

THE GARDEN AS A PERFORMANCE

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The aim of this article is to suggest that one should think of gardens in terms of performances and not necessarily in terms of architecture, painting, or poetry, for it is possible to show that, strangely enough, gardens seem to share certain features with performance arts. Such an approach seems fruitful since it allows one both to grasp the fact that gardens combine culture and nature and to underline the role of the latter, which cannot be reduced to a sheer medium as is traditionally done. The contention is that gardens should be treated more like a continuous, dynamic, partly planned process in which people can participate in different ways on a par with other non-human 'actors'. Moreover, the category of performance seems to offer a useful framework helping to solve certain problems inherent in traditional ways of thinking about gardens.

Gardens are usually analysed in terms of architecture (garden planning belongs to landscape architecture), painting (formal gardens are to be seen as a sort of perspective views, whereas landscape ones are to be appreciated in terms of the picturesque), and poetry (gardens are to be interpreted as texts). There are a few attempts at juxtaposing them with other arts, such as land art, these not so much by garden historians as by philosophers.¹ One of the advantages of such an approach is that it highlights what seems to be somewhat undervalued – even if it is obviously taken into account – by the traditional framework – namely, the dynamic character of nature and gardens, stemming from nothing other than their natural dimension.² There is, however, another useful point of reference which allows one to emphasize these aspects in an even more satisfactory way – namely, the categories of performance and performativity, two terms crucial for the so-called 'performative turn'. The performative approach is present in a variety of fields, including landscape studies which offer a suitable framework in which to analyse gardens.³ As David Crouch writes: 'this way of thinking about how we

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¹ For example, Thomas Leddy, 'Gardens in an Expanded Field', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28 (1988): 327–40, and Stephanie Ross, 'Gardens, Earthworks and Environmental Art', in *Landscape, Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Salim Kemal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 158–82.

² This dynamics is described by Donald Crawford, 'Nature and Art: Some Dialectical Relationships', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1983): 49–58.

³ The gardens can be thought of as the paradigm of landscape in general. On that subject, see, Rosario Assunto, *Ontologia e teleologia del giardino* (Milan: Guerini, 1994).

encounter space or landscapes [...] instead of examining the work of representation [...] examines moments of occurrence; things as they happen; connections between things that happen and how they feel and are understood and valued'. Performance and performativity are terms thanks to which one can see that 'things are not constrained by contexts [...] things can happen "anew": in the moments of being alive'. In a word, what these categories underline is the 'reconfiguring, or reconstitutive potential' of landscapes. Crouch writes:

The ideas surrounding performance's performativity demonstrate and explain how we, in our actions, intended and in the gaps of uncertainty between the intended and what and how things actually happen affect, lend character, to our surroundings in the broadest sense. The components of landscape, and the ways in which landscape works, are no exceptions.

He ends his article by stating: 'Landscape occurs.'⁴

In my opinion, the same holds true for gardens, so my aim here is to suggest that we should think of gardens in terms of performance and performativity. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, although it is not absent from garden studies,⁵ performativity is centred there more on garden practices than on the phenomenon of the garden itself, whereas I think that we should also make a 'performative turn' as far as the latter is concerned. Secondly, this turn is preferred because it can be demonstrated that gardens seem, strangely enough, to share certain features with other arts such as music and theatre, especially when their performing dimension is emphasized. I should therefore like to clarify what it means to conceive of gardens as performances or to state that they are like performances. The approach proposed in what follows is, I contend, fruitful, because it allows one to grasp in a phenomenological vein the essence of gardens whose primary constituent is that they combine culture and nature. As the idea of a totally artificial garden seems not compelling⁶ and, although it is clearly impossible to treat these terms straightforwardly as merely opposites, this dichotomy is necessary in order to describe gardens. Here, I do not depart from a widely shared opinion. But I think of gardens as places in which this dichotomy is overcome (at least in the Hegelian sense of *aufheben*), or, to put it in a

⁴ All the quotations in this paragraph are from David Crouch, 'Landscape, Performance, and Performativity', in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thomson, and Emma Warton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 119–28.

⁵ For example, Michael Conan, ed., *Performance and Appropriation: Profane Rituals in Gardens and Landscapes* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2007); David Crouch, 'Gardens and Gardening', in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, vol. 4, ed. Nigel Thrift and Rob Kitchin (Amsterdam: Elsevier), 289–93.

⁶ A contrary opinion appears, for example, in Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (London: Continuum, 2008), 114–27.

performative idiom, gardens are places which perform this dichotomy and overcome it. Moreover, the category of performance seems to be applicable since it offers a useful frame favouring not only enclosure of different perspectives but a way of reconciling them as well, and as a result it helps to solve certain problems inherent in traditional ways of thinking about gardens.

