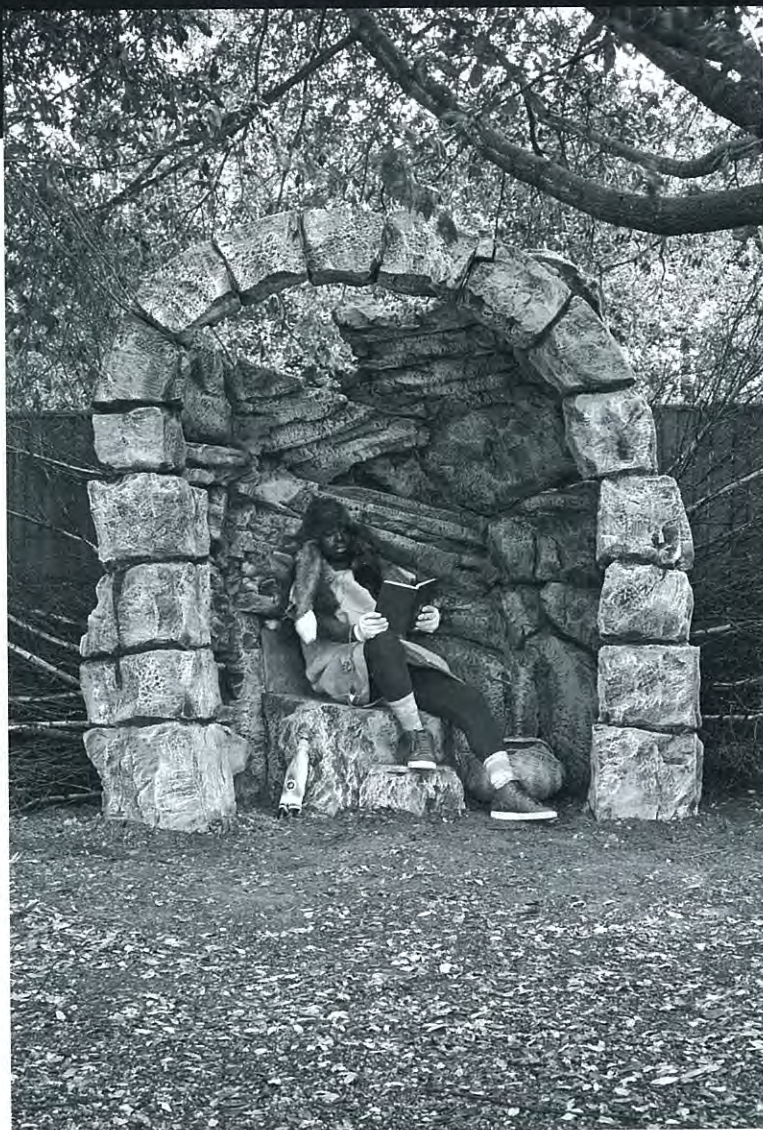


Michael Hampton on contrasting views of outdoor art

Human Nature



Harold Offeh
Arcadia Redesigned 2012

The visual style of Peter Greenaway's 1982 period costume film *The Draughtsman's Contract* owes a great deal to painting, although the intrusion of certain unaccountable, sinister motifs into the drawings of an idyllic estate – supplied by Mr Neville the landscape surveyor – ultimately ruffle this surface, offering dark clues to a country-house murder mystery.

The notion of the garden as a little 'paradise' (a word whose Old Persian origin in fact meant walled enclosure), a place of green refuge, romantic possibility but also of uncultivated danger, is thus a potent metaphor, for – as Camille Paglia has remarked – 'nature breaks its own rules whenever it wants. Science cannot avert a single thunderbolt. Western science is a product of the Apollonian mind: its hope that by naming and classification, by the cold light of intellect, archaic night can be pushed back and defeated.' However, the tyrannical apparatus of reason, doomed to be accompanied by its own unconscious behavioural substrate – the monstrosity of 'human nature' – is now directed at policing the state 24/7 in the name of security.

Stumbling into a Roman villa garden 2,000 years ago, you might have encountered the bearded head of a stone Herm or Priapus erected on a log, mythological sculptures designed to bring luck and ward off malign influences, even if only children scrumping fruit. These figures were often propitiated: household gods or *lares*, representations of symbolic beliefs to do with owned place, were not properly outlawed until the 5th century. At Little Sparta, the garden engineered from the mid 1960s in the Pentland Hills in Scotland by Ian Hamilton Finlay, for whom gardening was 'composing, and making a harmony with disparate elements', nature and artifice achieve a blend of 'specific landscapes' from over 275 works in stone, metal and wood, some bearing inscriptions in Latin fonts or concrete poetry, theming, for example, pre-Socratic philosophy, the French Revolution and naval warfare.

