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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Great Gardens of America



Métis Garden Festival

GRAND-MÉTIS, QUEBEC

INAUGURATED IN 2000, the Métis Festival of Gardens operates annually from June to October, with a rotating roster of avant-garde designers creating gardens which are perhaps more akin to art installations than the kind of thing one would expect to see at a 'normal' garden or flower show.

It must be admitted that the venue, the Jardins de Métis on the St Lawrence River in Quebec, feels a long way from anywhere – though that is also part of its attraction. Foreign visitors must fly to Montreal and then get a connecting flight to the tiny airport of Mont-Joli (or drive for eight hours or so). But what treats await on arrival: the garden festival at Métis – formerly the Reford Gardens, in the days of the Anglo-ascendancy – is one of the very best conceptual garden shows worldwide, with a unique selling point in that participants are encouraged to make garden installations which respond to the qualities of the existing historic garden and grand natural

landscape. Given the 'problem' of a lack of engagement with a sense of place in conceptualist work, it is interesting to note that each conceptual garden show has its own particular atmosphere, and that a sense of place or prevailing atmosphere does affect the gardens and how they seem to visitors. At Métis, for regular visitors even specific garden spaces seem to retain the ghostly impressions of previous gardens on that spot. Métis's particular atmosphere is tied up with its position in woodland overlooking the St Lawrence River. Of all the garden shows, then, this is the one which seems to grapple most closely with a sense of place, actively encouraging designers to work within the geographical context: there is no declared theme at Métis, but some kind of engagement with the site and its history is seen as mandatory here. It makes every design site-specific.

Once a family estate belonging to Elsie Reford, Les Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens have been open to the

LEFT AND RIGHT *Camouflage View*, formed of angled steel fins, was deliberately created by Aranda/Lasch to partially obscure the views out towards the St Lawrence River.



public since 1962. In 1995, Les Amis des Jardins de Métis assumed responsibility for developing the gardens, following a public outcry when the custodians (the Quebec government) threatened it with closure. Alexander Reford, the great-grandson of Elsie Reford, who made the Arts and Crafts gardens at the house (its showpiece is a border of bright blue poppies, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*), assumed control; the festival was his brainchild and continues to operate under his careful and considered direction. The garden's three objectives are the restoration of the historic gardens, the exhibition of temporary gardens by leading contemporary designers, and the preservation of the shoreline along the St Lawrence and Metis Rivers.

Since 2000, more than fifty gardens created by approximately 100 designers from eight countries have been presented. The inspiration for the Métis event came from the festival held at Chaumont-sur-Loire in France, which was initiated by Jean-Paul Pigeat in 1992. A delegation from Métis visited Chaumont in 1998 and

began the process of developing the Métis festival, whose aim is to invigorate the practice of garden design, and to challenge both the profession and the public by introducing new landscapes, new materials and new visions of the garden. Although Chaumont was the inspiration, the festival wished to establish its own identity. Rather than working with an assigned theme, designers are at liberty to develop their own ideas. There is no 'first prize', as at the Chelsea Flower Show in London and other garden shows. The Festival's objective is to present cutting-edge design and to contribute to the reflection and renewal of the art of gardens. After being selected by a jury, designers work in collaboration with the artistic and technical director. Although given complete freedom to create and construct, they must create something that chimes with the characteristics of the site assigned to them. Whether digging down or building up, designers are asked to respect the natural environment and existing vegetation.



