

oh comely

keep your curiosity sacred



issue nine

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Thomas Pausz (far left) relaxing in one of the chairs woven by teenagers at his garden project in Luxembourg, Hortus Praxis.

the perennial gardener

thomas pausz is a social artist with green fingers

words johanna derry, photos andrés lejona,
illustrations anna emilia laitinen

It's hard to get to the bottom of Thomas Pausz. He is, at first, the perfect stereotype of a French intellectual. He leans forward to sip his coffee and then relaxes back in his seat to expand on theories of how people interact with design. His bag is filled with sketchbooks, notes and obscure texts bookmarked with underlinings. His enthusiasm for ideas is engaging, but he's an enigmatic character.

By his own description, he's an open designer. If a product designer is someone who designs chairs, an open designer plans installations where people can build their own. Pausz's work examines the process of making, not the final piece. He loves seeing what people create from his installation projects: soap workshops using foraged plants, gardens where you might make your own deckchair, and sheds reconstructed from old people's memories. But for all his fascination with people, I think secretly he'd like to be a gardener.

"I have a fetish for ground cover herbs," he confesses. From his notebook he pulls out a tatty photograph of the plant samphire. "It's such a weird plant, but I really like it because it's magical. Vegetation can grow everywhere and it kind of grows because of adverse situations. All it needs is water."

Like his projects, he believes that gardens at their best integrate human activity. "Gardens take a long time to make and you definitely need to seek advice to make them work, because there are lots of ways of growing plants. You can't fix things and you can't control everything," he says. "As a model for the activities I would like to create, I think gardens are the archetype."

Soap was a characteristic project of Pausz's. In the summer of 2010, he set up a small soap-making factory in the Parisian suburb where he grew up, Garges-lès-Gonesse. His idea was to gather the

community to make soap using ingredients that could be found where they lived. He didn't choose the easiest of sites to set up his factory: a housing estate in the suburbs, with modernist apartment blocks.

The community of Garges-lès-Gonesse has a long tradition of soap-making for May Day, and Pausz spoke to older people to gather recipes and to find where the ingredients grew locally. He sought out gardens and found lilac, sage and marigold, and comfrey, borage and saponaria from a medieval nursery nearby. Over the course of a week, people gathered to make soap together, the older residents sharing their knowledge of traditional skills with the children. They planted a garden, which is still there today, on the terrace of the estate so the project could continue every year.

The influence of Pausz's first job, set design for dance, is still visible in his work today. He's fascinated by the way people move around installations, and how they interact with objects. He loves creating opportunities for other people to make things together, and revels in the unpredictability of collaboration. He reminisces with satisfaction on a project for which he made some wooden modules, as blocks for people to build things with.

He says, "The visitors took one of my pieces and stuck on something completely different. It completely exploded my imagination. That was one of the happiest moments ever." For Pausz, design is an open process that everyone can contribute to. "I'd never make a chair. I would always be happier to make a bench. That's my kind of philosophy."

Last summer in Luxembourg, he built another public garden in the grounds of the Modern Art Museum, Mudam. This project was called Hortus Praxis, and the idea was for people to mingle with the plants throughout the good weather and share their knowledge and ideas



Left to right: borage, burdock, lupine, hibiscus, sage.



about what could be made using the garden. He set up an outdoor laboratory for making natural dyes from the flowers, a library and a sound system.

Again, the results were beautifully unpredictable. "I ran a workshop with some teenagers to weave some chairs, and they came up with the most amazing ideas, which I happily fed on." But gardens can also be inconveniently capricious. "We had planned this thing like it was going to be sunny and we'd get to hang out. But the weather was so horrible! It was pouring with rain and windy, and it was an effort just not to lose everything we had made. The whole thing became, you know, epic."

He enjoys making things difficult, and the journey long. It gives him time to watch the scenery. "I like to deliberately take the long way round to get a result," he says. That's what he liked about Hortus Praxis. The project lasted a month, and involved joggers, gardeners, families, tourists, and others who passed through. "We had the possibility to really lose a sense of time, and to get into the rhythm of making slow things. The ink took a while to make. You had to go and find a plant, then you had to play and experiment with them." In a month, Pausz's team produced only six colours of dye they were happy with. "Maybe next year we'll be printing something with them. I see design as not about efficiency, so much as about what happens on the way."

His latest project is a study of how people use their surroundings to shape themselves. It's an eight-month residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, where he'll be part of a team that includes economists, scientists, artists and others all working out together how we create our surroundings around ourselves. He hopes to explore the

role design plays in this. "It's a bit complicated to explain, but it's about how you define or make yourself in work, in using your surroundings or making your surroundings. It's really very close to the way I see design. I'm always thinking of how people will move when I design something: what will they do with it, how it will affect the way they move and what they do. I made this watering can recently."

He produces his notebook and draws a rough sketch. It's a round-bodied bronze watering can, with a handle so large and circular that it almost looks like a hoop.

"It's not just a watering can," he explains, "but a sort of prop so that people can feel the magic of making plants grow. It looks a bit like Aladdin's lamp, and when you use it, it makes you feel like you're from another world." It does look as if there could be a genie living inside it. More than merely a practical tool for watering plants, Pausz's redesign of this common tool is an example of how he believes objects can make you feel a certain way. His watering can is meant to make you experience the magic of making a garden, as well as perform the function of keeping it watered.

These are the things he finds magical about gardens. It's the disorder, the lack of efficiency, the time they take, the people involved and the surprising things that spring up to delight you. "They make you feel really small. The Luxembourg garden had so many big trees around it. It just made us look like bugs running around. I love going to the botanical gardens in Berlin, and Kew Gardens. It's just fascinating how rich they are. Plants are cleverer than we are sometimes. They seem to be doing better than us."



a soap garden composition by thomas pausz

We asked Thomas Pausz to teach us how to make soap, but he insisted on telling us about a garden composition. It's a list of plants to grow in the garden that make good soap ingredients. They soothe the skin, foam the soap or add colour. As for the soap recipe, we were left to find it for ourselves. If you want to look up a recipe and try it, please remember the scenes from horror films: soap making can be dangerous.

Bardana (burdock). A medieval plant that has been used to soothe the skin for centuries.

Borago officinalis (borage). A blue shrub, which tastes like oyster.

Calendula (marigold). An orange miracle with cleansing power.

Hibiscus. A vitamin bomb, and the juice turns from red to blue when the acidity changes.

Koelreuteria paniculata (goldenrain tree). The soap tree. Use the leaves for foaming effects.

Salvia (sage). Calming, and wise.

Lupinus arboreus (tree lupine). A power plant, it has been used to develop cancer treatments.

Salicornia (marsh samphire). The magic 'corn of salt', which turns into soda when burned.



Thomas drew his self-portrait as the plant samphire. "You can eat it. It's really good with fish. It was also used a long time ago to make vegetable soda, which you need to make soap. It was also used to make glass, because of its high sodium content. The ancient glassmaking workshops in the east of France moved according to where this plant was. I like the idea of a workshop that goes where the materials are."