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## THE AVANT-GARDEN

### *Offering a Space of Freedom*

by Stephen Horne

The ambitious, 20-acre Reford Gardens in the Gaspésie (also known as Les jardins de métis) are an undertaking almost beyond measure—they require work and labour in the usual senses of these words. Yet for the visitor, the gardens are a place to stroll and sit, perhaps meditate on rhododendrons in bloom or a small stream flowing over strategically placed boulders. As such, they demonstrate a classic garden dynamic: they offer a radical break in the routine of toil and striving while hiding their own making and maintenance. In recent years the Reford Gardens have been the site of the annual International Garden Festival, an invitation-only competition that lends the gardens a professional focus within the formal discourse of landscape architecture. When seen side by side, the Reford Gardens and the Festival suggest an interesting difference: while one might expect the

1 + 2. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, Studio Bryan Manes – DIGSAU, *Veil Garden*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

3. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, relais Landschaftsarchitekten – Gero Heck, Marianne Mommsen, *Tree Stands*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Festival international de jardins, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

cutting-edge contemporary gardens to exemplify avant-garde aspiration, the Festival itself simply succeeds in the professional mode.

As Robert Pogue Harrison wrote in *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, we are in a gardenless society because we don't have the time to be other than superficial when it comes to such things. The garden is a forgotten place. If you make the trek to the Gaspé, however, within the Reford Gardens you are rewarded by the return of a visibility that has disappeared from our world become image (the world as electronically transformed or "globalized"). In the perceived space that is created within a garden, there is a release from the burden of your goals. In the Reford Gardens, wandering through secluded forest thickets, which are contrasted by more formalized patterns and decorative arrangement, we are encouraged to drift, not only physically but also emotionally. Pathways that follow the sensuous contours of this irregular landscape encourage a sense of "letting-go" of habitual rigid attentiveness. In this way, through the liminality of nature, you are eased into a space of aloneness or, perhaps, a space of repose where the aggressive focus of our time on "things" is forgotten in favour of emptiness and silence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this garden's situation on the edge of an immense river mouth, with its blending of waters, winds and living creatures, is a gift from paradise, marked and celebrated by what Hannah Arendt described as a space "where no beginning and no end exist and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition."

The artistic director of this year's International Garden Festival, Emmanuelle Vieira, proposes the theme of "Paradise" as a way to approach contemporary concerns within the profession. She asks: "What does paradise look like today?" To answer this question, three proposals were selected to be actualized on site: *Veil Garden* by Studio Bryan Hanes (Philadelphia), an interpretation of the Garden of Eden; *The Grass is Greener* by Habitation (a group of landscape architects from Sydney, Australia), an interpretation of transgression and original sin; and *Tiny Taxonomy* by Rosetta Sarah Elkin, a Canadian landscape architect based in Amsterdam. In addition, four teams of landscape architects from Berlin were invited to showcase their work: *Violence of the Garden (Land use observatory)* by Martin Rein-Cano and Lorenz Dexler; *Jardin de la Connaissance* by Thilo Folkerts and artist Rodney Latourelle; *Tree Stands* by Gero Heck and Marianne Mommsen; and *I'm So Proud of My Paradise These Days* by artist Kai Schiemenz and Atelier le balto (Véronique Faucheur, Marc Pouzol and Marc Vatinel). Alongside these seven

new "gardens," 14 participants continued projects from previous years, weaving the theme of paradise into their work.

Herein lies the crux: a true garden offers a break, free time, as does a true festival. However, this particular festival is far from what might be considered festive: there is no laying down of the tools here, no emptying of utilitarian space. Rather (and rather ironically), it is only the Reford Gardens that disturb the regime of the ongoing by way of repose and leisure and offer a space of opening and freedom. As such, for reasons that I will explain, these gardens function along similar lines to the "empty canvas, silent concert" practices of avant-garde artists. The tactic of interrupting by way of emptiness is well exemplified in Marcel Duchamp's statement, "It's not what you see that is art, art is the gap."



