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## Catherine Howett

In an essay published eighteen years ago in *ARTFORUM*, Robert Smithson posed the question, "Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches gardening?" When he later discovered the work of the eighteenth-century English landscape gardening theorists Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight—champions of a picturesque ideal that called for imitating nature in her wilder, more awe-inspiring and even threatening manifestations—he saw in them the antecedents of an understanding of landscape-making that had informed Frederick Law Olmsted's design of Central Park and that Smithson wanted his own work to reflect. His misgivings about garden design had to do with his sense that the "jeune Edens" pictured in the shelter magazines never reflected this more complex vision of ecological processes.

It took a long time for the historically conservative profession of landscape architecture to respond to the environmental art movement that Smithson helped to galvanize. Now it sometimes seems as if every formerly plain-Jane axis has been tricked out as a solstitial sight line. But there has also been some productive soul-searching within the profession, and the exhibition "Transforming the American Garden" reflects a growing interest in

re-examining the philosophic foundations of everyday practice in order to discover authentic new directions. Michael Van Valkenburgh, who conceived the show, rightly looks to the garden as the quintessential medium through which contemporary ideas of the landscape and insights into the man/nature relationship may be explored. The fifteen early-to-mid-career American landscape architects (there are three team projects) who were invited to submit designs for a real or imaginary, public or private, "ideal" garden on a roughly one-acre site would want to answer emphatically *no* to Smithson's query.

The exhibition and catalogue, with supporting statements by each designer or team, however, leave the rest of us believing that the potential of the garden as a viable expressive form for late-twentieth-century art still remains to be demonstrated. At the heart of the failure to prove the case is the ambiguous nature of the exhibition, in which architectural drawings and plans, sketches, and models are displayed as if they were themselves art objects. For Barbara Solomon, who came to landscape architecture from a career as a graphic designer, the drawing is indeed prior to the work and of equal importance with the landscape plan that is its subject. But for other entrants, the graphics

documenting the project proposals were the work of supporting staff—normal procedure in an architectural office but confusing in this context because in a number of instances they, too, are so self-consciously artful that the design concepts for the garden seem of secondary importance. Chip Sullivan's renderings for his "Persian" garden, complete with whirling dervishes, are displayed within medieval-looking triptych boxes, the wooden frames of which, he tells us, are "metaphors for the body as shelter for the soul."

In spite of the criticism implied in Stephen Krog's comment that "everyone seems to believe that they can/should/must make use of somebody else's paradise as their own," there is a good deal of rather heavy-handed borrowing of historic archetypes. Krog himself advises us that the labyrinth at the center of his garden cemetery is of Pima origin. Warren Byrd has combined a mount and a maze in his "Tidal Garden" for a site on the eastern shore of Virginia. The use of such elements is so familiar to us from their re-exploration in art of the last two decades (Byrd's maze, inundated and revealed through the rhythms of tidal flow, inevitably reminds us of the fresh simplicity, in 1974, of Richard Fleischner's "Sod Maze" for a Newport, Rhode Island, estate garden)

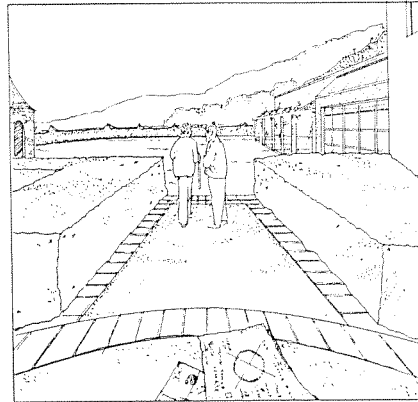
that they seem to undercut the exhibition's contention that these works are pointing the way toward a transformation of the American garden.

The same staleness haunts Martha Schwartz's "New York City Bulb Garden," which draws on Conceptualist precedents for a proposal to plant a roof-garden flower bed with seasonally sequential configurations of bulbs spelling out "IGNORANCE," "EVIL," "MONEY," "BLISS." (Whatever happen to "LOVE"?) Lee Weintraub and John di Domenico, arguing that athletes function as gods within our society, propose a Post-modernist/Pop shrine for the high priest Magic in which a neon basketball supported by a monumental hand looms over a Grecian temple complex on a pastoral site in upstate New York. A futurist echo sounds in Pamela Burton's and Katherine Spitz's "Hydrotopia," a retreat above Malibu designed for scientists, theologians, and convicts who represent, respectively, the empirical, spiritual and irrational aspects of the human psyche. The convicts are there, it turns out, to do the gardening. By contrast, Julie Messervy and Peter Droege invoke the grim actualities of the present in their "peace" garden for an urban site over an underground subway and shopping mall. They have

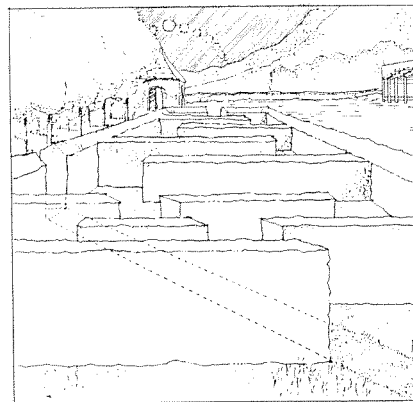
plotted a symbolic passage for visitors through a tunnel leading to a 50-foot-high, partially sunken cone, the interior walls of which glimmer with gas-fed flames meant to represent the “inferno” of nuclear disaster. Their question, “Is this what it will be like?” trivializes, in its startling naiveté, the power of their work’s good intentions.

Not surprisingly, given the temper of the moment, most of these gardens depend on a vocabulary of Renaissance and Baroque classicism, preferably complemented by a surrounding landscape of exceptional natural beauty. Exploiting these inherited forms, Vincent Healy wants to intensify, even using new technologies, the experience of sensuous physicality that such gardens afford, suggesting that they might serve therapeutic purposes in healthcare. Van Valkenburgh manipulates the formal vocabulary more inventively for his “Eudoxia,” which offers the most genuinely innovative idea in the entire exhibition, that the garden might serve instead of courtyard or plaza as prototype for the landscape development of urban sites by large corporations. He imagines a garden between office towers in which hedges, lawn, flowers, and furniture create an environment not traditionally associated with the city. Terence Harkness’s work, too, is a refreshing exception

to the shallow pretentiousness of some of the other projects. His workmanlike landscape for a midwestern prairie farm residence combines sensitivity to regional forms, both natural and man-made, with an imaginative reordering of familiar elements that makes them more vivid and delightful. Harkness has aimed to interpret certain “profound” qualities of the east central Illinois landscape—its extreme flatness and openness, “visual tensions” between growth and aging, ripe and spent. Smithson would have appreciated those values; they hint at directions that could rescue us from the moribund conventions of the contemporary garden.



*The meeting of art and science*



*The Maze*

#### Drawings

from Pamela Burton and Katherine Spitz panels