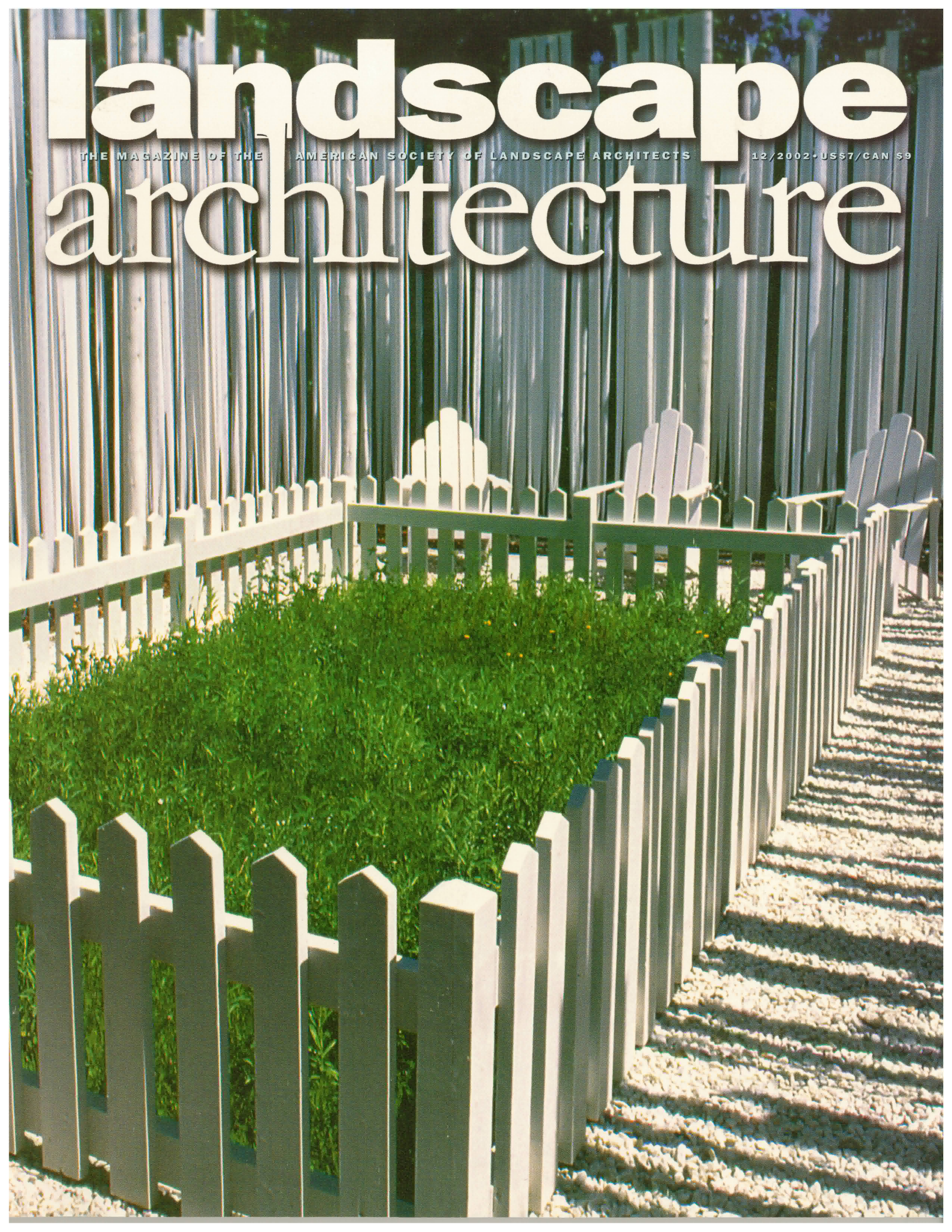


landscape architecture

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the artful



The International Garden Festival 2002 at Grand Métis, Québec, blurs the boundaries between art and landscape design.

BY DIANNE BOS

The idea of the “garden” as “art” raises questions of definitions.

