a belief in the absolute necessity of change.

As an example, I want to further explore the website of the community garden in Berlin, Die Prinzessinnengärten. This garden, located in the city center of Berlin, is a mobile growing space, and the plants are in containers that can easily be wheeled around within and beyond the garden. The garden is also host to a series of activities. On their "About us" page, the activists narrate a transformation story in a condensed manner with the help of two photos:

Where there was, before, a wasteland or wilderness, we now see a well-arranged, civilized green oasis. It is a garden in the inner city, where a multitude of vegetables and fruits grow.

The application of semiotics, that is, the arrangement of signs, uses a "then and now" ritual. It follows its own logic in the activist gardeners' communications. First, there is the logic of sequentiality. The signs follow the temporal order of 'before it was this, after it is that'. Second, this sequentiality recurs regularly. It is a normal practice, a more or less stable sequence of utterances on various activist gardeners' websites. Because this ritual uses the fixed arrangement of

'then and now', it is related to what Merchant (2004: 205) terms the Recovery Narrative – that is, the account of efforts to create order out of a chaotic wild nature. It, therefore, unfolds its own dynamic, and, probably, efficacy.

This recurring website pattern shows, further, that activist gardeners' actions are causally related to the specificity of the place: the place conditions (but does not determine) their actions in some manner. The "then and now" narrative follows a pattern of successful transformation of a given place in the face of harsh conditions. Nature is the main character in this ritual script. It vitalizes memory by linking the present to the past. It facilitates recognition and understanding in the communication processes, and therefore minimizes contingency – that is, uncertainty about how the message is or will be perceived. In the process, it may shape the public's perception to some degree. It may also limit the public's interpretative choices to either judging the transformation favorably or questioning whether it is worthwhile or desirable (for example from an ecological point of view). Rituals reduce the reservoir of interpretive alternatives. However, they cannot altogether eliminate the contingent character of communication.

In order to qualify as rituals, our descriptions of beautiful gardens must entail the expression of "something more". Ritual reveals the group's own visions and convictions: it expresses the group's norms and facilitates further communication. The normative distinction between "what is" and "what could be" the case is activated. In other words, this narrative emphasizes how things ought to be: Tree pits ought to be used for flowers and not for dogs. Wasteland should be used for cultivation. Many features of environmental communication address the gap between the "indicative" and the "subjunctive" (cit. Turner in Szerszynski 2002: 56).

Values: The Garden of Eden Trope

In the following examples, I will focus on the figurative side of ritual in communication. In this context I will refer to a slideshow that appears every year on the homepage of Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin and which serves the purpose of documenting and summarizing garden life for the public. This slideshow functions as a means of visually taking part in the annual actions of the activist group. It serves to promote the cohesion of its own group, and to gain attention from the recipients, and eventually to recruit new participants.

What kind of reality is constructed in these images and which symbolic rituals are used to support understanding? This reality is based on some common principles that allow communication to connect with tropes that will be recognized by the recipients.

The slideshow "garden season 2011" (www.flickr.com) consists of 22 photos. Only four of these show garden produce and beautiful flowers; the majority portrays people working or socializing in the garden. The gardeners are the main characters, and the garden is a kind of *mise en scène*. The atmospheric fashioning of the scene is constructed through beautiful flowers, healthy edible plants, tomato

plants supported by a string construction, a bunch of fresh carrots. The gardeners are favorably portrayed, and make statements about how they interact with nature. The images of these gardeners show a new category of people, who invent new forms of gardening in the inner-city. They have access to nature and wildlife. Here, nature is not an exclusive property, opportunities for intimate experiences are around the corner. This experience contrasts with that of most citizens, who experience "nature as a great distance, if at all, from places next to the road marked with a sign showing the image of a camera" (Bergman 1996: 295-296).

The security of recognition is generated by the tropes "garden" and "gardening". In Western Christian culture, the garden is rich in symbols and values, and has both a spiritual and a physical dimension. It refers to a discourse in which the garden is a vital symbol "of a moral society living in 'natural' social and environmental harmony" (Olwig 1995: 384). According to Merchant, the "Garden of Eden" trope is among the most powerful of Western narratives. "The recovery story begins with the fall from the garden into the desert". The desert, here, is the city or the wasteland. This entailed the "loss of an original partnership with the land". But the city garden moves us "upward to the re-creation of Eden" (Merchant 2004: 18). Nadel-Klein concludes that all modern gardeners are "engaged in recapturing Eden, if only in a limited way, and some more explicitly than others" (Nadel-Klein 2010: 167). Recovering nature and creating a kitchen garden are "experienced as antidotes to civilization". In the case of the urban community garden, nature "becomes a retreat from capitalist production" (Merchant 2004: 119). Cultivation takes place in small containers; all is handmade. It represents a resistance to the industrial production of food. Images of crops and tasty dishes talk of a successful garden season. This implies a normative framework: gardening is predicated as "good" and rewarding.

