## MICHAEL TAUSSIG

# AND THE GARDEN IS YOU

*For Rosella Biscotti*

**BRYON GYSIN WAS** a painter who after a decade in Morocco running a night-club called the "Thousand and One Nights" discovered the "cut-up" while cutting something on top of a pile of magazines in his room in a cheap hotel on the left bank of Paris in 1959. The debris fell on the floor. He looked down, marveling at the mash-up on the floor.

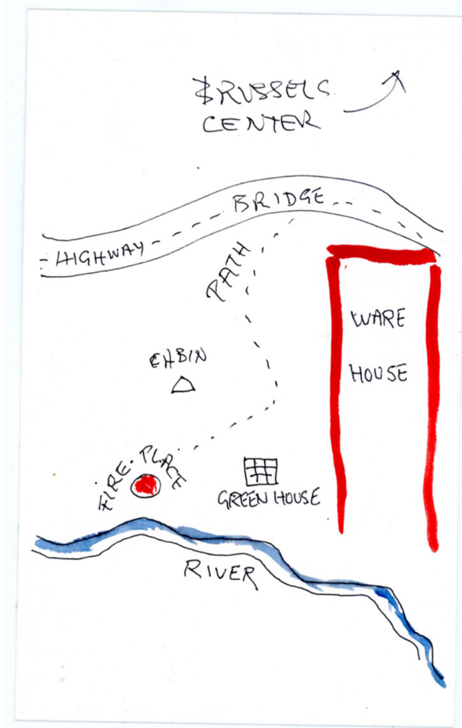
"I think you've got something there, Bryon," drawled his companion William Burroughs, who made the cutup notorious with his *Naked Lunch.* "Cut-ups?" he asked. Words are like animals trapped in cages he wrote, or words to that effect, in response to fierce criticism in the *Times Literary Supplement*. "Cut the cages and let the words free." For the Brit crit types it was too gay and too ungrammatical.

The cut-up was more than a happy accident while cutting through layers of old newspapers. Like a collage, it resonated with what Gysin felt earlier, looking at tiled mosaics in Morocco. "These magic carpets in tile," he wrote in a novel called *The Process,* "can catch up the soul into rapture for hours. They begin with mere optical illusion in which colors leap and swirl, but the effect goes on developing to where a pattern springs loose as you move into the picture you see. You step from this world into a garden and the garden is You."[1]

That is what I felt late May 2021, springtime, visiting an urban garden, a guerrilla garden, you could say, wriggling its way between new warehouses and debris along a polluted stream called La Senne that turned out to be the main "river" running mostly underground forgotten and hidden through Brussels. Here it surfaces as if resurrected from a long sleep, its waters nourishing a guerrilla garden. Strands of "seaweed" floated just beneath the surface, bringing to mind the drowned Ophelia in *Hamlet*—made all the more poignant when Kobe told me he uses this seaweed for fertilizer.

I very much like the idea of the tile mosaic sucking you in to its swirling colors in a conflagration of subject/object implosions. But I have problems here with my use of Gysin's idea of a "pattern springing loose," unless it is a pattern that continuously undoes itself, like the stream tugging at the seaweed, because what overwhelmed me from

the beginning as Kobe led me off the roadway into the garden was a sense of unpredictable irregularity, more a collage than a pattern.




Maybe if I visit a second time I will discern a pattern. But how much of that is me and how much is it the garden? Does it matter anyway, if an ambiguous sense of pattern or of rampant disorder later gives way to order? Isn't the sense of randomness, of bits and pieces conglomerating, imploding, conflagrating, desiring each other's otherness, what makes it interesting? Isn't writing itself just that? A collage of words masked as narrative?