Two ambitious yet contrasting outdoor shows, 'Garden of Reason' and 'Wild New Territories', based respectively at Ham House in Surrey and Camley Street Natural Park in London's King's

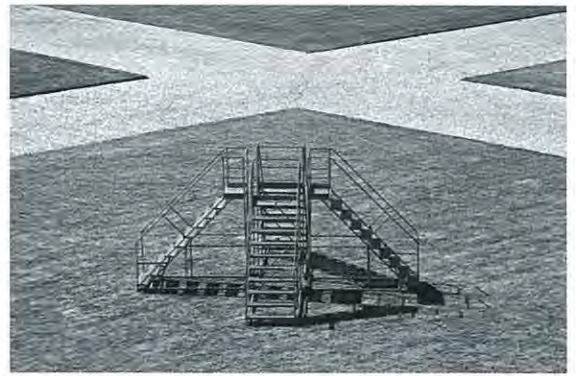
Cross during the summer and autumn, explored, if only vestigially, the idea of the *genius loci*, an indication that the entry by stealth of contemporary art into horticultural space is a growing neoclassical trend. At Ham the partnership between the National Trust and Arts Council England, Trust New Art, found its expression in 'Garden

of Reason'. Built during the reign of James I, Ham House, a secluded 17th-century courtier's mansion, is surrounded by a rare example of an intact Stuart garden divided up into both geometric open vistas and mysterious walled spaces, laced together by gravel walkways and clipped evergreen cones regulative of social behaviours – a *politesse* gleefully disrupted by Loki Music in their delightful video of parkour acrobatics performed in the grounds by local schoolboys.

At the rear, Alexandre da Cunha's work *Compass*, 2012, sat obliquely on the rectangular grass *plats*, a propositional structure made from four red metal library steps pushed together, suggesting research topics such as mapping and navigation. To climbers, *Compass* literally offered a new democratic platform, though ironically it gave little in the way of clear direction since, despite the estate's axial layout, it proved hard to grasp, especially for a first time visitor. Yet the 'Wild New Territories' trail at Camley Street, which snakes through ponds and deciduous copses, also disallowed a 360° view of the habitat, establishing instead contingent viewing protocols. Again Paglia sums this up neatly: 'walking in nature, we see, identify, name, recognise. This recognition is our apotropaion, that is our warding off of fear' – an irrational state of mind that is represented in Max Kimber's photograph *Foundling*, 2012, which poses a dead baby rabbit inside a curled up fox. It is certainly wishful thinking that a predator would go against its nature in this way, but the issue of cross-species metastasis is absolutely live, as British society hesitates over badger culls (designed to tackle bovine TB) in pilot areas of Gloucestershire and Somerset: farmers, government, High Court, the Badger Trust and hunt saboteurs lined up in a situation which, it has been predicted, could 'turn nasty'.

The decline of indigenous human populations (due to disease, forced labour and ethnic cleansing) in some post-colonial settings is the focus of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (enrolled in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe nations), whose work *Red Indian Genocide, Population Control?*, 2012, deployed a 30ft vinyl text banner to get his message across. Alma Tischler Wood's *Bird Box*, 2012, comprising 11 luxury nesting homes, some painted in gold leaf and made of wood scrounged 'from the skip of one of Britain's best known art schools', was installed on likely tree trunks at Camley Street. Likewise a DIY aesthetic ruled Simon Periton and Alan Kane's *eight sculptures*, 2012, sited in the mock Wilderness at Ham, a tenebrous hide-and-seek area of flowerbeds compartmentalised by hornbeam hedges. Standing in for several long-lost statues, their pop-art remedy filled the lacuna with no little wit; mounted on gaudily painted crates, the pieces included a pranged and knotted road sign, the severed transparent head of a goddess, shop window-type cut-outs (notably a rude Britannia), an Olympic discus thrower and a junkyard tribute to Anthony Caro.