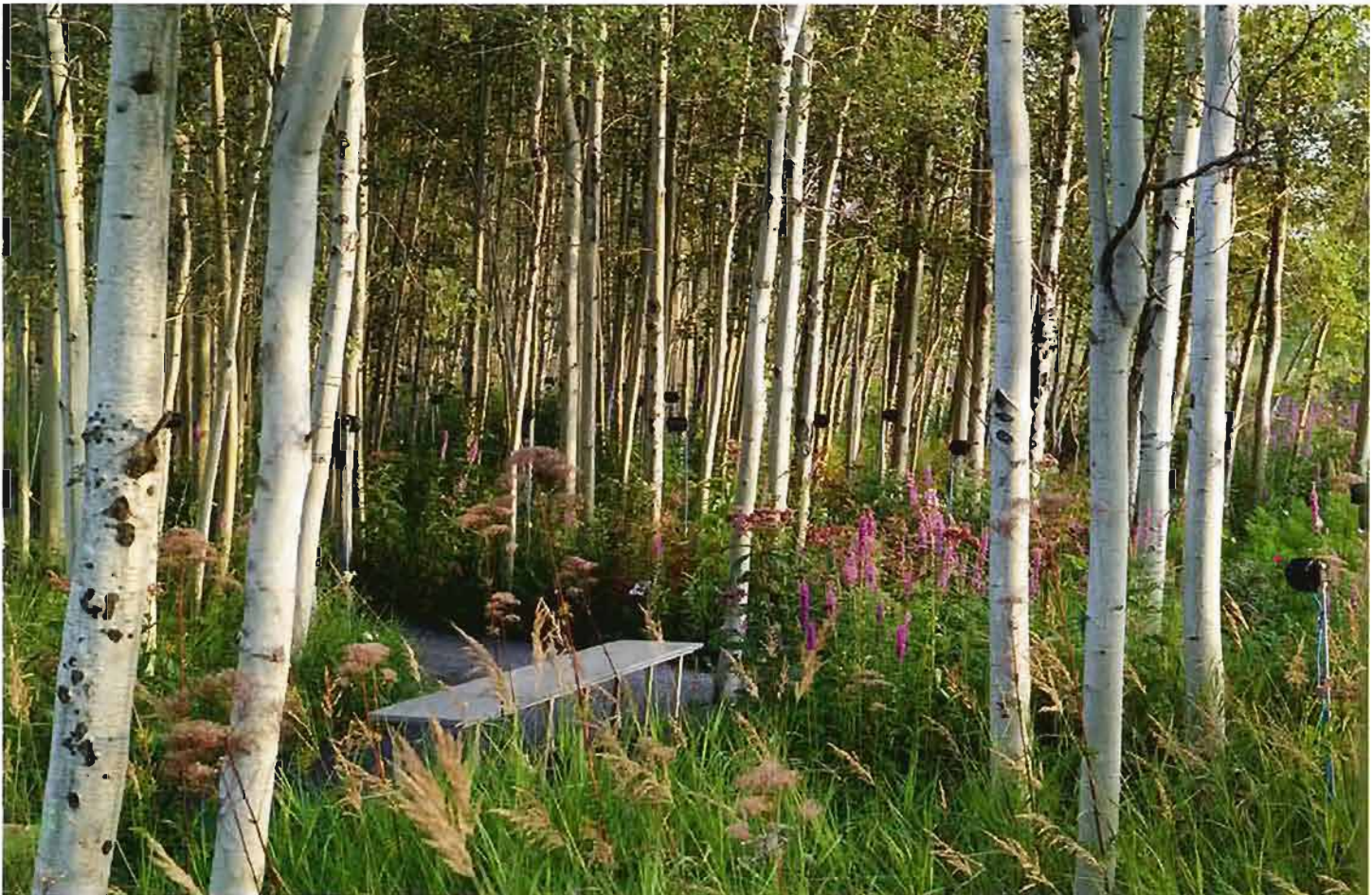
The festival takes place on a site expressly created for the event by the architects Atelier in Situ (Annie Lebel and Stéphane Pratte) and the landscape architects Vlan Paysages (Julie Saint-Arnault and Micheline Clouard). The site is laid out on two axes, roughly at right angles to each other – one broadly open, the other set in woodland. The more open, north–south axis comprises a geometric grid of spaces, each identical in size. The grid creates a framework of open and landscaped spaces, with viewing points on all sides. Interspersed between the gardens are rectangles of grass or gravel and glades of ash, birch and maple trees. The east–west axis consists of a series of garden rooms, set within glades of mature trees. These spaces, variable in size and of irregular dimensions, are the vestiges of the previous occupation of the site – where local residents once erected rustic cabins, the festival organizers created temporary garden sites. Although the chalets were demolished decades ago, a sense of their presence remains. The spruce and poplar trees planted between each of these verdant

chambers have grown to maturity. Each space enjoys views, sometimes filtered, sometimes direct, of the St Lawrence River and the garden installations may or may not take advantage of this.

When the snow begins to melt each year in early May, a team of workers builds the selected gardens, during a window of only seven weeks before the festival's opening in the third week of June. Over the course of the summer, the festival also hosts events and activities, making the site a destination for residents and tourists. Most visitors

OPPOSITE The entrance walkway to the festival site, which provides a complete contrast to the historic Reford Gardens adjacent.

BELOW *The Soundfield* is a buffer zone of birch and other trees at the perimeter of the festival site. Since 2007 it has been filled with speakers which emit unearthly sounds that change in tune with wind speed and direction.





begin their tour of the Reford Gardens by strolling along the winding pathways that constitute Elsie Reford's historic gardens. After admiring some of the 3,000 species and varieties of native and exotic plants, visitors traverse a woodland walk and enter the festival site, which is entirely separate. Here there is a change of both materials and perspective: a grid of compacted gravel along a large esplanade replaces the soft gravel pathways, tight spaces and colourful flower beds, and the view culminates in vistas of the St Lawrence River. Rather than simply strolling and admiring, visitors are encouraged, even compelled, to interact, participate, exchange and reflect. Guides are on hand to provide information and conduct tours.