With these thoughts I was plunged into an unexpected recollection. I was back fifty years in the Cauca Valley of Colombia. A young peasant day laborer named Robier Uzuriaga took me off the main road along a shaded path to his home. On either side of us was a bewildering array of trees of varying heights and shades of green whose names I only got to know later. Huge shade trees with pink blossoms, cacao trees with their pendulous, breast-like pods, coffee trees adorned with red and green berries, plantain trees glistening yellow and purple,

lemon trees, orange trees—trees everywhere higgledy-piggledy, only I didn't distinguish any of them then. To me to it was a dank primeval forest. Months passed before I got to see the ingenuity in this design, this "pattern" which extinguished pattern in a riot of irregularity at the beck and call of a scheme—if that's the word—composed of social and botanical history, tropical sun, equatorial rainfall patterns, and staggered harvesting patterns of commercial tree crops of coffee, cacao, citrus, and subsistence-oriented plantains.

Only later did I see that this place mimicked tropical rainforest, with its abundant leaf-fall providing the fertilizer, its scanty weed growth because of the shade, its release of moisture in the dry seasons, absorption of water in the rainy seasons, and very little labor, with at least half of the farms owned and worked by women-headed households.

Only later did I start to wonder how this ecological marvel came to be, presumably through centuries of pre-colonial and colonial farming

practice, followed by twentieth-century coffee. The cacao, which Europeans think of as chocolate or as cocoa, was indigenous, pre-dating Spanish colonialism, originating far to the east in the Orinoco river basin. Cocoa beans were used as currency in central America, which I find strange. I mean, could you just pick your money off a tree, like going to an ATM? But then, as we all know, money is strange stuff, so strange that it seems right to have chocolate as your currency rather than gold or banknotes, don't you think?

The most important thing, confusing and then expanding my consciousness, was that this peasant agriculture was based on trees, not open fields like Europe or north America, and certainly not like the sugarcane plantations closing in and crushing the peasant farms at a furious rate since the early 1960s.

You could call it a *farm*. But you could also call it a *garden*, a term which poetically and politically displaces the term "farm." And you might even call it a *grove*, suggestive of a secluded pocket of trees with sacred meaning.

When you encounter something strange that seems disorderly, you usually try and find a pattern, the "reason" below the chaotic surface. That's what anthropologists do when faced with a different culture, reducing the strange to the normal, not bothering too much with the fact that the normal, when exposed to the strange, becomes itself

strange and chaotic. This must be the reason why anthropologists clutch at structure—at the word and what it multifariously suggests—as a life-vest or epistemological security blanket. "Calm the beast, the beast of chaos!"

And here I was in Brussels in Northern Europe, flung back in time into my memories while looking down from a bridge on a wavy heap of greenness without gestalt, stretching down to the river that was more a trickle than a stream.

Cars stream behind me in an endless flow. In front in the distance is a solitary person in a red top pushing a bicycle off the road into the greenery along a barely discernible pathway parallel to the stream.

Later I got to meet the cyclist, when she and I were clearing ground to plant tomatoes gestating in the greenhouse, a curved, roofed structure covered in translucent plastic that bore the wounds of being slashed by vandals. Those scars carefully sewn together like keloid scar tissue sent shivers down my spine.

Like most people I met in the garden, she was from elsewhere, polyglot, and "irregular" (like the garden) in terms of nation-statehood, her parents being Polish migrants in Germany, she being a resident of Brussels, a city I increasingly found full of generous, soft people from all over. But her Polish language was weak, her parents not wanting her to speak it, for fear or shame of German chauvinism. This added to the irregularities: the fact of multilinguism plus the fact of linguistic hierarchies and denigration, something that leaps to mind with the Flemish/French friction that is Belgium.

Could this sonic medley be the reason why so many of the artists I met in Brussels were working on sound? She herself recorded sounds in relation to place and connected this, she said with a smile, to her use of telepathy—as when trying to connect that way with someone in Australia.

Up the slope, partly obscured by tree foliage was a small hut which had been used for tools or sleeping—I forget which—until without permission it was occupied by an African migrant, one of the fortunate in having a steady job as a mechanic but who preferred squatting to save money, which he sent to his brother in Africa. He worked on second-hand cars, Brussels being the European hub for the African market in such cars, many of which no longer meet European pollution standards. As far as I know nobody in the garden ever put any pressure on him. He did not help in the garden much or at all. When

he left, parts of the cabin were stolen by undocumented migrants sleeping upstream on a bridge.

