

Doing and Nothing

An exploration of Song Dong's Doing Nothing Garden and the possibility of renewing ourselves and our environment through not doing

By Vanessa Badagliacca



I grew up hearing the recurring expression that if you—a general you—didn't catch “the train” passing right at that moment you would miss it. You would lose your chance to do something, to meet someone, to experience something, to get something, to take the chance of a lifetime. Reflecting on Song Dong's Doing Nothing Garden, I am more and more convinced that “doing nothing” is not only an active attitude, but even a dynamic attitude. I have always been told that if I missed that opportunity it wouldn't pass a second time; there wouldn't be another chance. Now I think about it differently. “Doing

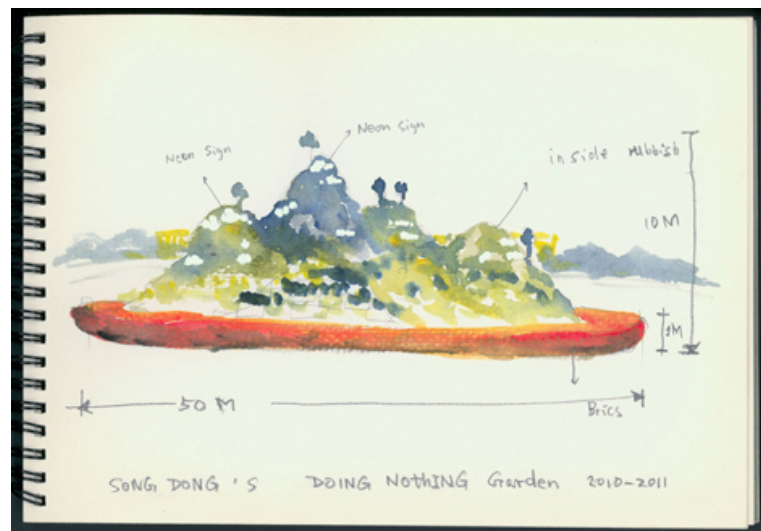
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nothing” means following the continuous flux of life, which moves and changes as it follows its natural course. Doing nothing is not about staying at a fixed point. “Doing nothing” is not the opposite of “doing.” Recognizing the dual existence of these two concepts may help us regain our balance.

Situated in front of a Baroque castle in Kassel, Germany, and in the midst of an artificial and ordered space laid out in the sixteenth century (Karlsaue Park), the Chinese artist Song Dong’s *Doing Nothing Garden* was (for two years, 2010-2012) a mound of grass, flowers, and plants.¹ Here Song Dong’s garden grew approximately 6 meters high upon several layers of rubble and biological waste. In the middle of this vegetation two neon signs in Chinese characters expressed the two ideas: “doing” and “nothing.”

Although the material of the garden camouflaged its sense to a certain extent, the garden’s striking, engaging appearance encouraged viewers to ask themselves what it was doing there, to reflect on the implications of its presence in such a carefully designed landscape, and on how rubble and waste might lead to physical renovation and personal renewal. By discussing these phenomena, we explore our own beliefs and the very core of ourselves. The garden

encourages the making of many connections—certainly with the vaunting of naturalness and non-action in Taoist philosophy, but also with other, non-Chinese writers and art works. For example, the spontaneous growth of vegetation on the mound and the



consequent development of biodiversity on an accumulation of waste recalled the French writer Gilles Clément’s idea of *un Tiers paysage* (a Third Landscape)—abandoned parcels

¹ Documenta, one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art, has been held every five years since 1955 in Kassel, Germany. A city where munitions were manufactured, Kassel was completely destroyed during the Second World War. For this reason, it was later chosen as a symbolic place of union in the realm of art. DOCUMENTA(13) was held June 9–September 16 2012 under the artistic direction of the curator and writer Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. For this thirteenth exhibition, Christov-Bakargiev chose to invert the capitalization of the title. An explanation about this graphic choice is available at the page <<http://www.ci-portal.de/documenta-13-visual-identity/>>

of land that have been altered by human activity and yet are neither developed nor preserved, but evolve without conscious human intervention. Song Dong's work seems also to be asking about human beings' potential not only to *do*, but also to *not* do. In this regard, it may call to mind the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's brief essay, "Su ciò che possiamo non fare" (On What We Can Not Do).