In the Fountain Garden at Ham, Kathleen Herbert's *Theatre of Flora*, 2012, referenced tulip mania of the 1630s, a stock market bubble in which fortunes were made and lost overnight, the bulbs themselves representing commodities of early capital, their trade a perfect expression of the Baconian world view. Sampling documentary material from Dutch propaganda pamphlets – fragmentary statements such as 'our ancestors will no doubt laugh at the insanity of our age' broadcast via low tannoys dotted about – Herbert's piece mimicked a chamber drama, as overhead a flock of squawking green parakeets interrupted these timely ruminations. Tom Dale's *Banquet of Sound*, 2012, was positioned around the oldest surviving statue, a marble Bacchus holding up



Alexandre da Cunha
Compass 2012

Henry Bragg
The Surrey Hills 2012

a bunch of grapes which adorned the Cherry Garden, a highly metrical space of low box hedges and repeated lavender (the type of layout dismissed by Sir Thomas Browne in *The Garden of Cyrus*, 1658, as 'contrivance and herbery'). Dale's cast-concrete lecterns – forms suggestive of PowerPoint presentations – hemmed in this figure, maybe a proxy for the louche Charles II. Perhaps it was the sculptor's intention to reference the CABAL, a foreign affairs committee of monied politicians who met upstairs at Ham during the Restoration, each letter of the acronym corresponding to the first letter of its members' surnames.

Tom Freshwater, contemporary arts programme manager at the National Trust, has revealed how the organisation wants to use art to enlist a less posh, mass membership, the target being five million by 2020; at the same time he claims that the NT is 'being a bit more intelligent about the experiences that we create for people'. Other strands of Trust New Art include placements: 'The Residents', curated by Inheritance Projects, and extreme craft commissions in 'Unravelling the National Trust'. 'Garden of Reason' came literally from the grassroots up, a response by head gardener Sandra King and volunteer Penny Schwier to the Trust's Memorandum of Understanding with ACE, indicating that the NT is aware that to ignore the voice and perspectives of its staff would only damage the visitor's experience. That an organisation in charge of 4,000 historic buildings is learning that the success of big projects such as this one is not down to univocal corporate control is encouraging.



Michael Landy
Greater Plantain 2002

Hermit-in-residence Harold Offeh's *Arcadia Redesigned*, 2012, a seasonal consultancy in a glass-fibre grotto at the bottom of Ham's Kitchen Garden, was supplemented by a series of fantastical spectacles.

The Camley Street experience, co-curated by Ron den Daas and Kathy Kenny, depended less on ornamentation and more on signposting the viewer's involvement in a set of ecological relationships stretching way beyond the boundaries of the reserve itself. This deixis was achieved using somewhat in-your-face methods as opposed to the sophisticated museum-like referencing so evident at Ham, the occasional blurred announcement from the nearby railway station disturbing the calm. Gordon Cheung's performative sculpture underlined one of the key differences between the interventions at the two sites: process. A bull's skull placed inside a modified beehive showed organic life mineralised at the end of its detour, providing both décor and a handy void for honeycomb production. Hung in the Visitor Centre, Michael Landy's etching *Greater Plantain*, 2002, of an uprooted weed resistant to treading, was a reminder of the sheer ecological pressure this green oasis has undergone lately in the shape of the construction of the Eurostar terminal and the new Central St Martins campus in Granary Square. Ron Den Daas's 'Camley Street Series' of oil paintings provided a telling commentary on this upheaval. Retaining the loose vigour of sketches, they portrayed the fragile wetland snared between canal, railway lines and road: JCBs, workmen in hi-vis jackets alongside piles of gravel, the St Pancras clock tower glimpsed through bare trees, or narrow boats at dusk, geese touching down on the gloomy water. Bearing down on the issue of wounded territory was Henry Bragg's slightly speeded-up video, playing on an old Samsung TV perched right next to the Regent's Canal, as if it had been flytipped. *The Surrey Hills*, 2012, depicts bulldozers busily flattening non-biodegradable domestic waste at one of the UK's 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The coalition government's new national planning policy framework promises 'robust protection' for all such spots, but still leaves a loophole for highly profitable mineral extraction, granting contracts to companies with a very patchy record of restoring worked-out sites – or legacy, to use the buzzword. For example, site operator the Banks Group has been responsible for contributing 2m tonnes of soil and clay, by-products of their Shotton Surface Mine at Cramlington, to the Charles Jencks designed *Northumberlandia*, 2012, a colossal earth sculpture of a recumbent woman.