This blurring of the boundaries between art and garden/landscape design has been a feature of many avant-garde garden festivals such as the International Garden Festival in Grand Métis, Québec, now in its third year. Other such festivals include the International Garden Festival in Chaumont, France, which debuted in 1992, and a smaller-scale program, Artists’ Gardens at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, which I’ve curated since 1990.

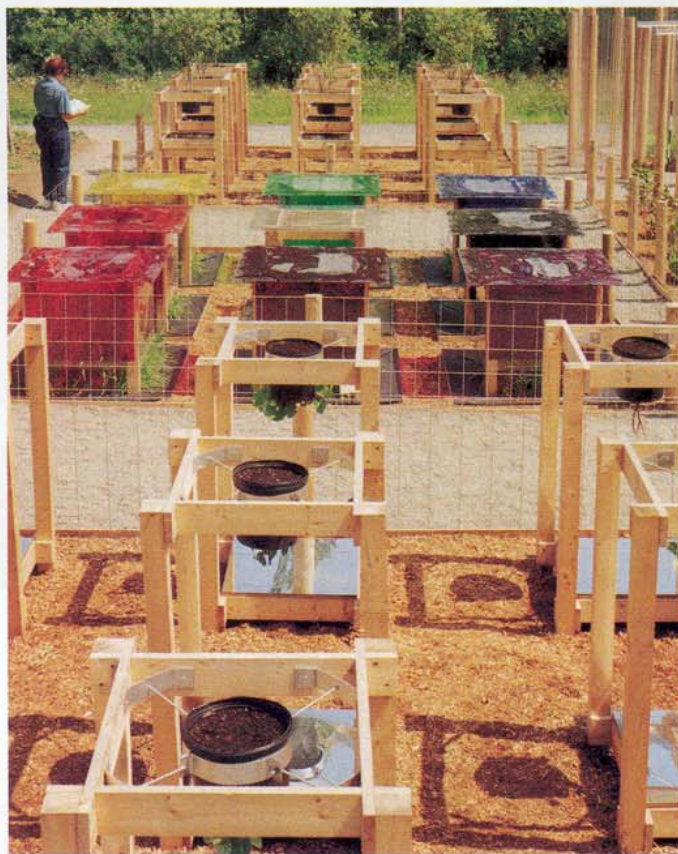
These “art/garden laboratories” responded to a recognition, developed in the late 1980s, that something new was definitely growing in the garden. Inspired by the earthwork artists of the 1960s and 1970s and the environmental consciousness of the

CHRISTOPHER BRADLEY-HOLE’S “Layers” offers a hard-edged painter’s approach to the landscape. Walking through his work is like treading along the borders of a Mondrian painting. A minimal palette is used within the systematic design framework, an orange wooden boardwalk. The blocks of color rise and fall depending as much on their intensity as on their substance. Bold brushstrokes of green grasses and blocks of blue water tanks rise unnaturally from the grid, adding a texture that changes with the light.

Bradley-Hole has become very obsessed with layers in landscape, a concept he feels has not been expressed in contemporary landscape design. “I feel comfortable when I introduce a rhythm of pure proportions into my designs,” he comments. “At one level this can be enjoyed as an abstract painting. But it also serves to create a feeling of normality. Then, where this is broken, there is a sense of drama.” Bradley-Hole’s “artspeak” alludes to the old battle between nature and artifice in a contemporary garden setting. The calming effect of artificial elements—his repetitious use of containers and pathways—is at war with unruly nature, fighting within this structure. For example, water levels in the pool areas change daily, and plants grow outside the lines.

MICHEL LAVENDERIE

garden



ON ONE'S FIRST WALK through Paul Cooper's "Eden Laboratory," it appears to be a plant torture chamber. Potted trees are hung upside down, suspended above reflective mirrors or reservoirs of water, and others have weighted wires pulling at their growing tips, acting as measuring devices documenting their progress. In one section plants of the same variety are each grown under a different colored glass frame, deprived of natural white light. The saddest—a rhubarb—struggles in a dark chamber straining toward a tiny spot of light.

Not surprisingly, it evoked many questions from the public. The very helpful on-site "interpreters" (docents) mollified their obvious bewilderment by explaining that it was "art." In fact it is "idea art" inspired by a very old biology textbook that illustrated a number of experiments on plant behavior and growth, including light (phototropism), gravity (geotropism), and water (hydrotropism). "It is intended as a satirical reminder of our obsession with the desire to control and harness nature for our own gain."