Song Dong's garden also simultaneously recalled and rejected the Asian tradition of bonsai, of strictly managed growth. The word "bonsai" derives from Chinese words for "tray" [bon] and "cultivate [sai]," and Song Dong placed his garden on a sort of ceramic tray, while also allowing it to grow untended, as it wished. With human control absent, there was a chance for spontaneous growth. Although seeming quite complete in and of themselves, in being alive and growing bonsai are always incomplete. Similarly,



Doing Nothing Garden was always whole and complete as a sculpture, while also being (as Clément once said in another context) a "garden in motion."² Bonsai are living sculptures (representations of larger trees) that need regular care, in order to guarantee continuous growth while existing in miniature. The necessary care for its durability was replaced in Song Dong's artwork by an ephemeral and organic sculpture based on a profound and, I hope, a long-lasting concept.

Doing Nothing Garden opposed the controlled growth of the bonsai, whose beauty results from human control or care. This aspect was evidenced by the neon lights in the shape of Chinese characters proclaiming the idea of "doing nothing." Especially for

² Clément, *Le Jardin en mouvement*.

those who cannot read Chinese, these neon characters' presence could be disturbing. *Doing Nothing Garden* was hardly an idyllic landscape; it presented the heterogeneity and renewed growth that may arise in an abandoned space, freed from human intervention and allowed to again grow in a natural, uncontrolled way.

Created and conceived for the dOCUMENTA(13) exhibition, *Doing Nothing Garden* (2010-2012) was removed when the exhibition ended. Having been made of recycled materials, it completed its life by being itself recycled. What remains, however, is the strength of its message. Through our memories and reflections, *Doing Nothing Garden* can continue to offer ways of thinking about how we—as a species, as societies, and as individuals—might renew ourselves, our circumstances, and our environments through *not* acting—through doing nothing, not striving either to fulfil our potentials or to stave off the disasters threatened by all our potential-fulfilling behaviours.

If we stand in the field of rhetoric we may find a paradox or at least an oxymoron in this drive to combine (external/material) renovation and (interior/spiritual) renewal with doing nothing. Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is to call attention to how this connection can be made and should be made, to include in reference to Song Dong's *Doing Nothing Garden*.

The paper will explore this topic in three ways. First I will briefly discuss a few of Song Dong's previous works, inter alia, connecting one of them with the work of the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone.³ Secondly, I will discuss Clément's idea of the Third Landscape and show how this idea fits with *Doing Nothing Garden*. Thirdly, I will very briefly trace the connection between the artwork and Agamben's essay "On What We Can Not Do." Walking this path—moving from this particular work, through works and ideas that are in dialogue with it—we may come to better appreciate *Doing Nothing*

³ Born in Garesio, Italy in 1947, Penone's artistic career began in the late 1960s. He was a member of the group founded by the Italian curator and art critic Germano Celant and named Arte Povera (poor art). This Italian artistic movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was inspired by ideas developed by the Polish director Jerzy Grotowsky in a 1968 text that is available in English under the title *Towards a poor theatre*. Arte Povera involved art reduced to the essential and was engaged in reflection about the relationship between nature and culture and between energy and technology, and this amid the economic boom and mass social movements of the 1960s. Penone's work throughout his career has focused on an investigation of human beings and nature, taking a special interest in materiality and the awareness that nature is also a human construction (agricultural land being an obvious example). Accepting that human beings are part of nature, Penone has not sought to oppose the artificial, but rather to recognize the partnership between people and their surroundings.

The relation between Song Dong's artistic practice and Arte Povera may be understood in Christov-Bakargiev's description of the latter as referring to "domesticity and habitat, a human scale, a layering of diverse cultural references, a rejection of coherent style and artistic signature, as well as the distinction between the literal and metaphoric, real and virtual, natural and artificial, live and inert, through the transformation of the installation into a type of 'poor theatre' where nature and culture coincide." Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 74.

Garden's deep and strong "political" meaning. "Political" here not in the sense of specific groups and movements, but as regards the role and life of citizens and societies, of the human inhabitants of the world in which we live.

