



DIGGING

REVOLUTIONARY TIME

KINCAID

PARIKKA

LOCATION

CLEANING



# DEAR FRIEND,

Last weekend

I went to the yearly share-out day of an allotment garden in a neighbouring suburb, excitedly hoping to be given the chance to take over a plot where I could grow potatoes, rhubarb, garlic, lots of marigold and perhaps some currant and raspberry bushes. Unsurprisingly, I wasn't the only one with this summer dream in mind after a never-ending Swedish winter—the queues for communal allotments have boomed during the pandemic and I returned home wishing for better luck next year. Most of the plots that were portioned out were quite overgrown and the woman guiding us kept repeating that one has to bear in mind that it is a time-consuming task to bring them into a good state. Back home, in addition to disappointment, I felt touched when thinking of the number of people who turned up that day and the bravery of taking on such challenge. Taking the responsibility of an allotment upon you means putting loads of effort without necessarily knowing the result.

A few years ago I was asked to help our local art exhibition space with their allotment as the staff were going on summer holiday and I lived nearby. It hadn't been cultivated for some years and thus needed to be prepared—lots of digging awaited—so I invited friends to join for a full-day activity and dig together. I can still summon the feeling of satisfaction as we, by late afternoon, had turned the soil up and down and were rewarded with the sight of a beautiful black square on the ground while sipping strawberry cordial from disposable cups. I have repeatedly returned to this memory to contemplate those hours of intense digging that we did together.

As opposed to a romantic idea of gardening that entails the lightness of harvesting and picking berries (walking at a slow pace, wearing a summer dress and straw hat), digging is intense, heavy and dirty. In the book about her garden, Jamaica Kincaid describes her digging self as “a picture of shame: a woman covered in dirt, smelling of manure, her hair flecked with white dust (powdered lime) . . . and her back crooked with pain from bending over”.<sup>1</sup>

Digging is repetitive. Its monotony allows the mind to drift away and be in other places, while at the same time digging is literally an activity that deals with location. It is all about standing in place, and repeatedly turning to and processing the spot on which you are currently located. Digging is movement. But not a movement in space, like walking or running, not a movement forward, not linear. It is a circular movement, and in this regard it resembles cleaning.

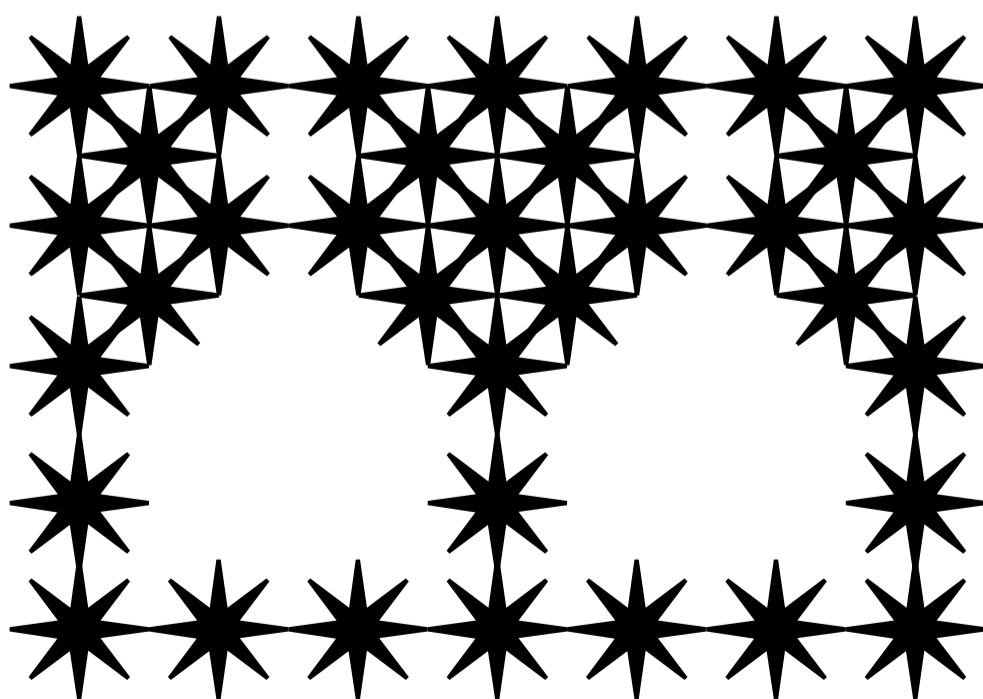
Gender scientist Fanny Ambjörnsson<sup>2</sup> writes that cleaning is closely linked to time and time perception. The timeliness of cleaning points backwards, towards what we have left behind (the dirt), while society rewards what points forward, what is not stuck in an eternal scrubbing but rather promises “future”, such as work trips and career-making. With reference to philosopher Fanny Söderbäck's concept of “revolutionary time”<sup>3</sup>, Ambjörnsson suggests that the bodily experience in the act of cleaning allows for a new experience of time in which the past, present and future coincide. We clean as we have learned from

previous generations, we are in the present when we struggle with the grease stain, but also in the future because we clean out of care for those who will soon walk on the clean and shiny floor. Similarly, I imagine that digging amalgamates the past (a long history of agriculture, burials, construction and so on), the present (the struggle of getting through the soil and picking up stones and rocks), and the future (preparing for plants, the coffin, or a house to be built).

Media theorist Jussi Parikka writes about digging as a methodological concept, arguing that not only is it a way of excavating and exploring beyond the surface, but it is also important to acknowledge the social dimension of digging, the verb, an activity that demands engagement. He draws from experiences and observations of hackathons and makerspaces as situations where collective digging takes place, in terms of people dedicated to getting across or through surfaces. The digging, he writes, “opens up visibilities and distributes a new sense of the infrastructural underground that underpins the surface of what we take for granted as a subject of everyday experience.”<sup>4</sup> I myself have zero technical skills, but the DIY/DIT-culture is pumping in my veins. For me, equivalent situations would be fanzine workshops or public collage/cut-up workshops that my friends and I used to organize as a way of community crafting our local history beyond the urban renewal trajectories imposed on our neighbourhoods.

The more I think about it, I realize that much of what I have been up to the last decade has been different kinds of digging. All the times I have gathered with friends, colleagues, comrades, with a more or less vague or well-defined mission, a wish to “figure something out”. Reading groups, research groups, activist groups or just undefined group constellations with a certain issue that brings the individuals together—formats and activities that have varied but one common denominator have been the search for an unknown, together.

I hope 2023 will bring me luck and award me an allotment where I can indulge myself in sweaty digging — you are of course invited to join (strawberry cordial will be served!). Until then, the diggings will take place in classrooms, by kitchen tables, by my desk and on my sofa, in culture and community houses, or wherever the diggings will take us.



# MARYAM FANNI