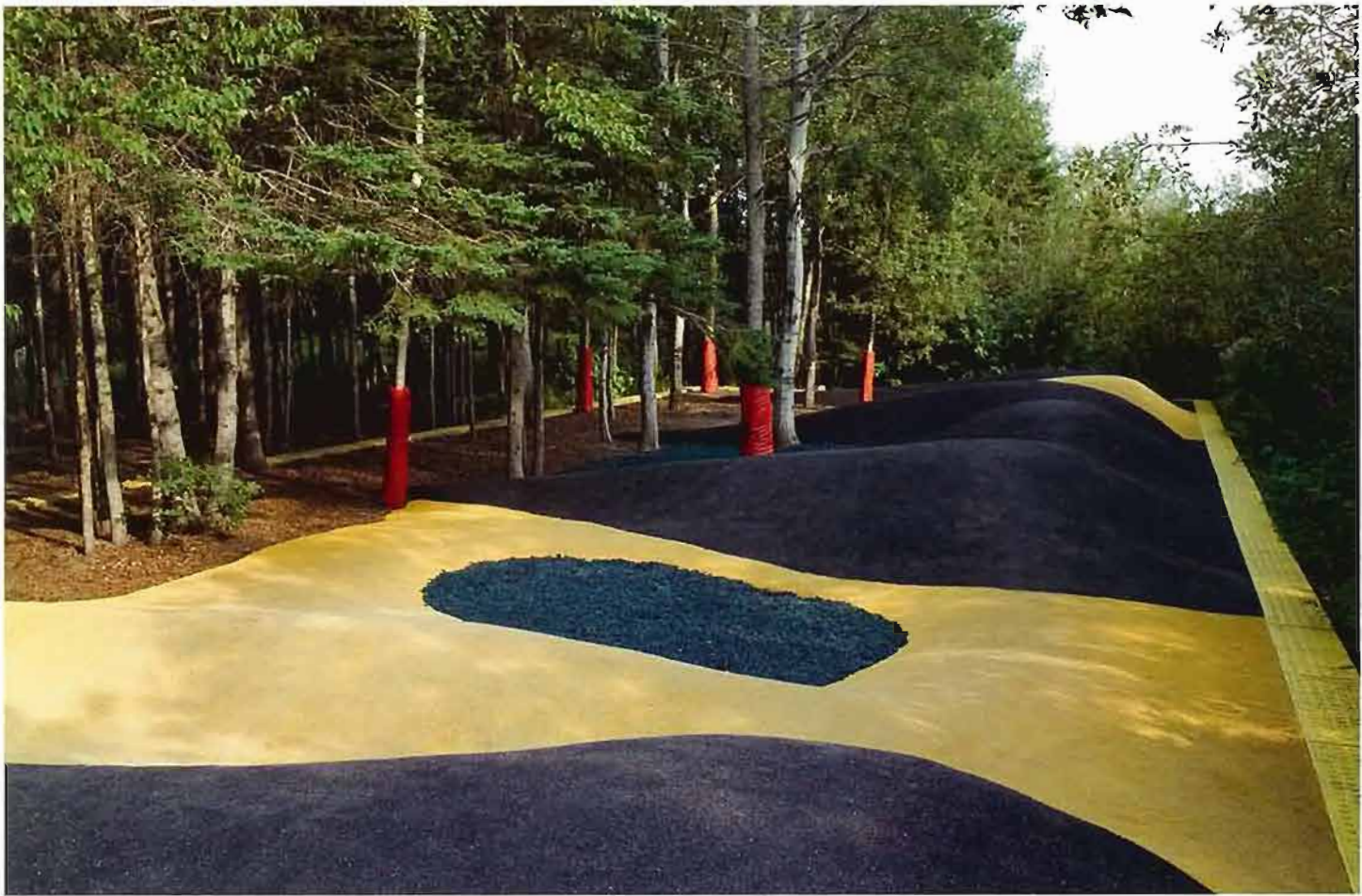
So what is garden conceptualism? This is a term coined by the present author in the mid-1990s as a useful shorthand

OPPOSITE The idea behind *Bois de Biaïis* by Atelier le Balto was to create a strict row system of willows which dissolves into a planting of poplars that mingles with the surrounding woodland.