One more qualification is needed: the perspective assumed in the following will be mainly that of a visitor or, so to say, audience, not of the creator, that is landscape architect or gardener. Everything that will be said, however, seems also to apply to contemporary common yards or house gardens and to a large extent to the perspective of every person cultivating her or his own garden.⁷

Garden studies have quite a long history and cover a wide range of thoroughly researched topics – from the history of botany to social and gender matters.⁸ It is then noteworthy that the field from which the general interest in gardens sprang, garden aesthetics, at least in its philosophical dimension, seems nowadays to be somewhat underdeveloped. In the past 20 years, however, one has witnessed an increasing interest in ‘philosophy of the garden’ or ‘philosophy of gardening’,⁹ which would doubtless have pleased the Italian philosopher, Rosario Assunto, who in the 1960s and 1970s pioneered this kind of approach.¹⁰ There are probably different motives behind the philosophical rehabilitation of gardens (the revival of aesthetics of nature or non-art-centred aesthetics, just to name two¹¹). But what is more important is that it seems to go along with an intuition generally shared by garden historians that such definitions as the one offered by, for example, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, stating that a garden is a ‘plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers, vegetables, or trees are cultivated’,¹² may be correct, but are definitely incomplete since they do not pinpoint the essence. For the sake of argument, let us compare that definition with the following, included in the Florence Charter:

The historic garden is an architectural composition whose constituents are primarily vegetal and therefore living [...] Thus its appearance reflects the perpetual balance between the cycle of the seasons, the growth and decay of nature and the desire of the artist and craftsman to keep it permanently unchanged. [...] As the expression of

⁷ The gardener’s perspective is beautifully described by Karel Čapek in *The Gardener’s Year*, trans. Geoffrey Newsome (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁸ One of the most recent and comprehensive studies is Michael Leslie and John Dixon Hunt, eds., *A Cultural History of Gardens*, 8 vols. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁹ David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Dan O’Brien, ed., *Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone; Cultivating Wisdom* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

¹⁰ Assunto, *Ontologia e teleologia*.

¹¹ See footnote 30.

¹² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. ‘garden’, <http://www.britannica.com/Ebchecked/topic/225726/garden>.

the direct affinity between civilisation and nature [...], the garden thus acquires the cosmic significance of an idealised image of the world [...]. By reason of its nature and purpose, a historic garden is a peaceful place conducive to human contacts, silence and awareness of nature.¹³

This statement is echoed in the opinion of one of the most prominent garden specialists, who says that what is essential to gardens is that they reflect far better than other arts (or cultural phenomena) the human condition that is suspended between culture and nature.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the problem with a definition like the Florentine is that although it fits the way garden theorists conceive of gardens it is highly ambiguous, if not elusive. Although gardens are a well-defined and institutionally legitimized field of research, some academics believe that they are quite different from all others. James Elkins states: 'Garden history, unlike the history of painting, sculpture, and architecture, has no conceptual foundations. It lacks the elements of scholarly and critical consensus: a conventional set of interpretive methods, agreed-upon leading terms, ruling metaphors, and descriptive protocols.'¹⁵

In sum: on the one hand, the garden as such is a significant, universal, and – one would think – well-known phenomenon, but on the other, it lacks 'conceptual foundations': This particular ontological and epistemological status of gardens was expressed in another way by Foucault who called them one of the most important examples of heterotopias, or 'other spaces', which cannot be defined in terms used to describe 'normal' spaces because they question everyday categories.¹⁶

The core of contemporary 'garden aesthetics' seems to lie in defining the 'garden-essence'. And it is problematic: can we allow such essentialism? Prima facie, the answer should be negative, for we cannot ignore formal, historical, cultural, or geographical dissimilarities, so we can at best talk of 'family resemblances' amongst different gardens. In spite of that there seems to be a feature uniting them at a deep structural level, which is the fact – as unanimously shared opinion has it – that they are situated between art (or, in broader terms, culture) and nature. And this is where the otherness of gardens stems from.

The art-nature relation may be understood in two ways: either we treat gardens as phenomena in which art and nature overlap, so gardens are 'art-and-nature';

¹³ Historic Gardens (The Florence Charter), December 15, 1982, http://www.icomos.org/charters/gardens_e.pdf.

¹⁴ John Dixon Hunt, 'Gardens: Historical Overview', in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 272.

¹⁵ Quoted in Jan K. Birksted, 'Landscape History and Theory: From Subject Matter to Analytic Tool', *Landscape Review* 8 (2003): 4–5.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–27.

or we treat them as phenomena placed outside the realms of the two, which means that they are 'neither art nor nature'. For garden historians, the first solution seems more plausible – gardens are particular artworks in which nature is just one of their elements or expressive media, like stone in garden fountains or bricks in architectural follies. For philosophers, however, this seems problematic, since – as many think – there is too much nature in gardens to treat them as standard artworks. Incidentally, they are at the same time and quite rightly apt to believe that there is too much art inherent in them to think of them in terms of nature or, rather, pristine nature.¹⁷ As a result, gardens are again a kind of shaky ground, lacking conceptual foundations.

