

How A Garden Becomes A Dialogue

Di Mao

A participatory installation exploring how everyday gestures become tools, and how tools quietly shape human behaviour.

IN BETWEEN: FROM MAKING TO MEANING · ISOLA DESIGN · SHOREDITCH DESIGN WEEK · LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL

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How a Garden Becomes a Dialogue is a participatory installation by London-based designer Di Mao, presented as part of **IN BETWEEN: FROM MAKING TO MEANING** by Isola Design during Shoreditch Design Week and London Design Festival 2026.

The project explores how everyday bodily gestures become tools, how tools establish patterns of behaviour, and how these patterns shape the ways we interact with living environments. Using gardening as its point of departure, the project reconsiders the garden not simply as a cultivated landscape, but as an ongoing relationship between people, tools, plants and their surroundings.

THE PROJECT

How a Garden Becomes a Dialogue grew from Mao's experience of growing up with a family garden in southern China and later encountering different gardening cultures while living in London. These experiences led her to consider gardening not simply as the act of growing plants, but as a system of gestures, decisions and repeated actions that shape how we relate to living environments.

Through research, embodied practice and planting experiments, the project explores how everyday gestures become tools, and how tools in turn influence behaviour. Digging, pressing, carrying and planting become starting points for examining the relationship between the body, designed objects and the environment.

The project takes shape through a series of custom-designed gardening tools and ceramic planters derived from bodily gestures. Visitors are invited to interact with these unfamiliar objects, becoming part of a garden that is continually negotiated through movement, care and participation.

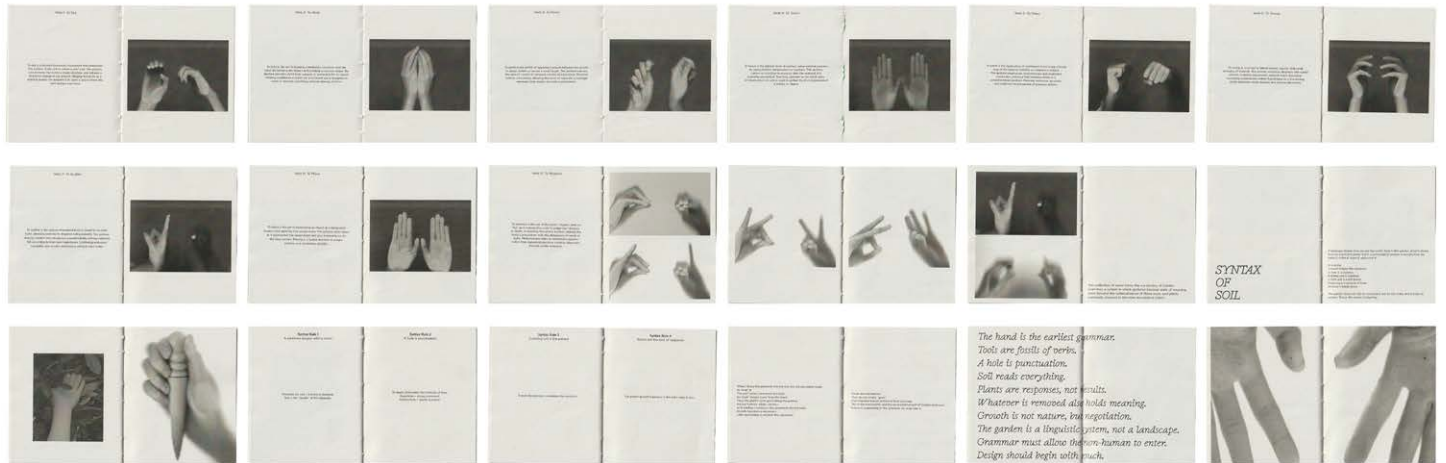
FROM GESTURE TO FORM

The project did not begin by designing gardening tools. It began by observing the body.

Digging, pressing, scooping, carrying and supporting are often regarded as ordinary gardening actions, yet each movement contains its own rhythm, resistance and relationship with the soil.

Instead of asking how existing gardening tools might be improved, the project began with a different question:

What if the gesture itself became the blueprint for making?



Together, the tools and planters form a participatory system rather than a collection of individual objects. Visitors encounter them through planting and interaction, transforming ordinary gardening actions into moments of reflection. Familiar gestures performed through unfamiliar forms gradually reveal how tools influence behaviour, how behaviours become habits, and how these habits shape our relationship with living environments.

The gardening tools are cast in metal as working implements whose weight, resistance and durability allow the original gestures to be re-enacted through use. The ceramic planters extend this translation through another material language. Formed through the same bodily movements, they preserve physical traces of making while becoming living spaces where plants, soil, water and care continue to interact.

Derived from the same gestures, the tools initiate action while the planters sustain growth. Together, they explore making not simply as the production of objects, but as a way of revealing — and potentially reshaping — relationships between bodies, tools, plants and the living environment.

ABOUT DI MAO

Di Mao is a London-based designer and artist working across installation, objects, publication and participatory design. Her practice explores how tools, systems and environments shape human behaviour, often beginning with overlooked bodily actions and everyday forms of interaction. She graduated with Distinction from MA Design: Expanded Practice at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Her work has received recognition including the GDC Award 2025 Shortlist, LICC 2025 Shortlist. Recent and forthcoming presentations include **London Design Festival 2026, Photofair Shanghai 2025**, with forthcoming presentations at **Dutch Design Week 2026 and Ithra Design Week 2026**.

EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Exhibition

IN BETWEEN: FROM MAKING TO MEANING

Presented by

Isola Design

Part of

Shoreditch Design Week

London Design Festival 2026

Dates

15-17 September 2026

Venue

Shoreditch Town Hall

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PRESS IMAGES

High-resolution press images, installation views and full image credits are available here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cY5lhDsBymZekcmZxMEQ7Mlgt2pgtplu?usp=drive_link

For press enquiries, interviews, image requests or additional information, please contact Di Mao at the details above.