Notes on Song Dong's artistic practice

Born in Beijing in 1966 and active in the Chinese art scene since the early 1990s, Song Dong has worked in a wide range of formats—from performance and installations to sculpture, photography, video, and painting. In the next two segments I am going to discuss three of the works that are most relevant to *Doing Nothing Garden*, as well as touching on the connections between Song Dong and Penone, a connection that also involves the dOCUMENTA(13) curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, whose *Arte Povera* is a central reference for anyone interested in *Arte Povera*.⁴

Concerns about the environment as well as about daily life, and dealing with ideas of accumulation and absence, have been constants in Song Dong's work. They were given monumental expression in the installation titled *Waste not* (2005), which took three years to complete.⁵ This work was done in collaboration with his mother, Zhao Xiangyuan (not previously an artist), transforming into an artwork the huge amount of objects she had been collecting to fill the emptiness left by the death of her husband (Song Dong's father).⁶ As he explained at the exhibition of this piece, closed in her sadness, his mother did not want to live in an empty and clean room, preferring to preserve any kind of ordinary objects that might help keep her husband's memory alive.

Through preserving and not wasting the material, he also had in mind relationships in general as well as a specific generation: that of people like his parents who came of age in China in the 1960s and were dissidents. In discussing *Waste not* at the gallery where it was exhibited, he distinguished three types of relationships:

- (1) People to people: Showing to the public how this personal memory offered his mother and him an opportunity to enter into dialogue with people who share similar memories.

⁴ At dOCUMENTA(13), just a few meters from *Doing Nothing Garden*, appeared *Idee di Pietra* (2003/2008/2010), a sculpture in bronze and stone by Penone. This turned out to be the only piece that was bought by the city of Kassel and remained in the Karlsau Park after the dismantling of the exhibition.

⁵ The information here on *Waste not* derives from Song Dong's presentation of the piece during its exhibition at the Carriageworks art centre in Sydney, Australia, January 5–March 17, 2013. Information accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blbjQT-qWBE>.

⁶ Cf. Eva Scharrer, "Song Dong," 306.

- (2) People to objects: Showing how each object and its use generates memories, and how not throwing an object away involves a will to preserve materials and memories.
- (3) Objects to objects: Showing how different objects from different periods and different people tell us different stories.

As the title *Waste not* claims, the materiality of the objects in this work, is not wasted: it brings to viewers a personal and intimate world, in which sorrow and grief lead to a regeneration that celebrates life.



In an early 1996 performance—documented by a photographic diptych titled *Breathing*—Song Dong is seen lying prone, first on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square (one of the largest squares in the world and a symbol of the power of the Chinese capital and state), and then on a frozen lake in Beijing. The diptych suggests that after Song Dong lay face down on the square, the small area touched by his breathing was covered with a thin layer of ice, while Song Dong’s breathing on the iced lake for forty minutes did not produce any noticeable alteration to

the surface.

It is here, in Song Dong’s horizontal, face-down position and in the vestiges of breathing, that we may observe the parallels between his work and Giuseppe Penone’s. In some verses written between 1967 and 1998 and published in 1999 Penone wrote, “Breathing is sculpture,” (1975) and, later, “Breathing is automatic sculpture, involuntary, and the ablest in reaching to osmosis with things” (1977).⁷ These thoughts found material expression in *Soffio di foglie* (*Breath of leaves*), a 1979 ephemeral intervention, in a

⁷ In Giuseppe Penone, *Respirar la sombra / Respirare l'ombra*, Santiago de Compostela, Xunta de Galicia: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 1999, 138. “Il respiro è scultura./È la scultura della pietra intrusiva, della crescita di un ramo,/della fusione in bronzo. /I soffi visualizzati con della polvere e fotografati si rivelano vaso, goccia, otre.” (1975). Respirare è la scultura automatica, involontaria,/che più ci avvicina all’osmosi con le cose./È l’azione che cancella l’involucro, l’identità data dalla pelle./Ogni respiro ha in sé il principio della fecondazione,/è un elemento che penetra in un altro corpo e l’emissione del fiato,/il soffio, lo testimonia con la sua forma. (1977)



gallery setting, made of a pile of leaves on the floor on which Penone left behind the imprint of his body.