In considering the garden experience, it seems inevitable that we will run up against cultural prejudices for and against leisure. In the work of the artistic avant-garde, the conventional Christian hierarchy of work = good and leisure = bad is reversed. As a way to interrupt the cycle of production and consumption, many avant-garde artists and writers pursue emptiness, silence or the blank page. For example, consider Kazimir Malevich's infamous *Black Square*, 1913, Alexander Rodchenko's "Monochromes," 1921, Yves Klein's exhibition of the emptied Galerie Iris Clert (*The Void*, 1958) and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953. In a similar vein, Fluxus artist Robert Filliou defined art as "organized leisure where value would be accorded in relation to innocence, imagination, freedom." According to Robert Smithson,

1. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, Thilo Folkerts, Rodney Latourelle, *Jardin de la connaissance*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Thilo Folkerts, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

2. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, Thilo Folkerts, Rodney Latourelle, *Jardin de la connaissance*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Robert Baronet, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

an influential figure in landscape art, writing in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York University Press, 1979), "When a thing is seen through the consciousness of temporality it is changed into something that is nothing, and it ceases to be a mere object and becomes art." Other examples of avant-garde gestures of interruption abound. Perhaps pertinent here is poet T S Eliot's definition of paradise as "a still point of the turning world."

Hannah Arendt devised a schematic that is useful for understanding the avant-garde's practice of emptiness or silence as a way of interrupting the industrial realm of instrumentality, an ethos in which a river has come to be merely a waterpower supplier and art, a sector of cultural industry. In her analysis, labour is described as routine maintenance (such as keeping supplies in circulation), while work is

by the avant-garde action of emptying, erasing, refusing or offering a blank page. With this in mind, we can include art, with its intrinsic refusal of productivity, under the heading of action as well as of work, thereby acknowledging art's defiance of the capitalist promotion of productivity over freedom. Re-categorized as such, art's potential to contribute to critical perception becomes more clear.

Unlike Arendt, Karl Marx saw the relevance of free time and the revolutionary potential of a "break" in the ongoing circuit of production and consumption. His theory of capitalism is built upon the notion of surplus labour, the labour performed by the worker during "free," "disposable" "leisure time." This "antithetic" time constitutes the only free, authentic human action, yet it is exploited in capitalism. Consequently, the worker's free time is for Marx the basic element that makes possible the infinite and frenetic increase of capitalist production. The sort of leisure exemplified by the occupation of a garden is a good example of what Arendt might (but did not) include in her category of action. It is an authentic human action that does not increase production yet participates in the public realm.

In these ways the garden, a true festival and the avant-garde share the mode of temporality that constitutes such a break: the cessation of work, the creation of an unfilled excess of leisure time, the empty form of time itself that appears when the forward movement of conventional linear time is disrupted. One could say, something moves when nothing moves. This something is temporality itself as human freedom and excess, recognized by Marx but not Arendt.

With this substitution of temporality for clock time in mind, let's return to the subject of this essay: The International Garden Festival and the Reford Gardens themselves.

In the urban built environment, we can find many examples where architects have taken their inspiration from the antithetical field of avant-garde art. In some cases, the use of critical precursors is explicit and acknowledged, while in others the use is purely formal (unfortunately reducing the complexity of the artist's original investigation). Various artists, especially those who worked in the milieu of "land art," such as Richard Long, Richard Serra, Alice Ayccock and Robert Morris, have had a sustained influence on the practitioners of landscape architecture. Even with the relatively small cross-section of landscape architecture presented at Les jardins de métis, we can see aspects of Robert Morris, Dan Graham and Mary Miss sustaining the designs. For example, *Tiny Taxonomy*, a new work by Rosetta Sarah Elkin, presents intricate miniature gardens on top of columns covered