That a garden is not pristine nature is beyond question, for there is always a person behind it: it is up to her to plan, set, and cultivate it in a manner that in many respects resembles the way one cultivates a field of grain. In a word, gardens are artefacts based in one way or another on nature. This means that there can be no totally artificial gardens devoid of what we commonsensically conceive of as nature or – to put it differently – that gardens are humanized pieces of nature even if the extent of humanization may differ a lot, ranging, for example, from formal gardens to landscape ones (or even *jardins trouvés*). And even if there is nothing uncommon in their being artefacts, so to say, built of nature, the way they use it is far from obvious. This is why the nature inherent to gardens makes them non-standard art, so non-standard that philosophers feel obliged to prove that they are artworks at all.¹⁸

It is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the genealogy of the opinion that the artistic status of gardens is doubtful, but it should be enough to mention just one name, that of Hegel, for whom gardens were too close to nature and not permeated by the Spirit enough to be regarded as works of art. So, in a way, the philosophical enfranchisement (to use Arthur Danto's expression) of gardens is tantamount to taking a step towards pre-Hegelian aesthetics.¹⁹

This move, however, is not unproblematic. On the one hand, there are theorists who define gardens in terms of painting (Kant) or in terms of poetry (Horace Walpole), but, on the other hand, historians tend to associate them with architecture, which is presented as their most straightforward historical and cultural context. Nevertheless, any description of gardens in terms of these arts – either taken individually or together – seems to be highly unsatisfactory, even

¹⁷ Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 21–62.

¹⁸ Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Stephanie Ross, *What Gardens Mean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁹ See Richard Whittaker, 'A Conversation with Tom Leddy: Is This a Garden?', *works & conversations*, November 21, 1999, <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=41#sthash.OVSVi3Gb.dpuf>.

if justified from a historical perspective. Such a description results in a reductive enclosing of gardens in a grid of concepts offered by art-centred aesthetics that remain blind to those aspects that can be grasped by the aesthetics of nature.

Why, then, are gardens artefacts whose artistic status is questionable?²⁰ (1) They are not objects standing in front of us like paintings; rather, they surround us, which means that we are not spectators contemplating them from a distance, but we enter them or immerse ourselves in them. In a word, we participate in them. (2) Gardens are not stable; they constantly change over the years, decades, seasons, according to the circular rhythm of biological processes regulating annual growth and decay, as well as according to the linear passage of time. It is therefore difficult – if possible at all – to decide what the original or finished shape of the garden is or was. (3) Gardens have a conspicuous phenomenal dimension, for such factors as light, temperature, and weather play a crucial role in them. These factors are not external elements like lighting or temperature conditions in a museum, which are external with regard to the works of art on display; they are internal, that is, belonging to gardens. As a result, it is unthinkable to enter the same garden twice: not only will the plants be older, but also what we experience will be different because, for example, the way sunlight falls will be different. (4) Gardens are to a large extent unpredictable because of the presence of nature, which cannot be submitted to full control, hence the creator – whoever it might be: the architect or a cohort of anonymous gardeners – cannot know exactly what the result will be. Unlike architecture, gardens are – to use Schiller's phrase – living forms to which one cannot subject oneself. (5) As far as the question of authorship is concerned, we may ask whether instead of treating nature as a medium of human expression similar to paint or stone we should not treat it as one of the co-creators. This leads to another problem: (6) What is the meaning of 'garden'? Is it what was planned by the landscape architect or what came out of the interaction between him and nature? Or is it perhaps what we feel regardless of the creator's intentions? (7) Last but certainly not least, gardens far more than other arts are multisensory in the sense that although sight is the leading sense, when taken alone it turns out to be insufficient since we experience gardens through our bodies.

Now, if we – as it is traditionally done – take painting, poetry, or architecture as our points of reference, then we can state in the Platonic vein that gardens lack

²⁰ I gather together here different arguments raised by David E. Cooper, Mara Miller, and Stephanie Ross, just indicating these features before elaborating on them later in the article. I would also emphasize that I do not intend to establish whether gardens are artworks or not, so I do not introduce the category of performance in order to prove that they are. Nonetheless, it is in the course of the discussion of the artistic status of gardens that the essential features of gardens come to the foreground.

an artistic essence, since not only do they have no structure typical of the arts, but they are also too ephemeral, changeable, and unstable to be analysed in any way and thus to have any 'conceptual foundations'. But if we put gardens aside for a moment and ask whether there is an art defined by these features, what comes to mind is, generally speaking, the performing arts or performance arts, by which we mean 'those art forms in which, as we would normally put it, our access to, and appreciation of, *works* (as receivers) is at least in part mediated by *performances of those works*'.²¹ Clear examples are music, theatre, and twentieth-century performance art.

A German performance theorist, Erika Fischer-Lichte, points out the following features as defining theatrical performances: there are no contemplative spectators, only immersed participants (contemplation is a sort of participation, no better than other possibilities); performances are not stable: every time a performance is performed it is different. They have a strong phenomenal aspect, because such factors as light, space, and time are decisive for what the audience participates in; this means that they are not merely external or accessory. Performances are multisensory, for they stress bodily interactions and reactions, and this is one of the ways their meanings are produced. What is more, they blur the traditional distinction between author and actor or creator and audience, since all of them co-create and re-create the performance time and again. It is therefore wrong to treat actors as vehicles of the author's ideas. As a result, performances are rather unpredictable and have no fixed meaning.²²

The foregoing theory is quite radical, for it largely reduces theatrical performances to unrepeatable, unique events (even if they follow a general and stable scheme), whereas why and how these events refer to their origin (text or scenario) is far less important. Nevertheless, despite being radical and thus contentious for some, the theory is helpful, since it stresses what other, more moderate theories notice, too – namely, that with arts such as theatre or music it is erroneous to treat an actor's or musician's performance as something that

²¹ David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 207. One objection can be dealt with right away. In the light of the theory stating that every art can be seen as performance, when we assume that gardens are works of art, ruminating on whether they can be treated as performances may seem pointless. Stating that every art is performance, however, does not mean that all arts are performances in the same sense. A garden, then, is closer to music or theatre conceived of as performances than to painting or literature seen in this manner.

²² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2008); by fixed meaning, I understand here a meaning which is conferred to an artwork by its creator in the moment of creation and which remains unaltered throughout time and as such is privileged over other meanings that may be possibly conferred on it by the audience.

serves only as a vehicle for the dramatist's or composer's intended work of art.²³ Contrary to those less 'extravagant' theories that accept the inevitable discrepancies among the performances, but still see them as the same work of art performed in different contexts, Fischer-Lichte's conjecture underscores the autonomous character of the performances. Every time a play, a composition, or a dance is performed, we as the audience participate in an event which has its particular structure thanks to which we know that this is such and such a play, composition, or dance. At the same time, however, every repetition of this structure is different just because it is a repetition, and therefore each time we watch a play, a dance, or listen to music, we participate in a new event, which is itself unrepeatable. To put it differently, Fischer-Lichte treats as a general rule what the more moderate theories reserve for improvised performing arts.

In the light of what has just been said, we may venture that gardens are like performances. If we agree on the above characteristics of gardens on the one hand and of performances on the other, we can see a striking similarity between the two. But what does this similarity tell us about gardens? Are we entitled to claim that what is at stake here is something more than a superficial, maybe even misleading, comparison? Is it then legitimate to suggest that we think of gardens in terms of performances or state that they are like them? This analogy obviously begs clarification.

My intention is not to convince anybody that gardens are in some literal or strong sense performances, so my thesis is not, strictly speaking, ontological. It is more epistemological in the sense that I would suggest that we should change the category under which we think of gardens and experience them. So, my aim is a modest one: it is about conducting a thought experiment that consists of changing our perspective and trying to treat gardens as if they were (artistic) performances, bearing in mind any possible shortcomings of such an analogy.²⁴ In other words, we can treat the expression 'gardens as performances' as a metaphor that, given the common features shared by its two terms, seems to be well grounded and has pretty strong explanatory force.

Such an approach may at first seem paradoxical, if not implausible, for it juxtaposes two domains that could not be any more divergent from each other (human actions versus physical objects, events versus places, and so forth); nevertheless, it is well rooted in the tradition we are discussing. It does not differ

²³ For example, James R. Hamilton, *The Art of Theatre* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

²⁴ What I will not take into consideration while discussing gardens as performances is whether gardens' creators intentionally treat them as performances similar to theatrical plays or pieces of music or spaces shaped more by nature than by humans, for example, Herman von Pückler-Muskau in the nineteenth century and Gilles Clément today.

much from when one compares gardens with architecture, painting, poetry, or land art, since whenever a philosopher states that gardens are like, say, paintings, he or she resorts to a metaphor, too. As a result one may grasp some aspects of gardens, which would otherwise have remained unnoticed. For example, comparing them with architecture makes us notice that gardens are spaces to inhabit, talking about painting stresses the visual aspect of gardens so that they can be experienced as painted landscapes, and, finally, treating gardens as poems suggests that we try to decode their hidden meanings. What we are offered in such cases is an informative comparison that, nonetheless, suppresses other aspects that then seem to be quite irrelevant, depending on the will of a gardener who may, but does not have to, include them in his project (for example, olfactory sensations which are always present, but usually neglected as a mere inevitable background except for, say, rose gardens or scented gardens; the same holds true for the presence of animals). Now, comparing gardens with performances follows in the footsteps of the older perspectives, only that it changes the point of reference.

Artistic performances as understood by Fischer-Lichte do not seem to be any more distant from gardens than buildings, pictures, or writing. If they appear so, it is rather because of the bias of the tradition rather than of any structural resemblances joining gardens with buildings, pictures, and so forth. Let me repeat: in both cases we coin a metaphor whose task is to allow one better to come to terms with the essence of gardens. One opts for metaphors that shed light on gardens or broaden our view of them.

There is little doubt that the traditional way of conceiving of gardens turned out to be fruitful if for no other reason than because it used to inform landscape architects' minds and was thus embodied in existing gardens. At the same time, the suggested new approach does not exclude the traditional comparisons. It does not impose a single, supposedly adequate way of experiencing a garden as is the case in the traditional approach which tells us that English landscape gardens are mainly to be looked at for they are intended to offer a sequence of views. It offers instead a general framework within which any manner of experiencing it fits. On this ground, an English garden can conceivably therefore be experienced only visually, but it is likewise possible to experience it some other way which perhaps does not meet its creator's requirements but is no worse for it, just different.