By leaving the imprint of his body's contact with things (with nature brought into a gallery) Penone registered the sensation of an absence, which was reinforced by the action of breathing. By making visible the imprint of the interior of his mouth, he registered the relationship between internal and external space.

In the 1990s Penone completed this project with a work called *Respirare l'ombra* (*Breathing the shadow*), which involved walls covered by laurel leaves and a bronze lung. During the same period a collection of his writings was published as a complement to his artistic production. In one of the texts he stated, “L'uomo non è spettatore o attore ma semplicemente natura.” (“Man is not spectator nor actor, but simply nature.”)⁸

We can now come back to Song Dong's *Breathing*—to his breathing on the square and on the lake and the way it calls attention to an involuntary, basic activity of life. Ice produced by breathing is the work of a living entity, and in this case the ice is created in and on a human-made space, Tiananmen Square. Such a location is above all a place where people congregate for social, political and personal reasons, a place of commercial exchange. It is a place where one person encounters another, and even the most basic, instinctual actions of a living being, such as breathing, might have visible consequences. Nature is not so sensitive to such small, almost invisible gestures, which are integral to all of the organic entities of the natural world. The breathing that in a square can have a social and even a political effect, in nature is not perceptible, because it is so much a part of it. The question then becomes: Can we go about our human business and engage in

⁸ Penone, *Respirar la sombra / Respirare l'ombra*, op. cit., 10.

our instinctual and not instinctual actions while leaving as little trace of ourselves on our surroundings, and altering them as little as possible?⁹

Doing Nothing at the Pace Gallery

After dOCUMENTA(13), Song Dong further pursued the idea of renovation and renewal from the ashes of the discarded in a 2013 show at the Pace Gallery in New York. This show, also titled “Doing Nothing,” was a retrospective of the artist’s work from 1994 to 2012.¹⁰ It

included *Doing Nothing Mountains* (2011-2012), an installation made of mountains created with mounds of ceramic bathroom tiles. This collection of human-made objects, which accumulate to



“build” mountains, relates to the idea of recycling, again *not* wasting, reinventing and renovating our lives. This piece also included the neon lights that had been used in *Doing Nothing Garden*, a video of which was part of the Pace exhibition.

⁹ As a preface to Song Dong’s exhibition at Beijing Commune in 2008, Leng Lin’s essay remarks on the connection between man and environment in the piece *Breathing* (1996), adding a consideration about a work made in the 1990s, a time in which some capitalist economic reforms started to be applied, while the control over the nation was still centralized. “[T]he political nature of Tiananmen allows a new thing to come about, but Houhai, which subtly symbolizes the everyday, cannot but return to a kind of unchanging existence. The year in which this work was created—1996—is especially significant. In the early 1990s, China began to implement capitalist-style economic reforms, but control over the nation in general was still administered by the centralized, socialist bureaucracy. Pulled in these two different directions, society cannot but remould its new character and characteristics. Since the mid-1990s, people living in China have experienced two social modalities, conflicting but intertwined. The everyday nature of Chinese contemporary art is locked in constant conflict with its avant-garde tendencies. The political stance which emerged from its earlier avant-garde position is now sinking into a mere posture. And the attitude engendered by Chinese contemporary art is now turning its original mission (convergence with the West, creation of a great twenty-first century art, etc.) and position (freedom, challenge, etc.) into a game of wit and strategy. This is characteristic of Chinese contemporary art, but also of the globalization of contemporary art writ large. To say that Song Dong’s “Breathing” is an examination of social change is not as apt as saying that “Breathing” seeks to discover and eke out its own kind of social space in a society that is itself changing.” Leng Lin, Preface to Beijing Commune 2008, accessed via <http://www.beijingcommune.com>.

¹⁰ A general view of Song Dong’s exhibition *Doing Nothing* at PACE Gallery at 510 West 25th Street (New York), 2013, is available on [YouTube](#).