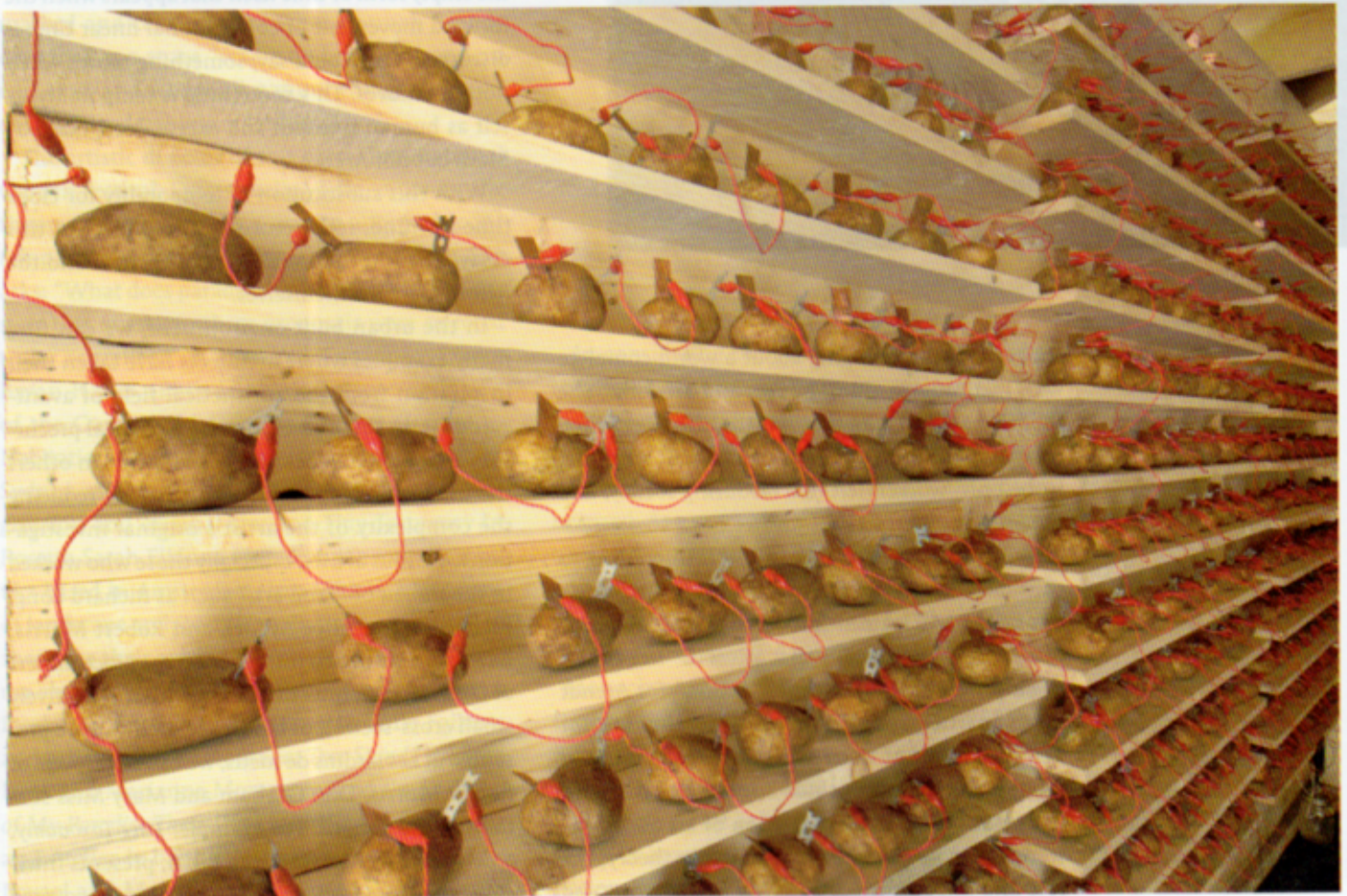
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concerned with bringing about a world complete with institutions, cities, houses and artworks. She followed with a claim that it is the artist's privilege to be non-productive as he or she, "strictly speaking, is the only 'worker' left in a labouring society, and the only one who actually creates."

In light of Arendt's schematic, it is interesting to consider the reversal effected by the avant-garde's refusal to participate in "productive time" in favour of a mode of temporality that arises in "free time," or empty-centred-open time. "Action" for Arendt means participation in the public realm, but for her, action meant initiative, setting something in motion and did not include any form of passivity, leisure or play. Her identification of art as "work" seems to ignore (as does most Modernist theory) the role and importance of passivity as demonstrated



1. Photo by [unreadable] showing a raised garden bed...



1. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens, Angela Iarocci, Claire Ironside, David Ross, *Pomme de parterre*, 2007–2010. Photograph: © 2007, Michel Laverdière, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens.

2. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens, Angela Iarocci, Claire Ironside, David Ross, *Pomme de parterre*, 2007–2010. Photograph: © 2008, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens.



© 2007, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens.

3. + 4. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens, Habitation – David Vago, Simone Marsh, Nick Brown, *The grass is greener*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Mitis/Reford Gardens.

with mirrored surfaces. Two avant-garde precursors immediately come to mind: Robert Morris's *Untitled* of 1965, in which viewers walk around four mirrored cubes in a complex interaction between place and spectator, and Daniel Buren's 260 columns at the Palais Royal, *Les Deux Plateaux*, 1986. In yet another garden, *Réflexions Colorées*, 2009, Hal Ingberg's adoption of Dan Graham's lifelong investigation of transparency and reflection as a sculptural/architectural material is all too apparent.

relatively invisible, countering modern notions of monumentality.

One of this year's projects, *Jardin de la Connaissance* by Rodney Latourelle and Thilo Folkerts, is an ambiguous space built with thousands of decaying books as the primary material. With simple and fragmentary walls, floors and furniture, Latourelle/Folkerts initiate relationships between what they are calling "knowledge," especially the sort of knowledge that belongs to the ethos of architecture, and what is conventionally called "nature." Books are composed of paper, made from trees like those in the surrounding forest environment; however, it is the reciprocal relationship between "forest" and "knowledge" that is of most interest to Latourelle/Folkerts. A book, aside from being paper and ink, is also made up of words and images and, typically, of words organized or composed according to a specific schematic; for example, a narrative path from beginning to end. As such, a book is a plan for reading, an order and a manifestation of a very particular conception of order: it is an authoritative device that models knowledge on the linearity of the production line. In Latourelle/Folkerts's "building," books are used as bricks to fabricate walls and floors, just as books conceptually function as containers with which we communicate in our linear cause-and-effect "creativity." However, through its exposure to climate and its interaction with living nature, the book building is literally subject to deterioration. Figuratively, the authority of modernity, calculation and construction, or perhaps what we call "form," disintegrates into its source in nature, into materiality, into the darkness of chthonic unknowing.

Another inquiry into cyclical processes, *Pomme de parterre* by Angela Iarocci, Claire Ironside and David K Ross, continuing from the 2007 festival, takes energy and its productive cycles as its theme. Like *Jardin de la Connaissance*, this work foregrounds the rectilinear grid of modern built space. Inside the enclosure, which is a kind of hut resting slightly sunken in the midst of a potato field, we find hundreds of potatoes arranged on shelves and connected by networks of electrical wiring. Although based on the model of an actual potato storage facility, this barn not only stores potatoes, it also regulates them, exploiting their process of decomposition as an energy source. As is well known, a potato can conduct a small amount of electrical power and, providing that zinc and copper electrodes are introduced, it can function as a rudimentary battery. In *Pomme de parterre*, the potato batteries are wired to accumulate and discharge their tiny charges with sparking lights. As such, it calls to mind the potential illumination hidden in this earthy and humble source.

Although these works seem like empty echoes of avant-garde activity, there are other "gardens" in the Festival that are more in keeping with its spirit. Several works demonstrate counter-progress-oriented notions of time by establishing processes of decay in which the work returns earthward. Other gardens incorporate processes that reveal connections to the natural realm and to the open-ended temporality and cyclical patterns frequently proposed in avant-garde art. And yet others include configurations that leave the work

*Pomme de parterre* recollects the work of a brilliant avant-garde precursor, Argentinean artist Victor Grippo. Initially educated as a chemist, Grippo in the '70s presented various "experiments" with food materials, specifically those harnessing the electrical potential of potatoes. These works, however, were more concerned with generating social allegories than suggestions for renewable energy. Grippo's choice of the ubiquitous potato is based on the recognition that it is an emblematic food of the poor. In his 1971 work *Analogy*, hundreds of potatoes are piled on a white, cloth-covered table. The potatoes are hooked up to electrodes, and at a button's touch we can see the energy they produce by means of a voltmeter. Here, the energy of the potato is harnessed and turned into electricity. It thus presents an important social and political reflection with its alchemical interest in workaday materials and its relating of art with science. *Pomme de parterre*, however, sidesteps the social dimension inherent in the politics of food while emphasizing the issue of energy and its sources.