What is more, the performance metaphor underlines something that the other metaphors used to neglect or push to the margin – namely, the presence of nature. Although, as we have seen, gardens are conceived of as being between art and nature, the latter's importance is likely to be highly reduced. Philosophically speaking, it counts only as a factor effectively undermining the artistic status of gardens. As a result, gardens do not quite fit within art-centred aesthetics, even

if their artefactual (and in most cases artistic) character is hard to deny. But it seems erroneous to grant nature only a negative role. Even if we are not inclined to think of gardens in terms of ecosystems, ecology, and the like, we appreciate nature in them, and a part of the pleasure of visiting a garden or cultivating one's own stems from the fact that one can experience nature there. Were we to find out that a garden is totally artificial (say, of plastic), we would first, I think, be terribly disappointed, and, second, it would influence our experience, behaviour, interpretation, and so forth.²⁵ It seems, then, that notwithstanding the tradition as well as the gardeners' or architects' intentions possibly stemming from it, we should seriously take nature into consideration. This is tantamount to seeing it as a positive factor, that is, not so much something that questions their artefactual (artistic) status (which makes them at best non-standard artworks) as something that adds a particular dimension to them.²⁶

What gardens owe to nature is their dynamic, changeable, and temporal character, and they can therefore be called 'dynamic objects' as defined by David E. W. Fenner. According to him, static aesthetic objects 'are designed to stay in the forms imposed upon them by their creators for as long as possible. This list would include many buildings [...] and the vast majority of paintings.'²⁷ On the other hand, 'one can talk about dance and other performing arts as being inherently dynamic [...]. They involve movement and change through time and through action.'²⁸ Further on, he divides dynamic objects into two categories: dynamically closed objects, that is, those which have 'a clear beginning, a clear ending, and a clear, logical (to use that term in its broadest sense), to some degree predictable, development', and dynamically open objects, which do not have such a structure and are to a large extent unpredictable.²⁹ The paradigm of the latter is natural objects. It seems that gardens belong to the second category, although they have, as it were, a structure which is nothing less than what is included in their project or plan created by an architect. As a consequence, gardens are an interesting topic for environmental aesthetics.³⁰ Incidentally, gardens being an

²⁵ Immanuel Kant notes this in a well-known passage of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 179 (AA 5:299). See also Whittaker, 'Conversation with Tom Leddy'.

²⁶ This particular dimension is thoroughly analysed by garden conservation specialists, mainly from Italy. See, for example, Maurizio Boriani and Lionella Scazzosi, eds., *Il giardino e il tempo: Conservazione e manutenzione delle architetture vegetali* (Milan: Guerini, 1992).

²⁷ David E. W. Fenner, 'Environmental Aesthetics and the Dynamic Object', *Ethics and the Environment* 11 (2006): 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

³⁰ See, for example, Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2007).

example of a dialectical relationship between art and nature,³¹ should be analysed both by art-centred and environmental aesthetics.

It seems that thinking of gardens in terms of performance favours grasping the dynamic character of gardens without losing their structure stemming from their creator's intentions. In order to clarify the analogy being discussed, we need to answer at least two questions: who performs and what is performed? In order to do that, we may note that in the plastic arts, such as painting, there are two figures involved: creator and beholder, whereas in the performing arts there is a creator, there are performers, and there is the audience.³² We may add that the creator and the performer might be the same person as well as the performer and the beholder. Now, if we think of gardens in terms of the plastic arts, we treat them as paintings created at a specific moment in time by a landscape architect (we obviously do not take into consideration garden workers) who, moreover, coded some meanings in it. Our aim, then, is to appreciate and read them just as we do with paintings. But when we say that gardens are like performances, we insert them in the second grid according to which we have a creator of the garden, performers of the garden, and audience members participating in the garden. Can this be done?

In my opinion, it can be done, in two slightly different ways. First, we may compare gardens to music, theatre, or even dance. Given that performance arts are most widely seen as engaging people treating a garden as a performance art may lead us to describe by analogy the human relations to it. On the one hand, there is the landscape architect who is the creator but not so much of the garden itself as of its project or plan. In many respects, a plan of a garden is, then, similar to a musical score or a scenario, and the landscape architect is like a composer who, notwithstanding her intentions, will never see her piece accomplished, performed once and for all. On the other hand, there are predominantly anonymous garden workers (whose role is often neglected and sentenced to oblivion) who correspond to musicians playing in an orchestra. Finally, there are visitors who are like an audience. Such an analogy reduces animate and inanimate nature to the role of a passive instrument which is manipulated by people and therefore is only a vehicle for their ideas.

This kind of approach treating only human beings as active, however, is problematic. This can be readily seen when we compare a garden to theatre. Even if one may agree that the garden planner is like the playwright or the director (in

³¹ Crawford, 'Nature and Art'.

³² Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2005), 149–63. Graham emphasizes that in the performing arts the attendance of the audience has a participatory and not contemplative character.

some cases it is conceivable that it is the owner of the garden who corresponds to the playwright) and that the visitors are very much like the audience, one is unlikely to state that the garden workers are the actors and that nature is a reservoir of stage props. Were we to maintain this analogy, we should treat the natural elements of the garden as actors and the garden workers as technical staff, while such factors as weather, temperature, and light would play an analogous role to that of, say, stage lighting.³³ We have thus come to the second way of understanding the metaphor that gardens are performances. The main difference between comparing a garden to music and to theatre consists in that the second comparison assigns agency to nature.³⁴ We can push this metaphor further and compare the garden even to dance: the garden architect would be the choreographer (garden workers, then, would be 'subchoreographers'), whereas the plants would be like dancers acting in the way intended by the gardeners but still remaining autonomous in the sense that the principle of their activity is hidden in them and that the gardeners have to refer to it.³⁵

It seems that comparing a gardener to a composer, a director, or even a choreographer is far less questionable than treating animate and inanimate natural elements of the garden as actors or dancers. The usual objection that such an approach raises is that agency is associated with the intentionality that non-human beings lack. Incidentally, this may be the reason why gardens are not seen as performances involving human and non-human performers. Nevertheless, agency need not be linked with intentionality, as many studies have recently proved, so treating plants as agents is conceivable.³⁶

In my opinion, we cannot grasp the essence of the garden unless we assume this anti-anthropocentric perspective and treat natural elements of the garden as performers. It is only now that we can fully treat gardens as performances, in particular as conceived by Fischer-Lichte. This, however, implies another shift – namely, that not only nature should be treated as a performer, but visitors should be treated as such too, given that they participate in the garden. In this case, there is no passive, distanced audience whatsoever as implied by traditional art-centred aesthetics. As a result, a garden turns out to be something co-created by its visitors in the same sense in which an audience co-creates the performance, for

³³ Other elements that are neither artworks in a garden nor nature can reasonably be thought of as technical facilities analogous to those found in theatre.

³⁴ There are, however, perspectives (see footnote 36) according to which an instrument can be thought of as active.

³⁵ See Crawford, 'Nature and Art', 50.

³⁶ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Owain Jones and Paul J. Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 47–71.

example, by their reactions and interpretations. One qualification is needed here: none of this means that the garden architect and nature are in opposition. Instead, they form what Crawford called a 'dialectical tension', which will be described below. But no matter which solution we opt for, a garden is more like a performing art than like a painting.

The above suggestion may sound paradoxical, but, I think, it is only because we are used to a certain – predominantly modern or rather eighteenth-century – way of thinking of gardens in terms of painting or architecture or even literature. In parentheses, we may note that it is not only the fate of gardens; sometimes we treat music in the same manner, and again this is the eighteenth-century heritage.³⁷

Anyway, what does it mean to treat a garden in terms of, say, painting? It means that we find it predominantly visual – a garden is a series of subsequent views that all together combine into a fixed shape possessing some fixed meaning conferred on it by the architect and coded through a passive medium, nature. Although nature is a necessary element in the garden, because of its untamedness it is conceived of as having detrimental effect, for example, it can physically destroy the architect's project.

Now, our everyday experience, which is reflected in these arguments against gardens being standard artworks, tells us something different: gardens are not only visual, but are also made of everything that might be smelled, heard, and touched. Whenever we are in a garden, we are immersed in it in the sense that we are not in front of it as if occupying a distanced standpoint, but are surrounded by it. Following the argument, which Ronald Hepburn included in his now classic article, we may think of ourselves as belonging to it.³⁸ In a word, we are aesthetically engaged in it.³⁹ Concerning the meaning of gardens, we can, obviously, muse on what the architect could have wanted to convey, but, on the other hand, it is equally obvious that what counts is what a garden expresses to us here and now, and not only, as it were, at a discursive level, but at an emotional one as well.⁴⁰ In other words, what characterizes gardens is their atmosphere,

³⁷ Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 153–54.

³⁸ Ronald Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2004), 43–62.

³⁹ Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Marc Treib, ed., *Meaning in Landscape Architecture and Gardens* (New York: Routledge, 2011); the present meaning – mainly the emotional one, which can be likened to the German idea of *Stimmung* – comes to the foreground, when we treat gardens as events that take place 'here and now'; what is more, gardens can be understood by everyone, even those who are not competent enough to grasp a possible historical meaning. See, for example, Francesco Fariello, *Architettura dei giardini* (Rome: Ateneo, 1985).

which is partly planned by their creators, but also partly emerges from the features of the garden regardless of their intentions, and exists only inasmuch as it is actually sensed by someone.⁴¹ This is one of the reasons why gardens can be defined 'psychotopias'.⁴² The category of performance which seems, thus, to fit the everyday idea of what constitutes a garden is the most suitable. At the same time, this category seems so vast and flexible that it even covers more reductive approaches such as those that treat gardens as paintings. Visual contemplation ceases to be the dominant approach, and turns into just one way of participating in a garden. And presumably it is not the most illuminating or rewarding one.