In the 1980s, a new generation of artists and designers was taking an enhanced interest in the garden as a locus for creation. Parallel to this evolution, landscape architecture had in the previous decade produced some innovative practitioners pushing the art end of landscape design.

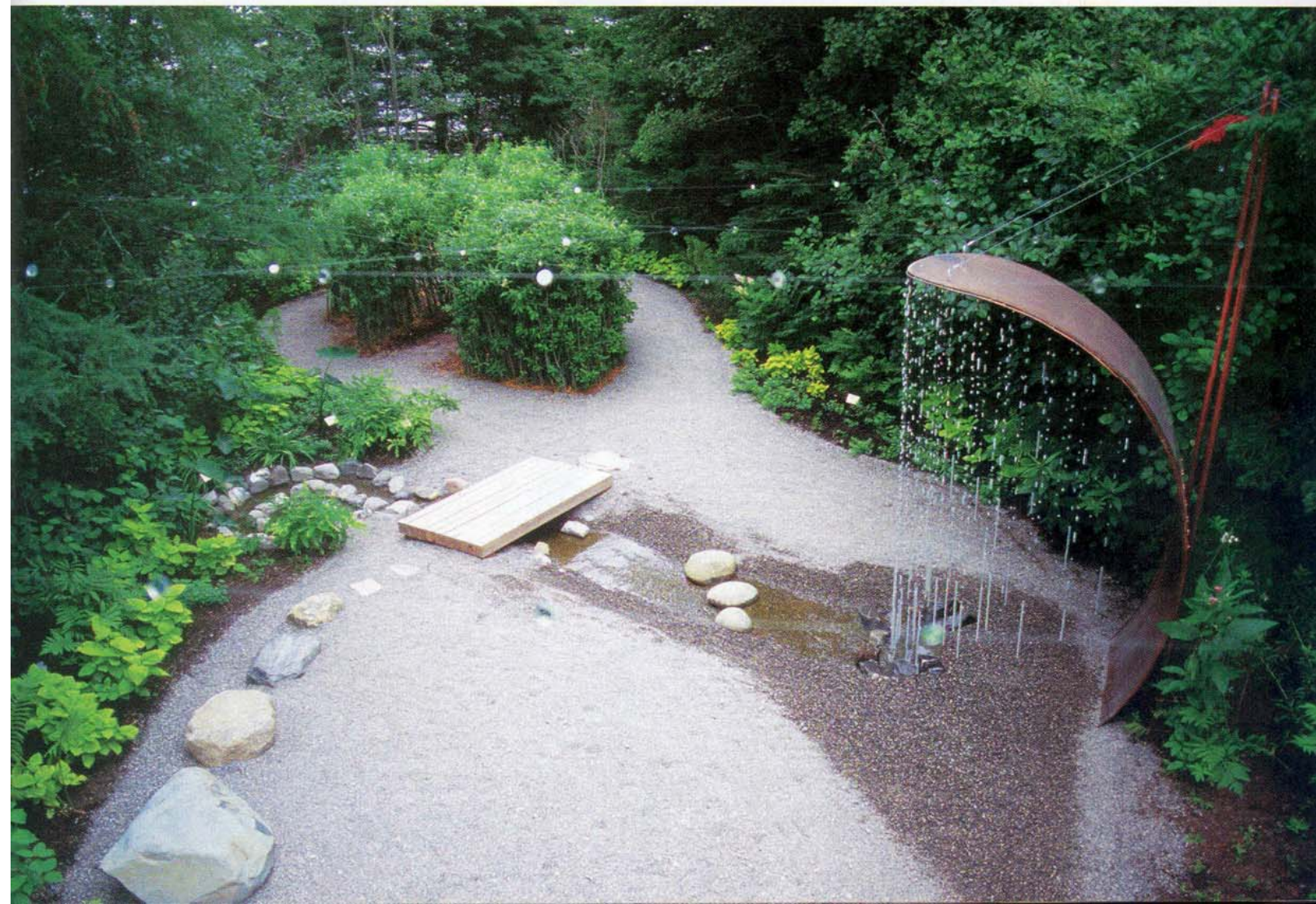
The late postmodernist era encouraged crossovers between many fields: Artists borrowed from architectural history and vice

