



HYBRIDS: Reshaping the Contemporary Garden at Métis.

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Difficult to define precisely, gardens are often considered quintessentially hybrid. Mediating between human beings and their surroundings, they constitute rich sites for addressing questions about the relations between people and environments (Hunt, 2000). To the extent that such relations are seen to involve processes of communication, and especially in the context of widespread concern about environmental problems, gardens represent an increasingly relevant focus for communication research. Focusing on contemporary as opposed to traditional forms, *HYBRIDS* presents an orientation toward gardens that is particularly useful to furthering their study in a communication context.

The book documents the first seven years of the International Garden Festival, held at Les Jardins de Métis in the Gaspé region of Québec, since 2000. Editor Lesley Johnstone was also the artistic director of the festival during this period. The first half of the book consists of an essay by her, describing the aims of the festival and exploring a selection of past gardens. Featuring both beautiful images and concise commentary, I found this part of the book engaging and insightful. In the second half of the book, a selection of shorter texts by the designers of the festival gardens is presented alongside further illustrations. While some of these texts contain profound and/or provocative reflections on particular gardens and the process of garden making, they are, overall, less satisfying—at least on first reading. Varying in style and format, as well as originality of content, they present such an overwhelming diversity of perspectives that a front-to-back reading may prove somewhat frustrating. Reading the book's second half in a series of “visits” to the festival might be more rewarding. In this context, Johnstone's essay serves as both introduction and guide. Consequently, I treat the essay in depth, and leave the designers' texts for readers to interpret one by one.

Johnstone begins by outlining the purpose of the festival: to “recover” the garden. The garden is taken here as “an ideal place for experimentation and innovation” (p. 7). What exactly constitutes a garden is part of what is at stake; its recovery involves designers and visitors in an ongoing exploration of what a garden can be.

Johnstone's subsequent description of what contemporary garden design has in common with contemporary art provides useful context for making sense of the festival gardens. Many of the gardens resemble installation art; they use unconventional materials, downplay the role of plants and borrow, not only from other artistic modalities, but also from architecture, engineering, and communication technologies. Despite these alliances, however, Johnstone emphasizes that gardens are uniquely powerful, writing that “[b]ecause they are places conceived to be used, because they are outside and thus subject to the variables of weather and nature, because they implicate visitors' bodies as well as their minds, gardens offer particularly intense aesthetic experiences” (p. 9, emphasis in original). But gardens also benefit from a certain “approachability” which enables a greater diversity of visitors to engage with ideas and experiences they might otherwise shy away from (p. 9).

Many of the gardens in *HYBRIDS* use this approachability as an opportunity to address questions about different aspects of the relationship between people and their environments. While a range of strategies are deployed to create and communicate meaning, these gardens work in large part through the activation of existing relations. That is, the gardens stage, challenge, and experiment with relations between person and place, human and non-human, society and environment. Alluded to in Johnstone's discussion of contemporary art, this strategy is very much in evidence in the images of gardens presented here. Unlike much garden photography, they frequently include people interacting with one another and doing things. For instance, visitors to the garden, *In vitro*, are shown walking between shelves of mason jars and examining the content: spruce saplings on one side and, on the other, spruce cones suspended in colourful liquid. In their initial proposal, the creators of *In vitro* posed the question, which Johnstone quotes: "Has the forest become a combined laboratory, factory, supermarket, museum and recreation centre?" (p. 70). This question is reflected in, and activated by, the way visitors are positioned in relation to the jars, and in the forms of commerce and consumption that this recalls.

Johnstone's discussion of individual gardens is organized around seven themes, themes that identify the predominant concerns and strategies of engagement in the gardens: "looking inward" (the garden as enclosure), "looking outward" (the garden as landscape), "recounting/referring," "seeing," "activating," "affirming," and "discovering." Although this arrangement seems somewhat awkward at first, it is quite effective in making sense of the otherwise overwhelming variety of gardens presented. The brief descriptions of individual gardens are quite successful in encapsulating both what is interesting about a given garden, and what kind of experience it produced. That said, the gardens themselves are not all equally compelling—there were a few that struck me as being either uncritical in approach or overly contrived.

Perhaps more important than the success of individual commentaries, however, is the extent to which Johnstone's essay informs a more general understanding of gardens. Does it apply outside the festival context? To a certain extent, I think it does. Certainly a consideration of the strategies and effects found in the festival gardens provides a useful perspective on gardens where similar strategies are deployed more subtly. For example, while the garden, *Macroscope*, gave visitors a view of the surrounding countryside by raising them above the site on an aerial platform, traditional English landscape gardens provide similarly sweeping views using more primitive technologies (e.g., the "ha-ha," as described by Pugh, 1988). I think both gardens could be seen, as Johnstone puts it, as "viewing machines" (p. 48).

That said, a serious reading of *HYBRIDS* also raises the question of why gardens tend not to be seen as sites of experimentation in the manner celebrated at Métis—why they are more often highly conventional in form and seen as cultural treasures to be preserved rather than experimented with. Further, what does this imply about the state of relations between people and their environments? While such questions are not explicitly addressed by Johnstone, I think they are implied in the framing of the festival as a "recovery" of the garden.

The texts that make up the book's second half respond to questions regarding

what is special or interesting about gardens. As Johnstone admits, “[t]hese texts are as diverse as the gardens themselves” (p. 93). There are many competing definitions of the garden presented here—often within a single text—and it is both tempting and impossible to arbitrate between them. It is hard to discern a common thread, or know what to do with them all, except to read selectively, or perhaps less intensively. In this context, individual texts stand out on the basis of originality or their relevance to more specific questions.

Clearly, the overall diversity is at least in part Johnstone’s intention. As much as we may take what counts as a garden for granted, it is terrifically difficult to pin down an adequate generalization. This is precisely what makes them such fertile ground—at least in a festival context—for experimentation and innovation.

References

- Hunt, John Dixon. (2000). *Greater perfections: The practice of garden theory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pugh, Simon. (1988). *Garden-nature-language*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

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