What does it mean, then, to think of gardens in terms of performances? What does it mean as visitors to treat them as performances? First of all, it means to stress their event-like character. Going to a garden is not like going to a museum. A visit to a museum is an event focused on the exhibited art objects, which are normally not events themselves (unless they are artistic performances), but are more or less stable objects. Instead, when we visit a garden we participate in an event gathering ourselves and nature within a frame offered by the garden's creator. Or we should rather say that it is our visit that creates an event to the same extent to which it is created by the elements of the garden and everything that happens to them.⁴³ As soon as we enter a garden, we become a part of it, so we experience it as an audience that has come to participate in a performance. Obviously, participation may assume multiple forms: we may only contemplate visual aspects, ignoring other dimensions, we may stroll around or play games, but, equally, we may mow the grass or prune trees.⁴⁴ One way or another, given the event-like character of gardens, we cannot visit the same garden twice, although we obviously can enter as many times as we like the 'plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers, vegetables, or trees are cultivated', to cite again the definition of the garden offered by *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Second of all, and in relation to the above point, it means seeing gardens as constant 'processes' or 'actions' performed by nature and partially planned by

⁴¹ Cooper, *Philosophy of Gardens*, 47–53.

⁴² Tim Richardson, 'Psychotopia', in *Vista: The Culture and Politics of Gardens*, ed. Noël Kingsbury and Tim Richardson (London: Lincoln, 2005), 131–60.

⁴³ Article 4 of the 'Charter of Florence' reads: 'The architectural composition of the historic garden includes its water, running or still, reflecting the sky.' This suggests that even the sky is part of the garden.

⁴⁴ The problem here is how to judge different behaviours: can they be judged as adequate, acceptable, and so forth? What criterion should we use? We may ask the same questions when we think of the reactions of the audience as elements of the performance: when watching a theatrical play, are people entitled to leave (because, for example, they do not like what they are looking at) even if they can thus destroy the performance? Is their reaction a part of the performance? Following Fischer-Lichte's theory, we should give a positive answer, which does not mean that their reaction is acceptable.

humans in which we start to participate as visitors. The category of performance allows one to grasp the temporal aspect of gardens. Describing gardens as processes, one treats any stage in their history as equally important as other stages, giving priority to none of them. All the changes that a garden undergoes – except for intentional reconstruction or the changing of its form – are due to the passage of biological time and have either a cyclical or a linear character. These constant changes are inherent to any garden, even those consisting solely of inanimate nature, for example, Zen gardens. This is another reason – which this time has nothing to do with the event-like character of gardens – why we cannot enter the same garden twice.⁴⁵ Given that these processes are human-independent, nature – understood broadly not only as flora, but also as fauna, weather conditions, geology, climate, and so forth⁴⁶ – is something more than just the material used by the architect or gardener. Nature is more like an actor in a play or a dancer in a dance. Lastly, it implies that there is no fixed meaning of a garden, in the sense that a garden is not a medium conveying a meaning established by the architect or gardener – its meaning is at best created individually on the basis of his or her suggestions.

This approach seems fruitful for other reasons, too. It helps one to grasp the fusion of art and nature, doing justice to the latter, which is no longer treated as a necessary but somewhat negative (or at best neutral) element. Finally, treating gardens as performances allows one to see that they are what they are thanks to a variety of creative moments born out of owner-architect, architect-garden workers, garden workers-flora, flora-visitors relations, to name only a few, which are analogous to those with which we are familiar in theatre, music, or dance (for example, conductor-musician, musician-instrument, and director-actors, actors-props, actor-audience). Given that so many agents are responsible for the meaning (or atmosphere) of the garden, it is impossible to say which meaning should be treated as privileged. What is more, if we assume that gardens

⁴⁵ The garden is usually compared to paintings or architecture understood in a traditional way as objects, that obtain their specific shape and meaning in the moment of creation. As a result, every change amounts to losing their original characteristics and as such is external to their essence. Despite the fact that contemporary artistic practice and theory tend to change this perspective, it is the traditional approach that dominates in garden studies.

⁴⁶ Here the question is whether we should restrict the notion of nature's garden performance to such benign aspects as hopping singing birds, fluttering butterflies, gentle breeze, and late summer warmth, while excluding pests or hurricanes as factors that only destroy a garden. It is, however, possible to think of the latter ones as participating in gardens similarly to someone who does everything to spoil the performance he or she is attending and as a result he or she co-creates it, even if the final result will only be a 'spoilt performance'; incidentally, the destructive potential of nature is one of the problems that garden conservation has to deal with.

are event-like, their meaning is temporary and changeable and at best created individually on the basis of the architect's suggestions. This does not mean that past meanings are cancelled; on the contrary – they exist as past ones and form the foundation for new ones.

In sum, it is only when we think of gardens in terms of performances that we can obtain 'conceptual foundations' thanks to which we can analyse gardens in their phenomenality and changeability, but at the same time take into account their long history, the different uses they were put to, the variety of interpretations, and so on. In a word, if we agree – as we should – that what is characteristic of gardens is their spatiotemporality, then treating them as performances seems to be a solution devoid of contradictions.

There is still another reason why the suggested perspective seems illuminating. It favours questions that are typical of the performing arts, but are less obvious in the plastic arts. The main question is no longer whether we manage to decode the meaning conveyed by the creator of the garden, but rather whether the performance in which we participate is in a way authentic. Do we, and does nature, perform in the way it was planned by the architect or gardener? What are the limits of the correct performance? Can we cross them, and if so, how far can we go? Such questions allow one to reconsider the historical dimension of gardens which are re-created or even re-enacted by each and every visitor on each and every visit.