LESS CEREBRAL EXERCISE and more physical play are encouraged in "Catimini," a garden designed by landscape architects Charlotte Gaudette and Emmanuelle Tittley (Mousse Paysage, Québec), both experts in children's play spaces. Drawing on childhood memories and garden imagery in children's literature, they collaborated with New York artist Pia Massie in a de-

sire to create a garden to be explored through the body and stimulating to the senses. Consequently, this garden is jammed with story-book vignettes: secret lairs, beaded waterfalls, vanishing streams, even a mini spiral jetty. As a grown-up I found their plant pairings on each side of the arched tubed entrance-way the most intriguing: wheat and nicotiana, and amaranth and corn.



MICHEL LAVERDIÈRE, TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM, DIANNE BOS, TOP RIGHT





THE “LAND ART” of the late Robert Smithson charged the art scene of the 1960s and continues to have a profound influence on landscape design. Randy Cohen of Atelier Big City (with Anne Cormier and Howard Davies) based in Montréal, Québec, invoked Smithson and the “land art” conventions in relation to their “Garden Party” installation. But what a contrast in forms! While “Ombre” (page 66) strips away and takes you down into the earth, “Garden Party” ramps up and propels you into the sky.

Atelier Big City wanted “to create something clearly distinct from the soil, something that played with your normal sense of security and cultural stereotypes” and do it all using something we are all familiar with—the backyard deck. The scale of the piece fills and transforms the site. The steep grade of the deck is unnerving, but the possibility of an excellent view drives you up. Descending into the constructivist underbelly of the deck reveals a barbecue and good hiding places, all a must for the ultimate garden party.



versa. The very nature of landscape design makes it more prone to overlaps within these disciplines, especially in the past century.

It was the July 1989 cover of *Progressive Architecture*, with its startling image of a white horse posed between rows of blue and purple painted hedgerows, that opened my eyes to this new cross-pollination. The cover work by landscape architect Tori Thomas

and profiles on Peter Walker, Martha Schwartz, and Michael Van Valkenberg illustrated that something unprecedented was developing in landscape design.

Traditionally the artist’s role in garden design can be broken into three categories: first, the Artist’s Garden, designed and maintained by the artist for inspiration and pleasure. Monet’s