Last year the team of Eduardo Aquino, Karen Shanski, Ralph Glor, Matt Baker and Martin Gagnon developed *HAHA!* using a subtractive procedure, leaving a negative space rather than filling in with a built form. *HAHA!*, a path sunken below grade, inclines our walk downward until we are left at eye level with the earth's surface and the growing space of the plants with which the pathway is surrounded. This less-than-horizontal plan could be construed as a kind of ethical statement in which modesty is a prominent figure. This is "building" that proposes a



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non-aggressive occupation of a space in which we encounter others held in an earthy embrace. The joyous colouration of both walls and floor creates a playful and entirely non-threatening enclosure, a space in which we can entertain and be entertained as the space reconfigures the comings and goings of its occupants. The work embodies an interesting historical reference: its original usage is as an invisible barrier, a sort of trench that could sometimes also include a fence to enclose domestic animals without intruding into the view of a landlord. The paradox of an invisible barrier is a parallel to avant-garde play with a concealing that reveals, as happens for example with Yves Klein's exhibition of an empty gallery.

Generally speaking, the most interesting issue to consider is the relationship suggested by the



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1. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, TOPOTEK 1 – Martin Rein-Cano, Lorenz Dexler, *Violence of the Garden (LAND USE OBSERVATORY)*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

2. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, Rosetta Sarah Elkin, *Tiny Taxonomy*, 2010. Photograph: © 2010, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

3. International Garden Festival, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens, spmb (Eduardo Aquino and Karen Shanski), Ralph Glor, Matt Baker, Martin Gagnon, *NANA!*, 2009–2010. Photograph: © 2009, Louise Tanguay, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens.

ambiguous conjunction of the Reford Gardens with this International Garden Festival. Although the architect/artists competing in the Festival create works with strong connections to avant-garde precursors, they are bound by the context of a professionalized competition and thus bring with them the dynamic of productive labour. You could say that the competition projects inevitably incorporate the labour of productivity and thus contradict the space of free time offered by the garden form. Considering that contemporary works must reflect on current materials and procedures in order to achieve any professional relevance, this is somewhat inevitable, if unfortunate.

Yet the Festival is framed by the ambitious “traditional” garden created by Elsie Reford during the first half of the 20th century. A garden space such as this one presents contact with the sensuous abundance of that blooming, buzzing of growth that is happening simultaneously with rotting and crumbling disappearance. Here at this confluence of river and sea, we are caught up in the fresh, airborne scent of an ocean with its infinite currents. Here we can recline among mossy rocks and observe strollers conversing about the present beauty and its sources, or even about the mortality of it all. A garden is a place of sanctuary, a space free from the particulars of place and from conventional or

clock time, which, as linear and sequential, only moves from the past toward the future. A garden, then, is an expression of what, from our perspective in historical time, is an ideal conception of place—outside conventional time—in short, “paradise.” As such, it not only frees us in the phenomenological moment but also offers a model that relativises dominant capitalist, technological constructions of space and time, revealing the existence of alternatives. In this sense, then, relieved from conventional time and the everyday world it constructs, we are freed from that version of the past and the future that have each offered only two possibilities—either the alienated labour of development or the labour of mourning.

In brief, the sensuous excess of the Reford Gardens and International Garden Festival are superb counterparts to each other in answering Director Vieira’s question as to what paradise looks like today. The Reford Gardens are an example of a space that is free of anachronistic representations and the struggle for power and so functions critically in relation to the inevitably professionalized contemporary Garden Festival. We could say it is here in the ambiguities of growth and decay that the relationship between art and its institution is revealed. ■

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