The "Garden of Eden" trope tells us that we can regain Eden if we work for it (Merchant 2004: 39). This involves bodies. Gardeners' bodies become a medium of communication. In ritual theory, the body is an indexical sign of performers' relationship with the order they refer to, and, in this case with the order of seasonal performance. In other words, rituals of knowing, arising from gardening, give the security of expectations concerning what gardening is about. The bodies are in motion and repeat the act of creation: they are digging the soil, alone or together, they are holding a water hose in order to water seedlings, lending a helping hand to support tomato plants, and sitting down for dinner at a long table with peers. The slideshow constructs the bodily engagement of the participants as ritual events: the body is shown doing hard work, performing simple tasks, and finally relaxing and socializing. As is often the case, the most important function of this ritual is to express a corporate group feeling: The active individual is part of the community in body and spirit.

The garden and the gardening activity are also seen as reservoirs of ecological knowledge and social practice: the garden is a place of learning. Here knowledge

passes from one generation to another, from expert to a layman. Children and adults watch a bee colony, and learn about the social behavior of honey bees. Showing a seed-pod, an adult presumably explains germination to a group of children, who are listening and watching attentively. Such images exemplify the metaphor of "nature as mother and teacher" (Merchant 2004: 118). They show that meaning production processes are controlled by connecting to powerful narratives where nature is becoming more important as a knowledge base and also as a moral entity.

The garden is also associated the idea of personal expression (arranging plants, cooking meals) as well as practical experimentation, recreation and social life. The body can be an intimate companion of nature and of peers. The images of the body shown narrate a story of environmental and social harmony. There are alternatives: the story told could have been of exhausting work, bad weather, lack of crops, plant illnesses, vandalism etc. But it is not. A selection has taken place among information available for publication, and the visual "Recovering-of-the-Garden-of-Eden" trope has been chosen. This trope seems to work best for winning the approval and sympathy of both group members and public, and ultimate for getting support for future activities.

The slideshow from the previous year includes almost the same images. It displays a repetition of ritual performances, or, in other words, images of communicated ritualized action: digging, hacking, planting, watering, learning, harvesting, cooking, eating and socializing. Here, attraction and replicability are elementary mechanisms for the management of public attention: the performance of seasonal garden activities becomes a ritual that can be endlessly replicated, and therefore visualized during different seasons and in different places. Also the above-mentioned mobile cultivation makes it possible to replicate the social action in other places. In one case, all the containers were wheeled out to a theatre and placed there for some days, which received some attention, not least from the mass media.

Finally, the communication of the annual slideshows on the home page of the community garden Prinzessinnengärten makes use of ritual symbols that speak of "a perfect world" as a kind of emotional inspiration for a joyful future: people are not only in harmony with each other, but also with nature. The communication of harmony is not only visible in the slideshow but also at other entries such as the following: "Raus aus der Stube, rein in den Garten!" [Getting out into the garden!]

"Creating [flower-]beds, containing beds, pre-cultivating rhubarb, planting rhubarb, honey bees are flying, the smell of coffee, in short: Again, a perfect world at Moritzplatz in 2011".

Telling Emotions of Pleasure

As mentioned above, rituals in communication are meant to attract people to the message and reduce the uncertainties of communication. Apart from, notification of the different group activities, we find information about farming, various expressions of feelings about gardening. The communication of feelings experienced in the garden, and while gardening, enforces the authenticity of the utterances. These messages offer an emotional insight into someone's thought processes, and a deeper involvement in communication. Simultaneously, the expression of positive feelings experienced while engaging in communal gardening promotes bonding, as does the fact that peers' activities are presented as being worthy of esteem. It enforces emotional ties within the group and strengthens the feeling of common goal. Within social movement studies it is common knowledge that strong emotions play a decisive role in attracting and mobilizing people. Negative emotions, in particular, play a prominent role in protest movements and are conceived as "powerful" (Jasper 1998: 414). Protest movements often express feelings of outrage or fear.