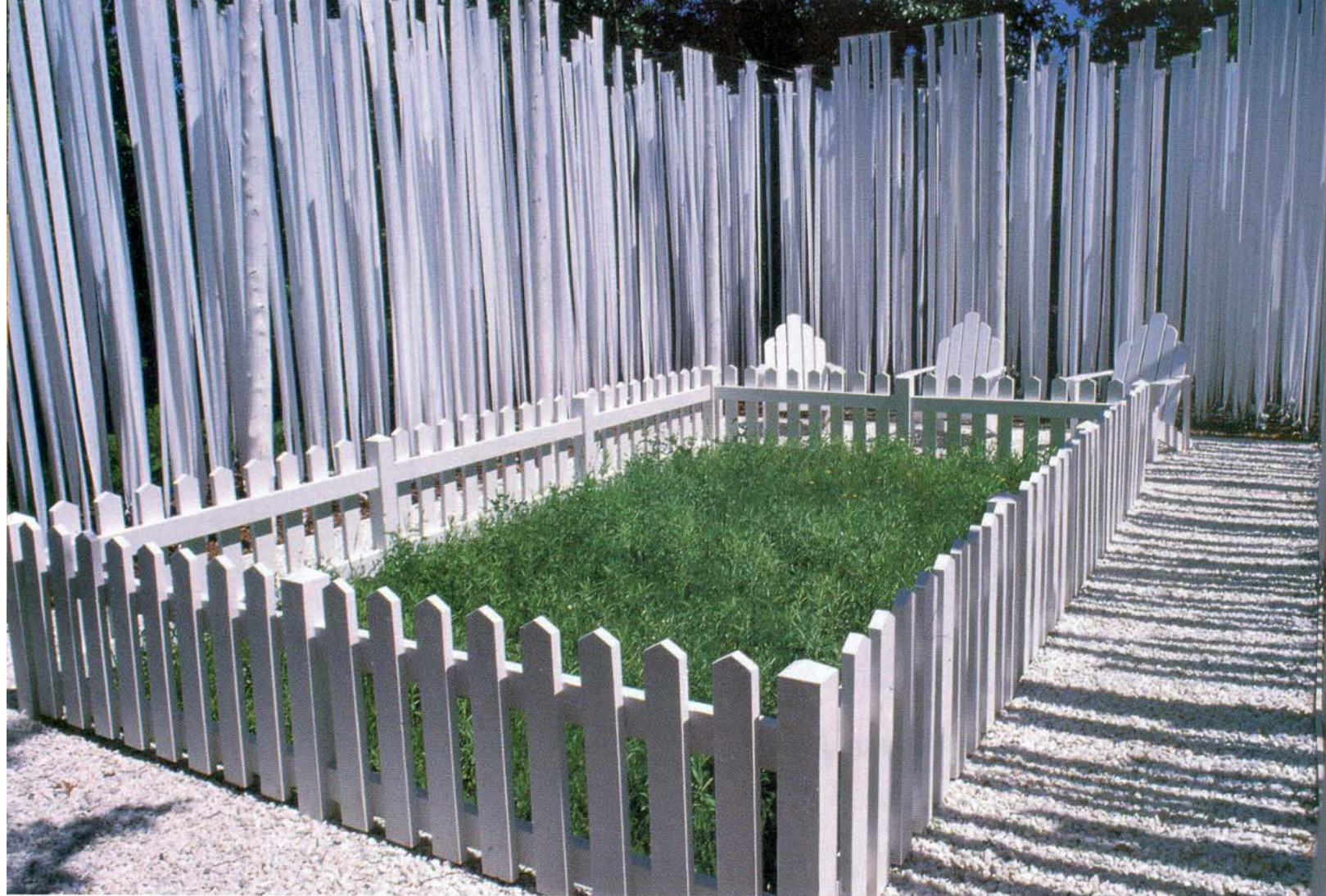


THOUGH BOTH ARE MODERNIST in approach, neighboring work by British landscape designer Bonita Bulaitis contrasts in many ways with the minimal and methodical gridwork of Bradley-Hole's. "No Strings Attached" was inspired by the migrating Canada geese and the meteor crater in nearby Manicouagan, but you'd be foolish to look for them represented in her work. Bulaitis considers herself an intuitive artist who uses many elements traditional to contemporary garden design—mass plantings, white crushed stone, erect formal poplars, lots of diagonals. These elements frame a blazing white enclosure, ingeniously constructed from common synthetic string that vibrates and intensifies the light, creating partitions of varying transparency. Mirrored tables balanced precariously on a single steel rod exaggerate the surreal nature of the space.

Giverny is a stellar example of this. Next comes the Sculpture Garden, a garden in which an artist's work is placed. Traditionally, the sculpture was created in the artist's studio and placed in a garden setting by a collector or curator. (In more recent history the artist has played a more integral part in the placement of the work.) Finally, we encounter the Garden as Art, a more recent

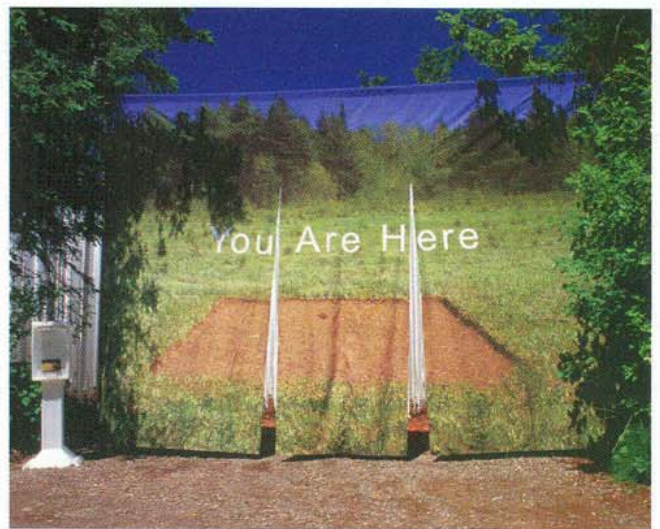
concept where the artist is using and manipulating plants or landforms as he or she would use other art media to create a work of art. This can include the use of plants as abstract materials, expressing color, texture, and form. Or inspiration can come from the meaning inherent in the plants: their botanical histories, herbal significance, associations, and meanings within our culture





