



Owlet vision in a blinding time

For the fifteenth anniversary of espace Labo, in collaboration with Ceel Mogami de Haas, we have imagined an exhibition project which will open this fall and will evolve until spring 2024.

Over the course of our discussions, the idea of giving shape to a collective exhibition project was born, which stems from Ceel's ongoing research on the cultural history of gardens. What particularly interests us is considering the garden as a political, social, ecological and artistic laboratory and a space of resistance and experimentation.

A series of exhibitions will take the shape of gardens and explore how gardens and resistance are related, how their histories intersect, and how their various occurrences in the visual arts illuminate this affiliation. This exhibition also recounts the different ways in which humans and non-humans approach this resistance.

The exhibition cycle, titled *Owlet vision in a blinding time* gathers a group of international artists who will engage with these different topics and whose works, once distributed in space, will form a garden of love and care.

Karen Alphonso & Ceel Mogami de Haas

The garden in the exhibition *Owlet vision in a blinding time* occupies two spatial categories: the physical space inhabited by the garden in the courtyard, as well as the representational space shown in the artworks, where the garden is often a motif for cultural pursuits that are not directly or literally connected to gardening or garden-making.

Since the garden dawns and dies with every season, halfway between the eternal and the immediate, Karen and I thought it'd be stimulating to design the exhibition in stages, according to the seasons. In fall, the gardener plants the bulbs that will bloom in spring. In our autumnal garden, among the tulips, irises, daffodils, and bluebells, we are also sowing concepts, ideas, intuitions, and desires, whose blossom will undeniably bear the promise of fruits in spring.

The first part of the exhibition (14 09 23 – 30 10 23) brings together works by Sarah Burger, Anne-Charlotte Finel, Vianney Fivel, Andreas Hochuli, Alec Mateo, Lou Masduraud, Alexandra Martens Serrano and Arnaud Sancosme.

Concurrently, a video program will be screened at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Cinéma Dynamo (17 10 23 – 29 10 23) with films by Mali Arun, Becket MWN & Alison Yip, Erika Roux, Margaret Tait, Mukerrem Tuncay and Matthew C. Wilson.

The second part of the exhibition will open on the first day of spring 2024 (21 03 24 – 21 04 24) and will rally the works of Azadbek Bekchanov, Yann Stéphane Biscuit, Sarah Burger, Becket MWN, Céline Burnand, Adrien Chevalley, Akiyoshi Dechenaux, Victor Delétraz, Basile Dinbergs, Vianney Fivel, Hunter Longe, Natasja Mabesoone, Alexandra Martens Serrano, Lou Masduraud, Becket MWN, Claire Van Lubeek, Arnaud Sancosme, Nolwenn Vuillier, Matthew C. Wilson, Alison Yip and Dan Zhu.

Exhibition Concept

The garden is the smallest parcel of the world, and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity.

Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*

I define the garden as the only territory where man and nature meet, in which dreaming is allowed. It is in this space that man can be in a utopia that is the happiness of his dreams.

Gilles Clément, *The Planetary Garden*

The other night, I was listening to a podcast with the gardener, writer and expert on the history of gardens, Marco Martella. He said many striking things. Listening to him felt like wandering in a beautiful garden, lush, verdant, safe, and generous. When asked if gardening had something to do with poetry, he cited Italian philosopher Rosario Assunto who said that a garden was nature turned into language and language turned into nature. Then he insisted that we should look at Renaissance gardens to learn how to deal with the ongoing climate crisis. He explained that before the *Quattrocento*, nature was considered either wild and potentially dangerous or anthropised and potentially absent. So early Renaissance scholars came up with a third proposition named 'third nature'. Third nature would be the place where humans and nature collaborate. In other words, a garden. Another moment I loved in this podcast is when Martella read an extract from Vita Sackville-West's poem 'The Garden' in which she writes that a garden is "a little world, a little perfect world, with owlet vision in a blinding time"¹. That's when I fell from my chair. So a garden can be a baby owl, a poem and a collaboration? Wow!

I was familiar with the interrelation of poetry and gardens since I had read Marianne Moore's poem entitled 'Poetry' in which she

1 Vita Sackville-West, *The Garden*, (London, 1946)

states that a good poem should be like walking through imaginary gardens (with real toads in them)². Earlier this year I also encountered the fascinating research of the landscape historian Michael Jakob who writes that “it is possible to read a garden”, and pleads for “a hermeneutic of the garden”. I was also accustomed to the notion of teamwork since reading Baptiste Morizot’s book *The Diplomats* in which he argues that we should rethink our interaction with other forms of life – his case study is wolves since their reappearance in anthropic territories, not gardens. Still, gardens and wolves may have a lot in common, I believe.

But the baby owl analogy blew my mind. What does it mean? I decided to dig further down, into the cultural history of gardens.

