

Phyllis Odessey
**Interview with
Thilo Folkerts**

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<http://blog.phyllisodessey.com/>

Unfolding the Agency of Beauty (part I):

Your work seems to go between „traditional“ landscape architecture and more conceptual projects, can you describe your practice. How do you define urban nature?

Creating any garden and landscape architecture necessitates a continuously renewed search: What is the appropriate shaping of time and space for a site? And, obviously, the design of open space involves the age-old dialectic between nature and culture: How do we relate to nature, what role does nature play for a space? Technically, functionally, culturally, metaphorically? The work of 100Landschaftsarchitektur is concerned with creating garden and landscape architecture in mostly urban environments.

Accordingly, the question of what nature could be in and as part of the city is always present. Both do not exclude each other! The great divide between the city (as culture) and landscape (as nature) has long been diluted, bridged and obscured. While of course city and nature have always been intertwined, today we are becoming more and more aware and accepting of their fragmented, complex, and multi-levelled relationship.

For me urban nature is not an object or spatial category (for example a flower pot on the window sill, a neighborhood park, or even the technicalities of micro-climate or water management). Designing with urban nature is about conceptualizing this complex presence. This means discovering and utilizing for our urban lives as much of the immediate nature as possible. The contemporary city is the acting ground of the gardener and the landscape architect.

VETEX Mint Gardens: The text on your website describes the installation as an „archaeology of urban space“. What do you mean by that?

The design and making of urban space should activate the substance, history, and stories of sites. The project was on the site of the former VETEX textile dyeing factory, located in the middle of a residential block. The garden installation involved giving the public access to the site after about twenty-five years of on-site soil remediation. It had been quasi forbidden ground in people's backyard. The opening of the wooden fences to the adjacent streets made it possible to freely visit this beautifully overgrown spot.

The installation was intervening minimally, yet adding a radiant narrative moment, in order to create curiosity for the rediscovery of the site. For one, the twenty-five mint varieties that

were cultivated among the unkempt rural vegetation created a little hunter's impulse to visit all the strange, exotically named varieties, such as chocolate mint, Bergamot mint, or ginger mint.

In the field scaffolding rods served as plant labels and mark the mint patches. Mint is a traditional, yet international plant, easily recognized for its characteristic smell. It is a charismatic plant that instantly enchants almost everyone. The mint thus fostered the personal uncovering of the site's history. At the same time, the installation did aim to not be just retrospective. It was also a projection of the site's potentials and possibilities; it was about unfolding the agency of beauty for the recognition of a brownfield as valid part of the urban tissue.

*Can you talk about your use of unusual materials like scaffolding rods?
And the strips in the street in Flying Zebras?*

The materiality of the projects, as much as the concepts, is developed from the specific places. For me (the concept of) garden is not essentially about form, even though it is in the garden that form can find its place. The garden is thus initially more about the approach and about the relationship between the gardener and nature. The garden always becomes and never is.

I believe that we are on a continuous search to discover beauty and cultivate sensibilities. This must have an effect for materiality: The garden entails the shaping of the raw material of place and nature. We should not limit our joy to the perfect beauty of a rose. Working in urban environments suggests the use of urban materials.

For me scaffolding rods or traffic marking are very close to central garden issues: They involve temporality, they signal and embody change. In the case of the VETEX mint garden, the scaffolding rods, fitted with the names of the mints are over-dimensional botanical markers as much as claim stakes, signaling immanent change. There's a similar background to the materiality for accessing a vacant lot and interstitial spaces with the Garden Bridges project in Brussels last year. The Flying Zebras project (together with Marc Pouzol) was about validating traffic dynamic and pedestrian movement as a necessary and aesthetically rich part of urban liveliness.

A Joyful Search (part II):

*Why did you decide to participate in the Festival International de Jardins de Métis?
Is it an opportunity to explore ideas, that a project for a regular client would not give you the freedom to do?*

In 2009 I had been invited to make a contribution to the International Garden Festival at the Jardins de Metis on the Gaspésie Peninsula in the Canadian Province of Quebec. Since 2000 the director of the festival, Alexander Reford, has successfully developed a venue of radically expanding the borders of what garden could be and mean today. Being able to realize an experimental garden project within such a challenging and supportive frame was an opportunity not to be missed.

Together with the Berlin-based Canadian artist Rodney LaTourelle we conceived and built a garden project called Jardin de la Connaissance—Garden of Cognition in June 2010. The project involves about 40.000 books (equivalent to about 40 tons) that we arranged and left in the forest. The 'Garden of Cognition' does not illustrate a 'return to nature', but its intention is to provide an opportunity to experience the forest site in a unique and compelling way. The garden engages the almost mythical relation between knowledge, culture, and nature. By using books as material in the construction of the garden, we confront these instruments of knowledge with the question of temporality. In exposing the fragile and supposedly timeless materials to transformation and disintegration, we aimed at inviting an emotional involvement of the visitor. The Jardin de la Connaissance is a sensual reading room and a laboratory for the aesthetics of the garden.

The short life-time of a temporary garden gives an additionally wide scope of freedom and possibilities. At the same time, the Jardin de la Connaissance has proven sturdy beyond its original temporality: this coming summer, the garden will see its fourth season at the Festival de Jardins. (www.refordgardens.com)

Do you want to talk about any other ideas you have about gardens?

The garden that is part of the work-title of my work is open. This garden is not bound by walls. In 1994 the American landscape architect Peter Walker gave out what for me has been kind of a brief for my work: "Jackson Pollock, for example, tried to make space that was non-pictorial, actually within the painting. It was not a picture of something else but rather a spatial image in itself. ... If one could find those things in garden art with the internal power of these paintings, you could reduce the need for walls in much the same way that these artists have eliminated the need for a frame or a window to look through." (Gardens without Walls, 1994)

In this way, the garden is neither restricted to specific form. Even though we may and should struggle over and over to define the garden's form and our efforts in giving it shape: There is no general form that makes a garden a garden. The attempt to define and delimit the garden even today along the etymologic root of enclosure or fence (paradeisos, grad, etc.) renders it dead: the medieval hortus conclusus is closed off to the world. It is concluded, solved, benignly encased. In the best of all cases this enclosure is the proverbial golden cage.

I believe the garden may better be kept outside of confines. For me the garden is a joyful search; far from being concluded.

The most important thing, however, is that the garden is about making. As the land-artist Robert Smithson put it (in my reading with a hopeful outlook): "Too much thinking about gardens leads to perplexity and agitation. (...) The certainty of the absolute garden will never be regained."