However, the feelings that the urban gardeners express on the web sites are almost uniformly positive. It is striking that emotions of pleasure and delight are selected: gardening is described as an object of keen interest, or in other words, of passion. Harsh weather conditions, unfavorable soil and unsuccessful sowing do not stand in the way of expressions of emotions of pleasure and enthusiasm. A few entries describe disappointments, but the final outcome of the activity would be satisfying. For example: A blog entry relates that most of the expensively purchased seed bombs had not sprouted, which "was very annoying", but neverthe-

less, the deserted tree pits "could be brought to life" and "thanks" everyone. (28 March 2011, www.gartenmiliz.wordpress.com).

Almost all the stories told are success stories, and even if there are problems such as vandalism in a community garden, the entry ends on an optimistic note: "It is the way it is, and so you have to make the best of it" (12 April 2012, www.rosarose.twoday.net/). Nature teaches you to be patient – and a later entry claims that vandalism has decreased. The writer hopes for a change in behavior of those who cause destruction. Thus, the writer relies on the positive energy a community garden can spread in the neighborhood. Accordingly, vandalism, even though it is a negative event, is neutralized or even masked by the pleasure of describing other positive experiences. Negative feelings, such as anger or displeasure, that may dominate an entry, are generally sorted out within the examined website communication.

The entries on blogs and websites exhibit a joyful feeling of togetherness with peers and with nature, and also of satisfaction with one own efforts. Entries emotionally describe the difficulties and efforts entailed in turning wasteland into green areas, and waste into garden tools. One author praises the "permanently required creativity" and the "constant confidence in achieving the ultimate raised flower bed, this time", though all the involved gardeners are laymen and have no experience with working in wood (30 May 2012, www.opflanztis.wordpress.com). But confidence in the possibility of reaching the goal is great, and the enthusiasm is palpable.

Most entries express a sense of being drawn together by a shared concern. By emphasizing people-to-people rather than people-to-nature relationships, they express an intense feeling of fellowship among those involved in the gardening, as some examples show:

> It is always exciting, unbelievable, and encouraging how many wonderful people give their best to make our garden possible. (6 March 2012 http://opflanztis.wordpress.com/)

> […] On the same day I started to revive the completely overgrown old flower bed. When I had to leave after three hours of strenuous grubbing and digging, out of nowhere appeared an unknown female garden enthusiast and offered to expand the bed. Meanwhile, someone has planted the bed, too. I have no idea who that, again, was. But it's fun that enthusiasts appear from somewhere and take care of the garden. (26 May 2012, www.rosarose.twoday.net/)

> The joy and work enthusiasm that spread in the group make our farming project feel fantastically meaningful and important. (23 Sept. 2012 www.matparken.wordpress.com/)

Gardening is celebrated as a unifying and uplifting force. The gardeners are a part of a collectivity of enthusiasts who share an identity created by a common interest. These quoted emotions express a strong feeling of belonging to the group of garden enthusiasts, and intensify the cohesion of the group. This collectivity of

enthusiast comprises not only the group of activists but also those who appreciate guerilla gardening, as another entry relates:

> During the 15 minutes we were actually in place, passers-by were constantly approaching us with kind words. It was a great action, thanks Wolfsburg! (4 April 2012, www.gartenstadt2punkt0.wordpress.com/2012/04/)

These entries communicate feelings of joyful togetherness and pleasure, of a positive attitude towards planting activities within the group and among outsiders. The aesthetic of a "we-ness" is present in all the websites and blogs examined here. However, feelings of well-being are not limited to relations within a group and to other people but are expressed at a purely individual level as well. Gardening makes you happy, and helps to fulfill yourself. A gardener expresses his excitement at beginning the garden season after a long winter, in capital letters:

> "I AM SO EXCITED. I HAVE 'EARTH WORMS' IN THE BELLY. My first planting in the garden" (3 March 2012, www.opflanztis.wordpress.com/)

Gardening is seen as an activity that leads to self-fulfillment. It allows people to communicate their feeling, to be proud of themselves and of their efforts, and to show and communicate the results of these efforts to a public, as a guerilla gardener expresses:

> For me, this day was certainly very fulfilling, because I finally realized how much the garden means to me, and that it simply is a part of me. Guerilla Gardening brings great fun and joy! I had almost forgotten it in the last year, since I barely did any guerilla gardening.
> (29 Sept 2012 www.gartenstadt2punkt0.wordpress.com/2012/09/)

Feelings of being in a relationship with nature are expressed in descriptions of hard work (often in the form of pulling weeds) and simultaneously enjoying the results of one's own efforts when looking at these transformed areas. Nice weather conditions are mentioned as something that makes work easier and turn hard work into pleasure, as another entry relates:

> We have built a new compost – shady in the North under bushes. This was very necessary because even the old compost has to be sorted and turned. But on such a beautiful sunny day like yesterday, it was a pure pleasure
> (3 Sept. 2012 www.keimzelle.blogsport.eu/).