On the gallery walls, a sequence of frames offered pages from the artist's book *Doing Nothing*, which was published for the dOCUMENTA(13) exhibition. This publication is composed of the translation of one Chinese sentence (see below) by various translators, including Google Translate and Song Dong himself. The differing translations reflect differing perspectives on the value of human activity, as well as the ambivalence of Song Dong's message. The ambivalence is rooted in Song Dong's linking everyday Chinese colloquial expressions with one of the most ancient Chinese philosophy texts, the *Tao Te Ching*.

The sentence displayed in Song Dong's artwork is composed of with the Chinese characters: 不做白不做. The first and the fourth correspond to "not," to the negative form of the subsequent ideograms (the second and the fifth), which can be translated as "do." According to Song Dong's explanation in the first page of his book, *Doing Nothing*, however, "This 'do' could be replaced by any action verb, such as "eat" or "drink."¹¹ The third character functions like an equal sign, putting the concepts presented before and



after it in parallel. The whole sentence could be literally translated as "not do — in vain — not do," transferring the idea that if you don't do anything you don't get anything, so maybe you could take the chance to do, although you could get anything from it. The ambivalence of this sentence could connect to how we are aware of both our power as

¹¹ Song Dong, "N°84 Doing Nothing," 534.

well as our powerlessness (as later described in Agamben's text), and to how these are balancing forces.

All twenty of the translations in the book share this ambivalence between “doing” and “doing nothing.” In addition to being twenty-first century wordplay and colloquial speech (the most dynamic manifestation of life within spoken language), Song Dong's sentence also reaches back to very ancient and traditional Chinese culture, i.e. to LaoZi's sixth century classic, the *Tao Te Ching*.¹² I note that this mix of the modern vernacular with a classic text reiterates the idea of renewal. Song Dong's wordplay is built on an ancient linguistic patrimony which is now often hidden by contemporary mass culture. It should also be noted that LaoZi was a court official and his text is, among other thing, a manual for governance. In this context, urging people to “do nothing” was



a tactic, what we might call a questionable one. And yet, at the same time, LaoZi promotes an approach to life based on naturalness, on simplicity, calm, and freedom from the tyranny of desire.¹³ Song Dong's artistic practice, as the above review suggests, has little to do with nature *stricto sensu*. Nonetheless, the philosophical principles of

¹² The name LaoZi has also been transliterated as Lao-tzu and in various similar ways, the two words meaning “old” and “master.” Composed of eighty-one chapters, the *Tao Te Ching* is the pillar and origin of the Taoist philosophy, which, together with Confucianism and Buddhism, has provided a foundation for Chinese thought. An English translation of the entire text has been available at <http://gj.zdic.net/archive>.

¹³ As described by Alan Chan, “Laozi.”

naturalness and non-action—which are brought together in Taoist philosophy—have shaped many of his works, including *Doing Nothing Garden*.

Clément's “Third Landscape”

The French botanist and gardener Gilles Clément developed his idea of a *Tiers paysage* (Third Landscape) after doing a survey of the area around Vassivière Lake, in the center of France, in 2003. Part of the landscape there—“a carpet interwoven by obscure and rough forms: forests”—was under the control of a forestry expert, and another part, principally devoted to cattle fodder, featured “clear and well-delimited surfaces: pastures,” which were under the surveillance of an agricultural engineer.¹⁴ But there were also bits of land—“*espaces indécis*” (uncertain spaces)—situated at margins, of modest dimensions, lacking in function, and difficult to characterize. They had once been altered by human activities, exploited for various purposes—agricultural, industrial, urban, tourist, etc. But this land was now *délaissé* (abandoned) and was serving—by accident—as a refuge for species of plants and animals that had been driven out of other territories.¹⁵ The land was thus, among other things, promoting and preserving biological diversity.