“THE YOU ARE HERE GARDEN” by Taco Iwashima and Christopher Bruce Matthews also uses a white enclosure device, but to a much different effect. This garden successfully delves into the contemporary concept or notion of “place” in the (techno) global village. Tourism marketing edits history and geography into easily accessible “site bites.” Our experience is predetermined, our views preselected. A monumental postcard image of a meadow with the words “you are here” indicates the screened entrance to this site. Peeling back this layer on-

ly unveils more. Thousands of long white streamers with the words “you are here” hang several feet thick, making it difficult to perceive where you are or what’s beyond. Large washers weight the streamers, creating a wonderful clinking sound as you swim through to the room-size clearing within: a meadow of white flowers surrounded by a white picket fence. Adirondack chairs invite meditation on where “here” is. Are we back at the entrance? Or are we in the field from which this patch of earth was removed?



and other cultures. The location and use of certain plants and plantings can evoke obvious political overtones such as environmental issues, industrialization, and technology.

Many of the gardens created for the 2002 edition of the International Garden Festival easily fall within this latter category.

On the rocky bluffs of the southern shore of the Saint Lawrence, where the river’s mouth opens wide into the Atlantic, the International Garden Festival at the Re-

ford Gardens held its third edition from June 22 to September 15, 2002. The festival’s dramatic site at Grand Métis, on the Gaspé Peninsula in the province of Québec, is six hours by car east of Montréal and three hours from the northern Maine border.

Though artists are allowed to submit proposals for the festival at Métis, it was clear after speaking with festival director Denis Lemieux that “they were not looking for art installations” in the selection process. However, collaborations between artists and landscape architects and designers were encouraged, to “stimulate

PERFORMANCE ART, PROCESS ART?

One of the most daring gardening experiments of the festival was "A Garden Is Never Finished" by landscape architects Marie Claude Massicotte and Raquel Penalosa, both based in Montréal. They sensed the multiple histories of the site and the temporary nature of their own intervention and decided on an interactive, participatory garden project.

They used the expertise of set designer Ramirez Nieto and graphic artist Lise Rivest to create a garden venue that would

encourage the public to participate in the ongoing transformation of the site. Rings of primary colors define small individual stages. A multileveled workstation, below, packed with trowels and aprons is the centerpiece of the composition. Once they overcome their well-conditioned hesitation, the public snips, digs, transplants, seeds, and waters the garden, above.

Landscape architect Raquel Penalosa found out just "how far you can let go as a designer" when audience participation began to transform the garden. It took time but "when the site took over it jelled more." They even invited the Ecole National de Cirque (The National Circus School) to perform improv at the site to assist in the "deconstruction of the work into the body," below right.

Through performance they hoped "the body would become the garden," she said. The performers emerged silently from the surrounding forest, clad in layers of tight-fitting skins, encouraging the audience to remove these layers as one might pick leaves from a tree. Penalosa observed, "You have to let your ego go to create a new territory." I gathered from this response that the performance/garden integration still needs work, though a video documentation of the event may be appearing as part of a virtual garden website the designers are working on.

contemporary creation in the field of gardens and garden design." As suggested by this description, the notion of art and the garden set the tone of this festival (and indeed of the past two festivals).

In total eight temporary gardens were featured in the 2002 edition. Five were chosen from an open call for entries: "The You Are Here Garden" by Taco Iwashima and Christopher Bruce Matthews, United States; "Ombre" by Marco Antonini, Roberto Capecci, and Raffaella Sini, Italy; "Catimini" by Charlotte Gaudette and Emmanuelle Tittley, Québec; "A Garden Is Never Finished" by Marie Claude Massicotte and Raquel Penalosa, Québec; and "Garden Party" by Anne Cormier, Randy Cohen, and Howard Davies (Atelier Big City), Québec.