If gardens have always represented a fertile land for the imagination, everything suggests that it was during the second half of the 19th century that it achieved in Europe, in literature and art, a function significantly different from the other eras. With the development of industrialization, cities especially became too big, inhuman, and polluted. To counter this problem, parks and gardens were planned to give urbanites better and healthier living conditions. Gardens and parks (including zoological gardens) became shelters in tantalizing and overwhelming cities. As time passed, gardens naturally grew into places of resistance, defying an alienating mass society dominated by economical discourses, exploitation, extraction and domination.

Enclosed gardens (*hortus conclusus*) have at all times symbolized places of possibilities and experimentation that diverge from the social norm: Plato’s philosophy teaching takes place in a garden -the Academy; Horace makes his Hortus the meeting place of witches; illicit love often takes place in gardens -think of Cligès, the poem of Chrétien de Troyes when the knight Bertrand, looking for his sparrowhawk, finds two lovers in a garden:

Il s’agrippe aussitôt au mur
Et réussit à passer de l’autre côté.

2 Marianne Moore, *The Collected Poem of Marianne Moore*, (New York, 1961)

Sous l'ente il voit dormir ensemble
Fénice et Cligès, nue à nu.

Taking these observations as a starting point, we decided to develop an exhibition that would take the form of a garden, that would explore how gardens and resistance are deeply connected, how their histories intersect, and how their various occurrences in visual art enlighten this affiliation. This exhibition would also narrate how humans and non-humans approach this resistance. Multiple narratives would then unfold and tell bigger stories, of e.g., industrialization and overurbanization, global warming and extinction, the histories of art, architecture, and literature, etc. If gardens are places of knowledge, it is now very clear why Vita Sackville-West used this metaphor, for the owl is wisdom that can discern at all times, even in the dark of night.

For this show, we have invited a group of national and international artists who could reflect on these various topics and whose works, when distributed in space, would draft a garden of love and care. Because if Marianne Moore is right when she says that poetry is about “imaginary gardens, with real toads in them”, then poets and artists are definitely gardeners of ideas, and their garden is the form their reflections take in this exhibition.

Ceel Mogami de Haas, 2023

Feuille de Salle³

Sarah Burger

'Problems', the series of objects Sarah is presenting, are what we could call dormant sculptures, or suspended riddles⁴ so to say. They are made out of glue and soil, a blend of "anthropocenic" and natural elements. When binding together, these conflicting materials merge into a flexible although robust entity. For the exhibition's first iteration *Owlet vision in a blinding time*, Sarah proposes a performative sculpture to be traversed, crossed, and walked upon, so that a third element is added: usage. Usage is a physical alteration in time, which is probably the number one problem our civilization is trying to solve – and probably shouldn't.

Andreas Hochuli

In the Old French medieval poem *The Romance of the Rose*, the narrator recounts how [he] "saw a large and roomy garden, entirely enclosed by a high crenelated wall, sculptured outside and laid out with many fine inscriptions." Here the dichotomy between visible and invisible is undermined, for one cannot effectively see a garden enclosed by "a high crenelated wall", if not with the eyes of imagination. In Andreas' painting, 'Souvenir-écran', the slight tilt allows us to see over the walls into the garden (*hortus conclusus*). But the scenery is deceitful, for a seemingly dead tree occupies the

3 All these interpretations are entirely subjective. There is a multitude of ways to understand and approach an artwork. Feel free to trace your own path in this garden.

4 The etymology of the word riddle is pertinent in the context of Sarah's work. *Ridelle*, in Middle English, means a "coarse sieve" and as a verb means to "perforate (something) all over with many holes".



garden space, and induces us to imagine again, what a delightful sight it once used to be or soon will be.

Vianney Fivel

The sculpture titled 'A wall with a door with a wall' is a threshold, and therefore it enjoys a rare privilege, for doors look at both sides at once, they open on one side to the past, and on the other to the future. In a landscape, doors stand out, we notice them immediately, and we know that we will have to go through them. At Espace Labo, the wall fragments while the door frames the space and directs the gaze and irremediably the body beyond the exhibition space, past the small office, to the patio and the garden.

The title Vianney gave to his work conspicuously evokes Gertrude Stein which in turn calls forth this ever-enigmatic sentence from her book *Tender Buttons*: "The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning." These lines resonate so accurately with the becoming-garden of our exhibition.

Alexandra Martens Serrano

With her new work titled 'The Feral Fossil Garden Carpet', Alexandra delves into the fascinating history of the 6th century Persian garden-carpet "The Spring of Khosrow". The Spring of Khosrow Carpet was made for the Ctesiphon palace of the Sāsānian king Khosrow I who reigned from 531 to 579. Its design was a formalized garden with streams, paths, rectangular plots of flowers, and flowering trees. Water was represented by crystals, soil by gold, and fruits and flowers by precious stones⁵. When the Arabs captured Ctesiphon (AD 637), the carpet, which measured about 7.8 square metres, was cut into fragments and distributed to the troops as booty.

5 It is believed that this carpet became the model for subsequent garden-carpets which are traditionally designed as Persian gardens seen from above.