In his 2004 *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage* (Manifesto for a Third Landscape), Clément proposes to group these abandoned lands under this name: *Tiers paysage* (Third Landscape). His choice of name deliberately echoes not the Third World but rather *le tiers état*—the peasants, working people and the bourgeoisie; the Third Estate—which played a leading role in the French Revolution. Specifically, Clément references and quotes from a 1789 pamphlet written by the clergyman Emmanuel Joseph Seyès. The pamphlet attacks the privileges of the nobility and the clergy. “What is the Third Estate?” Abbé Seyès wrote. “Everything. What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing. What does it ask? To become something.”¹⁶

Following Clément's classification scheme the land of the Earth can be twice divided. First it can be divided into land untouched by human activity (*ensembles primaires*, i.e. virgin land) and land that has been in some way affected by human activity. Secondly, this latter type of land can be further divided into: developed spaces (e.g. agricultural land or housing lots); human-made reserves (e.g. parks, forest preserves, protected wetlands);

¹⁴ Clément, *Manifeste du tiers paysage*, 4.


¹⁵ Clément, *Manifeste*, 4. « Entre ces fragments de paysage aucune similitude de forme. Un seul point commun : tous constituent un territoire de refuge à la diversité. Partout ailleurs celle-ci est chassée. »

¹⁶ As quoted in Clément, *Manifeste*, 4. The French original: « Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ? — Tout. Qu'a-t-il fait jusqu'à présent ? — Rien. Qu'aspire-t-il à devenir ? — Quelque chose. »

and *les tiers paysages*. In Clément’s view, virgin land is optimal for non-human species and promotes maximal diversity. Reserves offer similar advantages, but they may be more vulnerable to human intervention, and indeed their ecology has already been, and continues to be, shaped by human decisions. *Délaissés* (Third Landscapes) derive from the abandonment of an activity, thus evolving naturally towards a secondary landscape, heterogeneous and chaotic; receiving “pioneer” species during periods of growth until the installation of species in a permanent way.

They are not protected and are therefore more vulnerable, their extent often being intentionally reduced, their very nature suppressed. And yet they, too, are biological reserves. Although one might argue that Third Landscapes can only exist insofar as they are abandoned, marginal, unnoticed—*délaissés* (a key word of the manifesto)—Clément urges

that their existence be recognized and indeed protected, thereby making Third Landscapes into a kind of “reserved non-reserves.” In the interest of promoting diversity, Clément would subject Third Landscapes to both the ethics and politics of diversity and preservation.¹⁷



<i>Ensembles primaires et réserves</i>	<i>Délaissés</i>	<i>Espaces gérés</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – grande diversité spécifique – espèces stables/ dynamique lente – endémisme fort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – diversité spécifique hétérogène (indigène + exogène) – espèces instables – endémisme faible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – diversité spécifique réduite ou nulle – espaces maintenus artificiellement par énergie contraire – endémisme minimal ou nul

Although Clément calls his text as a whole a manifesto, only at the very end, after a series of definitions and explications, do we come to the true manifesto: to what Clément is proposing. In this last part all the concepts and ideas explained in the previous pages are summarized in a list of affirmative sentences that he suggests also be read as questions.¹⁸ By suggesting we read the manifesto in this way, Clément underscores how the potential of Third Landscapes is linked to the questions it raises. To preserve the landscape—and thus to promote diversity and preserve ourselves—we have to recognize what we have abandoned *and* the value of abandonment. Renovating our environment can only be successful if we are also committed to renewing ourselves. (And, if we consider the proposal of “instructing the spirit of not-doing,” which appears

¹⁷ Clément, *Manifeste*, 9.

¹⁸ Clément, *Manifeste*, 24.

at the beginning of the *Manifeste*, along with the final proposal of an exchange with other, non-Western cultures, in particular with ones that place greater emphasis on how human beings are a part of the rest of nature, Song Dong's *Doing Nothing Garden* appears as a paradigmatic example of the kind of renovation and renewal Clément has in mind.¹⁹)

The Third Landscape and Doing Nothing

Re-approaching Song Dong's dOCUMENTA exhibit, I note the first five sentences of Clément's *Manifeste*. Here, as with Song Dong's neon characters, Clément stresses the importance of encouraging both not doing and doing. He seeks to confer political dignity on indecision, asking that it be treated as on a level with power (with taking action). He urges that a larger space be opened for the posing of questions. Non-organization, he proposes, should be a vital principle. We should approach diversity with amazement.²⁰

I would note again the paradox in which not only Clément but also Song Dong and the rest of us are enmeshed. How to preserve the *délaissé*—the abandoned, the left alone—while recognizing not only its existence, but also its beauty and value? How can a culture devoted to doing, production, and results learn to leave well enough alone, to recognize the value of doing nothing, or the fact that even doing nothing is doing something?