The festival also hosted participants from the United Kingdom as its featured country this year, in conjunction with the "UK...OK!" program



"Festivals such as Métis have encouraged a redefining of the garden"

organized by the British Council that celebrates cultural exchanges between the United Kingdom and Québec. The three invited designers from the United Kingdom were Bonita Bulaitis, Paul Cooper, and Christopher Bradley-Hole, billed as "avant-garde creators whose work has played a large role in the renewal of the art of gardening." All three invited British designers were located in a row on rectangular sites, separated from the natural surroundings by wide gravel walkways producing more insular results. The other five teams, selected from an international call for entries, had sites in five similar-sized clearings located in a more natural wooded area along the river bluff.

I asked the creators of this year's temporary gardens at the festival, "How would you place your installation within the context of 'the garden as art'?"

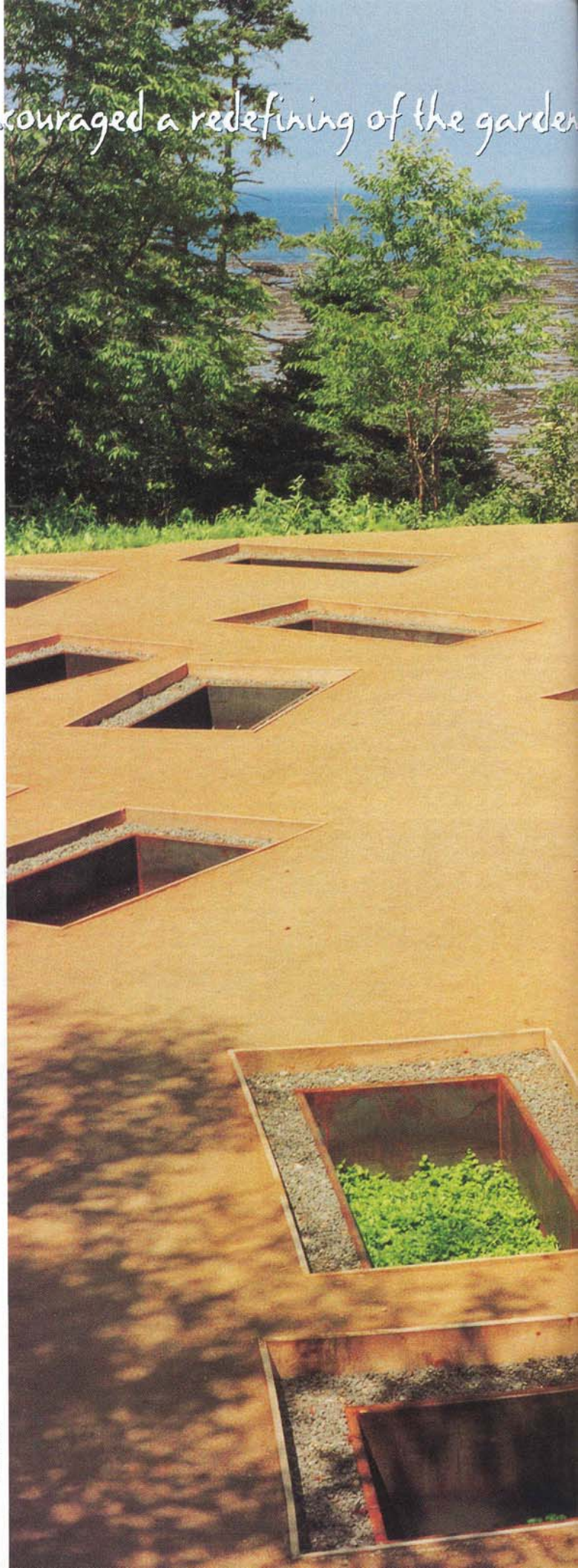
British garden designer (and former sculptor) Paul Cooper points out that while the definition of art has been open since at least Duchamp's "readymades" (sculptures made from found objects) in 1912, "the garden has only recently been subjected to a reexamination. Festivals such as Métis have encouraged a redefining of the garden. But they are not restricted by functional practicalities or the demands of a client. Are they gardens for gardens' sake, or are they art for art's sake?"