BELOW LEFT *L'Effect desert* by Bosses Design played on the French term for 'greenhouse effect' by utilizing real greenhouses and a variety of ground-surface effects.

BELOW RIGHT This whimsical interactive garden by Cédule 40, entitled *Terraine fertile*, incorporated a swing which triggered random seed plantings across the garden.





for grouping together a range of designers working independently of each other, in many countries, in the manner pioneered by the Boston-based designer Martha Schwartz. Fundamentally these are gardens based first of all on ideas rather than plants or the architectural use of hard materials. Such spaces are underpinned by a single concept or visual motif which informs every aspect of the design. The role of the artist or designer is therefore paramount, while the old idea of nature as a legitimate guiding force for design is rejected. This is design in which the central idea of the garden or landscape, inspired by the place's history, ecology or intended use, is ultimately more important than its decorative appeal and planting. The work tends to be characterized by the use of colour, artificial materials and witty comments on the history and culture of the place and its users. In many cases a narrative is revealed in the landscape scheme – many of these gardens are 'readable' in that sense. Often these gardens blur the boundaries between art and landscape.

There are now between 60 and 100 landscape and garden practices worldwide who are working mainly in this mode (which I gathered together in an earlier book, *Avant Gardeners*). There are also a number of conceptualist garden shows, from the first, Chaumont in the Loire Valley, to Cornerstone in California (see page 114) and Future Gardens in Britain, as well as events in Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal and elsewhere.

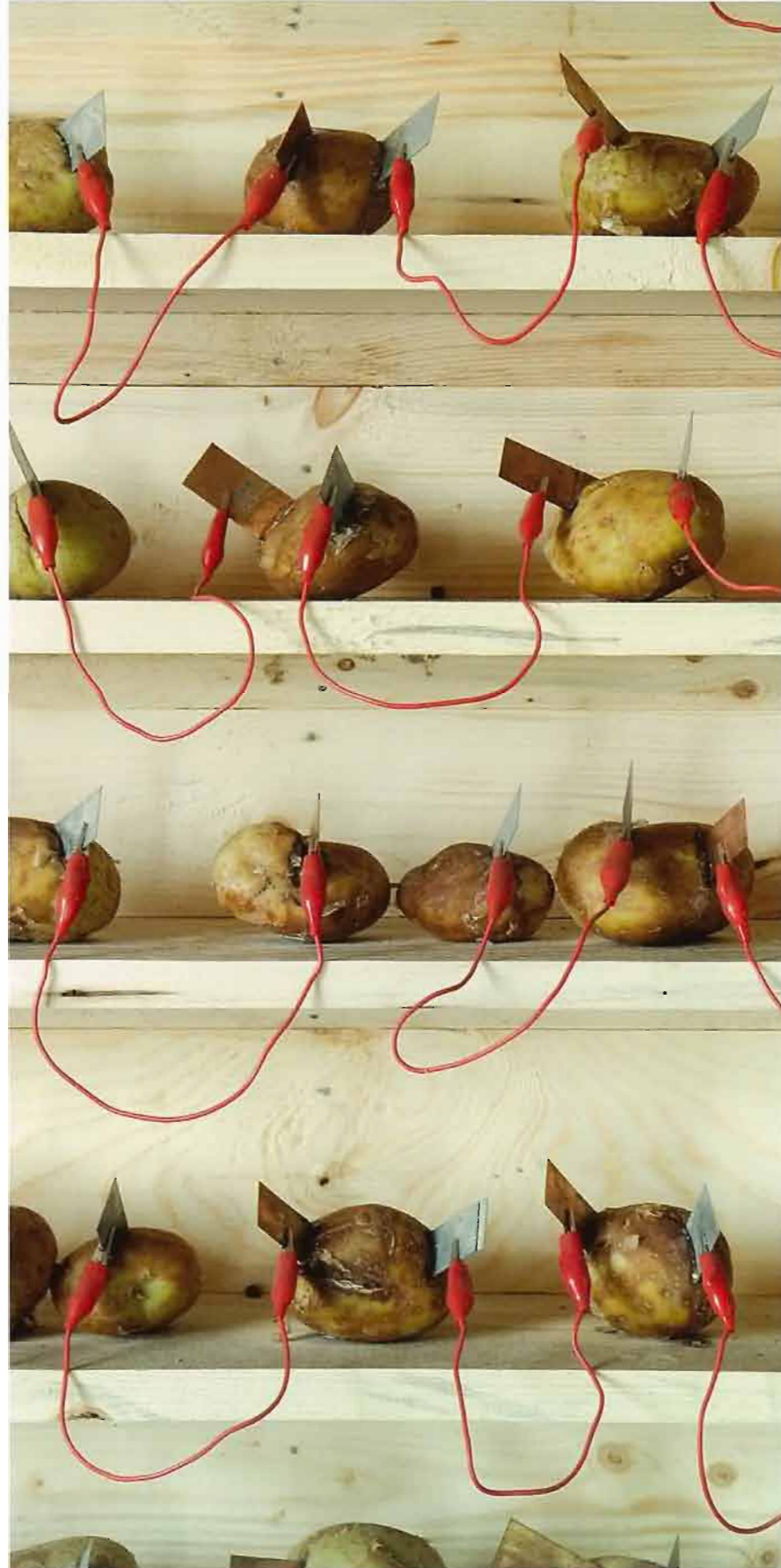
So what kind of concepts are used by these designers? Most of them take their inspiration from history in some form or other – perhaps the industrial history of the city where a new square is sited or the immediate history of the space. Some designers draw on the ecology and plant life of the site as their guiding principle, perhaps using endemic plants only or somehow honouring the local topography or climate. Or they might take as their starting point the users of the space, past, present and future, since most of these designers will have been brought up as good Modernists, and as Thomas Church reminded us, 'gardens are for