The Third Estate took the lead in the French Revolution, and the Revolution led to greater recognition of the central role of this estate—of the bourgeoisie. Could some kind of ecological revolution lead similarly to an increasing role for the Third Landscape, an increasing power for abandonment, for the ignored, for left aloneness? Could we human beings maintain voluntarily and on purpose such intermediate spaces—in between virgin land and organized landscapes? Could we pass from collective ignorance of these spaces into a collective awareness of the value of this ignorance—or, rather, of ignoring? Having recognized how ignoring such spaces helped promote diversity, could we then act responsibly by doing nothing to these spaces?

This brings us to Agamben's quite short (too short) essay "On What We Can Not Do." In the concept of doing nothing, he proposes, lies the "specific ambivalence of

¹⁹ Clément, *Manifeste*, 25.

²⁰ Clément, *Manifeste*, 24. "Instruire l'esprit du non – faire comme on instruit celui du faire. / Elever l'indécision à hauteur politique. La mettre en balance avec le pouvoir. / Imaginer le projet comme un espace comprenant des réserves et des questions posées. / Considérer le non – aménagement comme un principe vital par lequel tout aménagement se voit traverser des éclairs de la vie. / Approcher la diversité avec étonnement."

every potentiality—which is always power to be and to not be, to do and to not do—that defines in fact human potentiality.”²¹ For him, by contrast with other species:

Human beings are the living beings that, existing in the mode of potentiality, are capable just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do as just to not do. This exposes them [us], more than any other living being, to the risk of error; but, at the same time, it permits human beings to accumulate and freely master their own capacities, to transform them into “faculties.” . . . [I]t is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do that gives consistency to our actions.²²

I saw Doing Nothing Garden at DOCUMENTA(13) at the beginning of September 2012, just few days before the exhibition ended. It was the first time I had been to a Documenta exhibition, and I had only three days to take it all in—the vast amount of visual information and all its related connections. It may be 2017—when the next exhibition is scheduled—before I am down digesting the experience.



When I first saw the garden I was impressed above all by what it wasn't, rather than by what it was. Standing near to it, the very first question that came to my mind was: What is this garden doing here? Or: What is this disordered mound of grass doing here? And as I wandered—first closer, later a bit farther from the garden—I found myself wondering why was this abandoned natural landscape polluted by neon lights?

The garden was actually doing nothing, as its title proposes. The Chinese characters—the only fixed elements in this “garden in motion”; both a neon public advertisement for the art work and one of the elements that made it seem abandoned—expressed so clearly the idea of doing nothing.

Clément writes that the Third Landscape has political implications because of its biological contents and the necessity of preserving diversity. Doing Nothing Garden invites us to think more deeply about our real needs, our choices, and the way we act.²³ It does not take a neutral, ambivalent position; it proposes a positive, dynamic, and feasible way of renewing ourselves. Accumulating and preserving waste, the piece is a metaphor for life growing from waste in a consumer society that swallows up and replaces natural life with an artificial one. Abandoned bits of our society can help us renew

²¹ Agamben, “On What We Cannot Do,” 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

²³ Clément, *Manifeste*, 9. “Par son contenu, par les enjeux que porte la diversité, par la nécessité de la préserver—ou d'en entretenir la dynamique—le Tiers paysage acquiert une dimension politique.”

ourselves and can create spaces of freedom, of uncontrolled life. And thus a choice to do nothing instead of doing something becomes an active attitude, a responsible attitude. In a society that motivates people to strive and strive to meet false, empty needs, not acting and not doing can become a way of affirming and realizing our full potential.

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Sources of Images

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- 10 Gilles Clément schema for illustrating the main characteristics of primary ensembles, “délaisé” and organized places, in *Manifeste du tiers paysage* (Paris: Sujet/Objet), 2004, 8.
- 11 My photograph from dOCUMENTA(13), 2 September 2012.

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