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**Cultivateurs**  
(on the work of atelier le balto)

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A vague terrain is also a field that can be cultivated. In the short text "*Terrain vague: The Future Belongs to Landscape Architecture*" Philip Ursprung refers to today's complete urbanization, as forecast by Henri Levebvre in the 1970s<sup>[1]</sup>. For him the dissolving of the divide between city and landscape entails "a new urban form."<sup>[2]</sup> Ursprung describes this transitional situation as *terrain vague*, which can be dealt with in particular by landscape architecture. Marc Pouzol, Véronique Faucheur, and Marc Vatinel are working in this field, specifically addressing the phenomenon of spaces in transition. The design research by atelier le balto is dedicated to the redefinition of how nature and urban life come together, and how these may be experienced<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **Gardeners**

Since 2002, at the *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris, a boardwalk provides access to the unlikely garden location of a lushly planted, dark chasm between buildings. Wedged between a retaining wall as high as a house and the cultural palace, ruderal plants, vines and climbers have taken over the space and are admired curiously by visitors. The plants have turned the former refuse-site into an exotic, wild garden. This *Jardin Sauvage* was the first more permanent manifestation of what Marc Pouzol – together with Daniel Sprenger – had articulated since 1997 as the quintessential idea of the temporary urban garden: the 'cultivation of the eye'.<sup>[4]</sup> This means to acquire a deeper understanding of the site, and to re-introduce the notion of the garden as a cultural asset.

The garden is determined by reality and effect, beyond truths or visions.

Apart from seeing and understanding, the garden is the cultivation of concrete space and represents human intervention into the environment. Based on the working method of the gardener, atelier le balto as landscape architects have adopted a hands-on approach, which is literally *grounded*.<sup>[5]</sup>

As an interpretation of the given situation, this connection with the site means to show its potential and to develop it, primarily by way of minor interventions. It means giving the ordinary a new appeal and persistently bringing people and the specific place together. As with the *Jardin Sauvage*, le balto frequently uses platforms, paths, and boardwalks for this purpose. These mostly easily-built structures are tools in themselves. Similar to boardwalks in nature reserves or national parks, which make forests, bogs, or grass meadows accessible to visitors, they open up possibilities within the space and give it meaning. They are physical and intellectual bridges into the space. Constructing such boardwalks and the gardens together with others enhances this function and is an essential component in le balto's projects. In this way the larger garden space becomes a platform in itself in the sense of a field of work, or it turns into a forum for exchange and encounter. The garden itself becomes a communication tool.

## Creating Space through Questioning

What do these gardens tell us? Which conversations do they set in motion? Le Balto's design interventions primarily elicit questions. Questioning serves as a mediator between city residents and the site. Accordingly, the project *Woistdergarten?* (Whereisthegarden?), realised in 2005, does not begrudge nonexistence, but rather affirmatively initiates the search for the existing. In Berlin-Mitte, a borough that is strongly subject to transition, four brownfield sites were activated as gardens. They were maintained and taken care of. Le balto made the sites accessible with permeable slag material and wooden platforms. The existing plants were assessed, selected, and pruned with shears and saws; a subtle act of shaping, that only becomes apparent at second glance and that exploits the ruderal aesthetic for the gardeners' purposes. Initially for one season, the project also generated urban searches beyond these quasi exemplary project sites: the garden as a comprehensible and easily approachable *space of possibility*. Of the four project sites, three have since been built on. The *Tafelgarten* (blackboard garden) behind Hamburger Bahnhof museum has, however, found a supporter in the director of the museum, so that the garden can be kept up year after year with minimal means.

In le balto's projects, plants are a resource. They generate real commitment to the garden site. They are metaphors for attention, care, and use. This approach has been applied long-term as a work in progress to the historic garden of the Villa Romana in Florence (since 2009) and the LUF0-Park in Aachen (since 2011). Since then existing spatial structures and qualities have been carefully unveiled and developed — together with owners, users, and visitors. Neither of the cases involved the realisation of a predetermined design scheme, but rather the application of a particular garden and design sensibility; a new understanding of these places as gardens.

## A Question of Time

Le balto describe their approach as "inventive economy"<sup>[6]</sup>. This landscape architectural 'attitude' of finding and inventing turns neglected, nondescript brownfield sites into places that merit attention. A combination of respect for the existing, selection, and careful addition has transformed two formerly unused sites in the historic centre of Berlin-Köpenick into *Lichtgarten* and *Schattengarten* (Light Garden, Shadow Garden), which are now grown over by the monster-leaved gunnera – aided by a cleverly devised irrigation system – and spontaneous growth of perennials and grasses. The sprawling leaves of the *Rodgersia* mingle with ruderal vegetation along the banks of the adjacent stream. Le balto uses the plants to attract attention to the site and to ensure this long-term. A key aspect of this project<sup>[8]</sup> launched in 2007 was to tend the garden themselves for three years. In the meantime, the gardens have become city gardens, maintained by the municipal authorities – despite the unconventional construction and planting standards.

With their quite radical assertion that the garden must be created over time (namely through long-term care and development) and through dialogues (also with the long term, personal commitment of the client), le balto have developed a new work concept over a number of years, with different clients and in different places. With their enquiring, guiding design approach, atelier le balto is thus also stepping into the *terrain vague* of a possible, new landscape architecture.

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[1] Philip Ursprung: "Terrain Vague: The Future belongs to Landscape Architecture". Catalogue text for the exhibition 'The Swiss Touch in Landscape Architecture', pro helvetia 2012.

[www.prohelvetia.ch/fileadmin/ftp/www/expo/landschaftsarchitektur/en/text-terrainvague.html](http://www.prohelvetia.ch/fileadmin/ftp/www/expo/landschaftsarchitektur/en/text-terrainvague.html), 03.06.2013

[2] P. Ursprung a.a.O.

[3] The author's knowledge of the work and the thinking of atelier le balto is based on many years of friendship, intensive professional exchange, and truly innumerable conversations in the mentioned and many other gardens.

[4] cf. Internationales Zentrum für Kultur- und Technikforschung (IZKT), Universität Stuttgart: Interview with Marc Pouzol, 2009. [www.izkt.de/index.php/cat/50/aid/240](http://www.izkt.de/index.php/cat/50/aid/240), 09.05.2013

[5] Brigitte Franzen (Hrsg.): atelier le balto. Les pieds sur terre. Cologne 2010

[6] Erfinderische Sparsamkeit. Solo exhibition atelier le balto. 19.07. - 31.8.2012 Saxon Academy of the Arts, Dresden. The term stems from Alexandre Chemetoff (cg. *ibid.* Visites. Paris 2009), freely translated by le balto.

[7] Within the framework of Kunst und Architektur in Alt Köpenick (KAIK), a publicly funded project initiative that aims to address and activate the potential of inner-urban brownfields.

[8] The new Academy of the Jewish Museum in Berlin will shortly see the beginning of the Garden of Diaspora, a processual design project, initially commissioned for a three year period.