Entries describing the opposite – harsh weather conditions that make gardening almost impossible – seem to be deleted in website communication. In order to transform abandoned land into flower beds, the gardener has to do a lot of physical work. This may even be experienced as useless work, since nature will take over after a while unless someone cares for these beds. But narratives about such hard labor are always presented in an upbeat manner, as this example shows:

> Thank you for a wonderful day! We had to work hard with the flower bed, which was packed with couch grass. But we had a lot of fun, too! […] It will be amazing to see it grow! (www.tillvaxt.org/tillvaxt-2010/).

By illustrating the entry with a photo showing working children and adults who are trying to get rid of troublesome weeds, the feeling of having fun while doing this work is transmitted, even though it is laborious. The bodies are in motion rather than rest. A girl is laughing while handling a big pitchfork. The gardeners seem to know that they have to get rid of the weeds completely if the boxes are to be replanted. Here, again, the trope of the Recovery Narrative is evident. Nature or wilderness has to be transformed, be made to serve human interest. Couch grass is unwelcome, as any gardener knows.

"Thank you for such a wonderful day!" (http://www.tillvaxt.org/tillvaxt-2010/).

The same goes for the next example. Pulling out weeds, an activity that is here described as "grubbing" weeds because of the enormous root system (20 June 2011, www.rosarose.twoday.net/), fulfills expectations of what is expected from successful gardening; it also gives pleasure.

The effort is satisfying. The gardener enjoys the result, which she proudly shows to the photographer. The message is clear: gardening is fun.

"Grubbing"

Conclusions: The Risk of Ritual

In media research the study of rituals has customarily focused on their impact. I, however, have chosen to focus on how rituals are used in communication, and what function they fulfill. In general, we may note that rituals serve the function of minimizing uncertainty in communication, that is, to increase recognition and, thereby, connecting communication according to the systems-theoretical approach. In the communication of activist gardeners, a successful ritual raises awareness and conveys to the recipients a new understanding of urban gardening. Activist gardening is mainly described as self-fulfilling and fun, and as being deeply culturally connected to our ideas of living in social and environmental harmony.

My aim was to show that the communication of the examined activists is deeply rooted in cultural language, and uses rituals. Their communication does not only reflect social activities in the garden. Rather, is "part of a communication process in which the culture addresses itself" (Thomas 2006: 325).

Inspired by Kreinath's description of ritual performances (2006: 469-470), and applying them to the concept of communication, I can distinguish at least three features of rituals held in common by the websites I have analyses. These rituals show certain forms of

1. Replication: that is, ritual recurs in accordance with the seasons of gardening. Here, ritual symbols of recovery, harmony, togetherness, enthusiasm etc. configure the pattern of communication.
2. Referentiality: that is, ritual invokes the ideal of the permanent presence of a desired form of community and a new way of life. Entries are often based on concrete actions in the garden, which, when communicated, express the idea and desire of a new way of urban life.
3. Efficacy: that is, how the rituals of communication can be established, and how they transform relations in the communication process, e.g., joint action. Messages defined as rituals are clear: they reduce the uncertainty of communication. I did not especially look at this feature, but judging from the attention given urban gardening by mass media (articles in newspapers as well as reports in TV), it appears that connecting communication has taken place, and the public awareness of these actions has increased.

However, ritual can also create new uncertainties. Images that include rituals can create artificial worlds. "This is a world as it happens to be. In this situation, an observer is inclined mistakenly to see symbolic 'maps' as having become real 'territories'" (Thomas 2006: 337). Those, for instance, who have the Garden of Eden trope in mind when visiting the real Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin for the first time, may experience disappointment. During the planting season, it may, for

example, look like a chaotic place full of diverse containers of various garden vegetables in more or less good condition.

The repetition of the fixed flow of ritual symbols of a perfect garden world of pleasure and social harmony can be experienced as boring, and eventually, "rituals become the victim of their own success" (Thomas 2006: 339). Sooner or later the participant may drop out of the communication process, or engage in other playful and entertaining forms of involvement.

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