I helped Kobe plant two fruit trees about four feet high. The soil was surprisingly soft. He explained that in the construction of one of the adjacent warehouses, a lot of sand had been bulldozed onto the garden site. One of the gardeners' tasks therefore was to rebuild soil.

I might add here that Kobe is an artist with an unusual project. He worked for four years in New York City in the 1990s as an assistant to a prominent artist, setting up exhibits. Back in Brussels, with friends he helped set up an artists' housing co-op in a disused downtown post office, five stories high. The resulting apartments were fabulous. The western wall was all glass, providing marvelous light—such an important resource in this perpetually grey city. The ceilings were twelve feet high. The construction labor was supplied by the inhabitants.

Note that real estate in Brussels is one-third the cost of Paris, which could be why artists' collectives and communitarian projects seem, unlike in Paris, to abound. Here I was only one hour from Paris but what a difference! Not a trace of the stiff-necked haughtiness that passes for elegance in Paris, with its high heels and men like mannequins in striped shirts. Brussels was not much like that. It was down-at-heel, drab clothing, swathes of beer drinkers ignoring the drizzle in lively conversation in open squares, humanity writ large, bohemian and Breugelian.

Kobe's current and long-term art project consists of 2,000 wooden boxes (nicely crafted, made for kids' toys), each box containing files of bizarre legal suits and trials concerning disputes over art, each involving intellectual property rights. One, as I recall was a suit in Brazil by a cult claiming that visits by spirits should be credited to the spirits as legal owners of a specific work.

There may not have been structure in the garden, but there was a center and that was the fireplace, around which was a circular stone bench. When I arrived, two men were attending to two babies there while the mothers were clearing shrub. Late afternoon. a middle-aged man turned up who seemed to take charge of cooking a vegetable tagine while we talked, and I met three or four new arrivals with kids aged about seven, happily playing in and with mud. I recall F., a middle-aged, Flemish-origin artist who paints abstract designs over old junk paintings, and M., a tall German flute player with a girlfriend and child in Poland, trapped by COVID. He is working with a group

on a project concerning a Black Madonna in Germany who attracts many pilgrims.

No leader. But a cook!

**IN A FAMOUS ESSAY,** Michel Foucault, who spent time teaching in Iran, focuses in on the garden as a heterotopia, viz., a social space that stands apart from society. Even in secular societies a heterotopia carries sacred weight, positive or negative, such as a prison or brothel, for example. The word "paradise" comes from the Persian word for garden. Foucault draws attention to the four rectangles within such gardens, representing the world, and notes that the fountain in the center is an umbilicus, which I presume to be the life-flowing connection to the cosmos at large.

Am I mistaken, therefore, in assuming that here, lost in the tangled wilderness of an inner-city European capital in the midst of pollution and warehouses, this communal garden likewise has its umbilical center, not a fountain but a fire, with a stream running past?

Around the fire, I explained that I was invited here by a US artist from San Francisco who, many years back, had formed a group called *Futurefarmers* that had found a niche among like-minded folk in Belgium. What I didn't realize until I met the guerrilla-garden people was how this niche was a lot more than any identifiable ecological or political movement.

It was a state of mind.

There was a haphazard basis to *Futurefarmers*; "hap-hazard," as in the sense of chance (French) and irregularity (English), a premium on originality, humor, Luddism, low-tech, localism, and anarchic; plus an indefinable savoir-faire of empathy and being together that no amount of willful trying could achieve.

Like the surfacing of the River Senne ,flowing miles underground in the city, it was a temporary autonomous zone, product of undercurrents in culture and history.

When F. asked me what my San Francisco friend was doing in nearby Ghent I told him about those awesome Belgian draft horses there which, at that very moment, were being harnessed to haul a giant tree that had fallen in the forest.

He looked puzzled. "What's the point?" he asked.

I found it hard to answer.

Then his face lit up. "Ah! It's a performance! It's art!"