An introspective six-minute video *I know what it's like*, 2012, by Daphne Wright ran in the egg-shaped brick cavity of the Ice House at Ham, sourcing William Gouw Ferguson's dark painting *Medea casting Spells among Ruined Sculpture*, c1673, hung up at the main house in the private closet of its gifted 17th-century chatelaine and Royalist spy Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart and Duchess of Lauderdale. Featuring an elderly woman's personal recollections, the monologue used Wright's title as a refrain, disturbed by feral sounds and alphabet gaga – a descent into indissoluble madness. Ruth Proctor's *Weight of Air*, 2012, a pair of helium and air filled balloons in the porticoes flanking the front elevation of the house, found its gravity through alluding to Galileo's experiments weighing air; reminiscent too of Atlas supporting the globe (fine examples terrestrial and celestial could be found in Ham's library), an illustration that crops up in both William Cuninghame's *The Cosmographical Glasse*, 1559, with its advocacy of grid delineation and global co-ordinates, and Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World*, 1614, one of the most influential texts of the 17th century; Proctor's neo-suprematist spheres in effect turning the riverside entrance into a 3D frontispiece. On a separate page, hermit-in-residence Harold Offeh's *Arcadia Redesigned*, 2012, a seasonal consultancy in a glass-fibre grotto

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at the bottom of Ham's Kitchen Garden, was supplemented by a series of fantastical spectacles – the one at midsummer so badly hit by squally rain that Offeh had to turn it into a baroque disco workshop for 30 or so visitors under a row of evergreen oaks. 'Purcell meets Donna Summer' was his motto and the supporting cast, some donning yellow hats that imitated St John's Wort (a botanical anti-depressant), were coaxed through a work-out step-by-step in a swaying plant-people species of Surrey carnivalesque.

The NT took over curatorial control of Ham from the V&A in 1990, a brief subcontracted here to Tessa Fitzjohn. In 'Garden of Reason' most commissions came across as add-ons, their site specificity translated as a strength when it engaged with precise historical aspects of Ham House, yet somewhat weaker when it turned into a localised gimmick. Thankfully in this aristocratic setting there was no sign of the decking, loungers, pop-up gazebos and barbecues, the suburban back garden as extra room rather than quiet place for contemplation and refreshment. Ultimately, though, there was a slight disjunction between the contents of 'Garden of Reason' and their presentation under this title. The estate, which has undergone several bouts of restoration and still remains largely of its time, easily accommodated innovative work, yet it is doubtful that reason was the best hook on which to hang this show. The 17th century was a transitional one of overlapping epistemologies, shaken by the Copernican revolution while still wedded to a belief in alchemy – a fault line exposed in Isaac Newton's thought. Also, Albertian single-point rationalisation of space had steadily been undermined by the artifices of wit, or the 'curious perspective' in which it was understood how the eye's mobile focus, from paradigmatic close-up to syntagmatic long shot, altered meaning. Indeed, virtuoso Robert Hooke's popularisation of the optical microscope in *Micrographia*, 1665, and thus discovery of the living cell, had caused a sensation.

At Ham the idea of reason operating not just as a research tool but as a vital way of maintaining psychological equilibrium in a cosmos that had lurched on its medieval foundations could have been teased out more in the delimited space. At Camley Street, on the other hand, the decision to foreground the spatial issue of territory (rather than heritage) was an edgier move, forcing the visitor not only to consider their own footprint but also to give greater thought to the permeability of art and nature, zones tied together with aplomb in Canadian conceptualists Michael Morris & Vincent Trasov's images of *Colour Bar Research*, c1970, projected onto a screen beside the office. Nevertheless, 'Garden of Reason' was well indexed via a stapled plantsman's catalogue with reproductions of period surveys of Ham and a co-authored text with botanical pen-and-ink drawings by Louise O'Reilly, with background provided by garden historian Sally Jeffery. As a tour guide it was informative on prestige plants and how modern replica containers were based upon 'fragments of terracotta pots with goats' head decoration', and the fact that outside the wall to the west was a long straight path known as the Melancholy Walk. 'Step out through the French Windows and you are in the realm of Pan,' quips Tom Sharpe in his introduction to Picador's *The Best of Saki*; but vegetation and water can be invasive too, as in Abbas Akhavan's exhibition 'Study for a Garden', 2012, at the Delfina Foundation, London, where a floral carpet seems to be sprouting ivy and a sprinkler annoys guests – a futuristic essay in how to break down the binary opposites of homeland/abroad, cosy/sauvage. ■

Michael Morris & Vincent Trasov
Culture meets Nature, Image
Bank Colour Research
photograph taken in 1974

Abbas Akhavan
Fountain 2012



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