Christopher Bradley-Hole takes on the distinction between art and design by defining design as "a creative solution to a known problem. The solution is generally arrived at by focus and creativity. It's really problem solving." Art, on the other hand, "can be successful purely by posing the problem without finding the solution. For me, art is work that can be appreciated on a subconscious as well as conscious level. It engages with the soul, and recurs in the mind well after the initial experience of the work itself. It also deals with the unfamiliar, or new, and therefore can shock or repel because we don't know how to respond to it."

LAND-I, A TEAM OF THREE Italian architects and designers (Marco Antonini, Roberto Capucci, and Raffaella Sini), has been creating some significant temporary site-specific works in Europe. Their shocking "Ombre" installation at Métis plays with negative space in a big way, combining Smithsonian's minimalism with the romance of a Roman archeological dig.

A spectacular view of the Saint Lawrence River makes this one of the most naturally scenic and thus challenging sites. The Land-I group opted for a dramatic contrast to the natural

landscape to pull you away from the view. In the true spirit of minimalism, things have been reduced and leveled. Entering through piles of excavated dirt, viewers find that the entire site has been scraped of plant life. What remains are 49 sleek, steel-lined, anthropometric excavations, randomly perforating the site. Thankfully, ground-creeping plants (the only plant life they've introduced to the site) carpet the bottom of the sarcophagi. In these shadows, or "ombres," the pleasant twist is finding life instead of death at the bottom of these pits.



DIANNE BOS



Are they gardens for gardens' sake, or are they art for art's sake?"

So where does that leave the landscape designer or architect when the program for the site is very open? There is no real client and very few practical considerations for these sites. The designers are invited and encouraged to use the venue as a laboratory for creative thinking about the garden. Does this bring them into the realm of the artist?

Garden designer Bradley-Hole believes that "at its best, garden and landscape design should have an Art dimension. And I think this is particularly pertinent where the design is for a show garden rather than as a site-specific design. In this case the designer is forced to invent the ideas rather than to respond to a site and its surrounding landscape. I feel this 'invention' necessarily provokes an artistic approach."

The design team of Taco Iwashima and Christopher Bruce Matthews raised another important issue: the garden's relation to time. "What is commonly held up to be 'the garden'—especially in our home countries of England and Japan—is a complex and living environment, in constant flux and requiring many decades to approach its prime. What is asked for in Métis is entirely different, but it is still a garden. Time becomes compressed, the immediate effect overtakes the seasonal unfolding that is most powerful in a permanent garden.... Plants do not sit as comfortably in these gardens, but ideas do."

In his contribution to the festival, British designer Cooper felt he had avoided the "art versus garden" debate with his installation, "The Eden Laboratory," although he did run afoul of festival director Lemieux's idea that he was not looking for "art installations." In fact, Cooper describes his contribution in precisely those terms. "It is an art installation, which borrows the compositional format of a garden to comment upon the way we grow plants. Of course since the installation is a place where plants are grown, it also fits into the traditional and conventional definition of a garden. My background is sculpture and my way of working is idea based. The Eden Laboratory is a parody of the way society (including gardeners) attempts to interfere with the natural growth of plants for its own gain."

The third annual festival did present some new territories of garden design. And whether they are clearly art or gardens is beside the point, according to the team of Matthews and Iwashima.

"Perhaps the gardens at Métis do blur boundaries between art and landscape architecture/garden design, but the way we see it is that a good garden should grow out of its physical site, its use (whether aesthetic, food production, spiritual, etc.), and the ineffable ingredient provided by the imagination of the artist/designer. The gardens are unique at Métis because of their temporary nature, the evocative power of the Gaspé environment, and the sympathetic and skillful support of the festival staff. This rich combination helps immensely in getting the best out of the participating artists."

LA

Calgary-based photographer and writer Dianne Bos has curated the Artists' Gardens program at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto since 1990.