OPPOSITE *Safe Zone* by Stoss Landscape Urbanism was a satirical take on health and safety rules, with a rubberized surface and crash pads around trees.

RIGHT AND ABOVE The exterior of *Pomme de parterre* by Iarocci, Ironside and Ross was a garden of thirteen potato varieties, while inside the sunken pavilion could be found a slightly sinister 'potato battery' that powered low light and a droning noise.





of landscape conceptualism ever since. International conceptual garden shows such as *Métis* have proved a useful part of the process of moving along this kind of work, and also stand as a pertinent corrective to some of the platitudes about ecology which are sometimes ventured by contemporary landscape designers looking for ways to enhance their chances of winning design competitions by playing up to political expediency with regard to 'eco'. The installations at these shows prove that gardens and landscapes do not always have to take plant life or the wider idea of nature as their theme: a garden can be 'about' anything, a realization which effectively raises the discipline to the level of an art form.

ABOVE AND LEFT North Design Office created *Core Sample* as a semi-permanent installation at *Métis*, the vertical plexiglass tubes a reference to geological exploration techniques. The content and arrangement of the tubes changes each year.

RIGHT Andy Cao and Xavier Perron's beguiling *Jardin des Hespérides* featured the frame of a silk lantern at the centre of a floating orange grove.



people'. Finally they might allow themselves to be guided above all by their own artistic vision, so that everything in the space is clearly mediated by their own artistic personality – and that is where garden and art start blurring together most strikingly.

Landscape conceptualism started with a bagel. Or rather a few dozen bagels. In 1979 Martha Schwartz was living in Boston and married to Peter Walker, who was then as now one of the leading Modernist landscape architects in the USA – responsible for large-scale, formalist designs for companies such as IBM. Trained as an artist and printmaker, Schwartz was just starting out on a career as a landscape architect herself, but she was dissatisfied. Rather on the spur of the moment, she decided to remake the front garden of their townhouse, as a kind of a joke, as a bagel garden.

Worried, quite justifiably in hindsight, that she and her husband might clash over her idea, she decided to redesign it in secret. She waited until he went away on a business trip, did her work in the garden and then invited friends round for a drinks party just in time for her husband's return a few evenings later. 'We were a bit tipsy and just hanging out on the brick sidewalk,' she recalls. This was the Bagel Garden. Walker was shocked – first to find a party going on, but even more by the new garden, which consisted of a double row of (real) bagels arrayed round the

existing box hedges, with a grid of bright pink geraniums at the centre. In the weeks before, Martha had individually varnished every bagel in the makeshift workshop she had created in the attic, entirely unbeknownst to her husband. Schwartz observes: 'A bagel is not an appropriate material for a garden. Remember, at this time there was no art installation or site-specific art in the USA. I went around my neighbourhood and made an ode to the bagel.'

The garden was half Pop Art, half seventeenth-century parterre in design, and in every way infuriating to the landscape profession, which exploded with anger when images of the garden appeared on the cover of *Landscape Architecture* magazine. The editor was duly sacked. But it was the start of something, and Martha Schwartz has certainly been the international pioneer and leading light

OPPOSITE *Réflexions colorées* by Hal Ingberg was a simple triangle of coloured glass which enclosed three birch trees in the natural woodland. It was designed to intensify the experience of forest.

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT *La Boîte noire* was an ambitious installation by Bertrand, Corbell and Dufresne which sought to subvert our ideas of gardens through materials and unsettling sounds.