One final remark seems relevant. Even if one agrees that it is important to stress the dynamic character of gardens, one may ask whether there are no better, less controversial candidates for metaphorical reference than performance. The twentieth century abounded in artistic projects that stressed art's changeability, temporality, and so forth, as well as turning audiences into co-creators, for example, happenings, installation art, and interactive art. Why, then, should one choose performance? The answer is twofold.

On the one hand, were we to think of gardens in terms of these genres, we would well grasp the processual dimension of the former and the fact that they never assume their final form, but we would again reduce nature to the role of sheer medium that cannot cross the borders imposed upon it by its creator. What is more, although comparing gardens to installation art grants nature an active role, it decidedly reduces the degree of unpredictability characteristic of gardens. These are predictable only at a fairly general level (the level of the 'natural course of events'), which means that the margin of what cannot be foreseen, that is, the sphere where the agency of nature comes to the fore, is large. In this respect, what comes to mind is likening gardens to aleatory art. This analogy, however, also has its limitations, for the role that the pure case usually plays in gardens is rather

inconspicuous. Gardening is, after all, an activity that involves foreseeing or at least imagining the future (even if the risk that the expectations will not be fulfilled is always high).

On the other hand, there is another sense of the term 'performance', which is useful in the context, and far less important in the abovementioned genres.

David Davies states that artistic performances are 'of a distinctive kind, in virtue not of their manifest properties per se, but of the way in which their manifest properties are used by performers to articulate the content of their performances. Artworks in general, and artistic performances in particular, call for a distinctive kind of "regard" from receivers in virtue of how they are intended to work.'⁴⁷ In other words, the action as performance remains unaltered, but at the same time gains another dimension: it is about how the action is carried on and about how this 'how' influences the action itself. In a similar vein, Roger Scruton observes that there is a difference between a tree growing in a wood and a tree growing in a garden, since the latter enters into a relationship with people in the garden, whereas the former is, as it were, solitary.⁴⁸ We may therefore say that by virtue of being enclosed in a garden, nature is not only what it is, but is also seen as nature or – to put it differently – is seen as that which is conceived of as nature within a particular culture.

What this suggestion implies might be that such a tree growing outside a garden cannot make us ruminate on what nature means to us. Such a conclusion would be obviously false, but what does seem to be true is that such a tree – contrary to one in a garden – does not demand from us any particular look or consideration: it does not perform its growing, it just grows. In other words, a tree in a garden makes us focus our attention on its naturalness or rather makes us aesthetically engage in its naturalness: without us, it would not perform it, and as a result we would not pay attention to what it means for a tree to be natural not only in the garden but outside it as well. This is how we can interpret gardens as heterotopias.

The above suggestion can give rise to the following objection. The notion of performance was until now used in order to offer an anti-anthropocentric point of view, but the understanding of performance proposed by Davies is anthropocentric in that it assumes that performances are directed at human receivers. It may then be said that treating a garden as a performance does not really make the shift it claims to make. Indeed, it hardly makes sense to speak of wild nature as performing in Davies's sense; but when it concerns nature in

⁴⁷ David Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 14.

⁴⁸ Roger Scruton, *Perictione in Colophon: Reflections on the Aesthetic Way of Life* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), 83.

a garden, one can state that it does perform. The garden is humanized nature in the sense that plants are chosen, arranged, and cultivated, and as such are always addressed to the garden's creator, user, or visitor. Even nature that appears to be totally virgin in a landscape garden only performs its role of being wild, in other words, pretends to be pristine. Although this role was assigned to it by the garden architect, nature performs it thanks to its own 'natural forces'. Someone could protest here, stating that such an account is not valid with regard to formal gardens, which are difficult to fit into an anti-anthropocentric grid. One can reasonably reply, however, by saying that in formal gardens nature performs too, but this time its role consists in its being tamed and controlled. Again, it is a role conferred on it by the garden's creator and made possible by the constant efforts of garden workers responsible for topiary. Nevertheless, all these plans and efforts would be pointless were it not for the 'natural forces' to which they have to comply to try and ensure that these plans and efforts will not be in vain.⁴⁹ The tension between anthropocentrism and anti-anthropocentrism, which can be grasped when gardens are analysed as performances, is another dimension of the dialectical tension between culture and nature, which makes gardens places of a community of human and non-human beings in which gardeners and visitors have to act (perform) hand in hand with nature.

To sum up: the category of performance allows one to grasp and solve the main problems stemming from the fact that gardens are spatiotemporal phenomena involving not only human intentions and actions, but also non-human actions and processes (belonging to animate and inanimate nature). If, then, we agree that what is essential for gardens is that they somehow mediate between culture and nature, then, again, it is useful to conceive of them as performances in which human and non-human actors participate on an equal basis, having varying roles assigned to them. This means that the dialectical relation between art (culture) and nature is not stable but something produced over and over again, whenever we enter a garden.

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⁴⁹ On the topic of topiary, see Isis Brook and Emily Brady, 'Topiary: Ethics and Aesthetics', *Ethics and the Environment* 8 (2003): 126–42.

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