This new work examines how this type of carpet performs as both archive and heterotopia. Michel Foucault defines a utopia as a fundamentally unreal space and a heterotopia as a real space that shares a mythic dimension. Within a Foucauldian framework, gardens are clearly heterotopias. Ancient garden had an evident mythic dimension. This can be understood by the many literary references to the Elysian Fields, the Garden of Hesperides, and Homer's Garden of Alcinoüs, by the presence of shrines in Roman gardens, and architectural and decorative elements referencing classical myths. Heterotopias are "other" spaces that are often disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or transforming. Gardens for example encourage encounters that diverge from the social norm; not for nothing does Plautus make his *hortus* the gateway to illicit sexual access, for example.

Anne-Charlotte Finel

The video 'Jardins', with its coarse grain and dusky colors, exists ambiguously between figuration and abstraction, and plays with the tension of the familiarity of the places filmed and the strangeness of perception. A dense and tangled vegetation unfolds in an indistinct and dim space. After some time, the passing of the changing lights and the reflections of the railway wagons tell us that the granted garden is in fact a commonplace metro station, restored to a poetic and mystic dimension.

Alec Mateo

"Son muy vagos los recuerdos de los jardines... Al pasar sus umbrías la melancolía nos invade... Todas las melancolías tienen esencia de jardín..."⁶

6 "The memories of gardens are very vague... On passing their shady places, melancholy invades us... All melancholies include an essence of garden..."

Alec's aural works are compositions that blend the archival, the synthetic, the communal and the personal – understanding that this world of relations constitutes a testimony that is necessary sharing. I was hesitant to open with Federico García Lorca's voice, for it is in the poems of Marianne Moore that Alec has found stimulation recently. But Lorca's voice undoubtedly echoes in Alec's -like Moores' or Alec's brother's, grandmother's and grandfather's. If Vianney's work is a threshold, Alec's work titled 'On the Dog Rexy + Gardens' is a channel, leading to a landscape of peculiarities and analogies.

Lou Masduraud

"History has no memory of the great majority of gardens that have graced the earth over the millennia—gardens being by nature impermanent creations that only rarely leave behind evidence of their existence—nor should it. Gardens are not memorials."

Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens – An Essay on the Human Condition*, 2018

At first sight, Lou's 'Cabinet de contorsion (Danse macabre)' could resemble a "gisant" (a tomb effigy) canonising a biologist or an anthropologist, because the immense diversity of materials that were used to create the sculptures mimics the patterns and complex relationships found in nature and culture: homemade sugru paste, steel, shirts, pearls, nylon thread, feathers, medicine blister packs, shells, pebbles, iron wire coral, lithium drug bulbs, cotton thread, mother-of-pearl, nail polish. But Lou's work is not there to immortalize or defy the ravages of time. If anything, it exists to reenchant the present.



Arnaud Sancosme

Arnaud's quadriptych titled "Un petit monde parfait" resembles garden pickets used to fence off a plot of land and mark the limit between public and private space. Quite antagonistically, their work fabricates a fictional space that opens up more than it fences off.

I can't resist sharing with you the witty text Arnaud sent us when he elaborated on their ideas:

"The street sweeper cleans the pavements after Carnival and tries to get rid of the multitudes of confetti that flew in the air the night before. It runs along the private gardens lined with fences, a small enclosure having more or less succeeded in containing the party. But the noisy machine only throws the confetti into the air again, this time wet, a little shredded by its powerful jet, and this time they end up sticking here and there on the pickets.

What attracted me to this idea are the stigmas of celebration in public spaces which impose themselves on the edge of private spaces, gardens among others, which are so well demarcated. There is this feeling of "after party" which I also like, which I am tempted to mix with the history of painting, this feeling that I often have, of arriving "after the party" when all that remains are scattered images that cling here and there."

Vanessa Urben, Nathanaël Verrey

Vanessa works in a permaculture garden a little outside Geneva. She has prepared a multitude of drinks and bites whose ingredients all originated from it. She brings the garden back in the city and in our bodies.

Liste des œuvres

- 1. Arnaud Sancosme**
Un petit monde parfait
2023
Acrylique sur toile
(shaped canvas)
180 × 13cm chaque
quadriptyque
- 2. Andreas Hochuli**
Souvenir Ecran
2020
140 × 100 cm
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection.
- 3. Vianney Fivel**
A wall with a door with a wall
2023
fermacel
292 × 392cm
- 4. Lou Masduraud**
Cabinet de contorsion
(danse macabre)
2022
dimensions variable
- 5. Sarah Burger**
Problems
2023
colle, argile, terreaux,
et techniques mixtes
- 6. Alexandra Martens Serrano**
The Feral Fossil Garden Carpet
sillicon, pigments
2 × 100 × 79 cm
- 7. Anne-Charlotte Finel**
Jardins
2017
vidéo HD
couleur, musique de Voiski, 5mn
- 8. Alec Mateo**
*On the Dog Rexy +
Gardens' is a channel*
performance 30'
- 9. Vanessa Urben,
Nathanaël Verrey**
Combo kitchen
- 10. Yann le Floc'h**
Owlet
autocollant, enseigne