M. smiled and nodded in agreement. The strange had been normalized by plunging it into another and different strange—“performance” that had no boundaries and could absorb all mysteries intact.

And wasn’t that what we were doing in the garden, too?

Meanwhile Kobe and a newcomer scavenged across the “river” to the looming warehouse for wooden packing cases to add to the fire, which was to my mind already alarmingly high. Just as the African mechanic squatting in the tool shed took advantage of the guerrilla garden, so the gardeners took advantage of their industrial neighbors scavenging their debris.

Sturdy “workhorse” bicycles with saddlebags were abundant. Kobe’s massive saddlebags were stuffed with food and beer, plus material for the garden. As we walked for forty-five minutes that bright Sunday morning, from his inner-city apartment in the ex-post office to the garden, we passed plenty of sad-looking, solitary men sipping their beer. “Albanians,” said Kobe as we passed such a group.

Their faces stuck in my mind after I walked home from the garden. I thought of the contrast, like night and day, between those faces and the animated collective in the garden. More than animated, they were like energy-providers.

I took six or seven cell-phone photographs of the garden but was surprised how untrue they seemed, something that has never occurred with my images before. The perspectives seemed inaccurate and made no sense as trigonometry. The colors were somehow off, dark, blurred and misty, full of shadow. And overall, the images were far from what I remembered.

How could that be?

Perhaps reality outstripped itself? (That’s the metaphysical take.) What the phone camera caught was an out-of-body experience, the very meaning of the garden in world history. Had we not doubled back in time? Had we not, like the river, suddenly surfaced into a “no man’s land,” a strategic point or fault line in urban industrial development?

Yes! That must be it. We had slipped into the void, a timeless space that the original inventors of the word ”paradise” might have had in mind when they named the ancient Persian “garden”—like the tile mosaic I cite at the beginning of this essay, that Bryon Gysin described and I like to see as the proto-history of the “cut-up”—which is also, I now understand, the same as the garden centered around fire and

cooking, so that it can have no structure. The circle is the most perfect form, I remember from Aristotle, essays—read while studying medicine—that discuss the discovery of the circulation of the blood in the human being.

Of course a mosaic is different. It has structure, but in many instances it is a structure that outdoes itself. Instead of resolving a mystery, it creates one. "These magic carpets in tile," wrote Gysin, and I quote again, "can catch up the soul into rapture for hours. They begin with mere optical illusion in which colors leap and swirl, but the effect goes on developing to where a pattern springs loose as you move into the picture you see. You step from this world into a garden and the garden is You."

Could it also be that those recently built, giant warehouses either side of the river were to blame for the beyond-reality feel? Or rather, not them alone but their forming an elemental part of the riverside complex, along with the garden?

First of all, were they really warehouses? I don't know what to call them, or what they were, or what was inside them. Perhaps they contained commodities, perhaps people or animals, perhaps atom bombs, or rusty handcuffs. They were so huge they seemed like natural phenomena, what Lukács, in a famous essay, referencing Hegel, called "second nature." More than mountains, volcanoes, or cliff faces, they had become the sky itself. They were background. They were context. They not only shaped reality as much as the trickle we called a river, they got inside reality, they percolated it, riddled it, shimmered it too. This was especially the case with the one painted blue on the river bank whose cast-off wooden packing cases we were burning to get coals to cook the tagine and, let's face it, let us indulge in the delirium of fire leaping high into the approaching night. "In its completeness of form and finish, in its squat grandeur and no-nonsense being—in its just being—this voiceless, slumbering, monolith of an anti-Christ perfected the garden.

Or was it the other way around?

**IF I HAD** been able to stay more than three and half hours, maybe I could tell you.

## NOTES

[1] Brion Gysin, The Process, New York: Doubleday, 1969, 65-66.

MICHAEL TAUSSIG is an anthropologist-writer whose books include *Mimesis and Alterity*; *Walter Benjamin's Grave*; *My Cocaine Museum*; *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*; and *I Swear I Saw This*.