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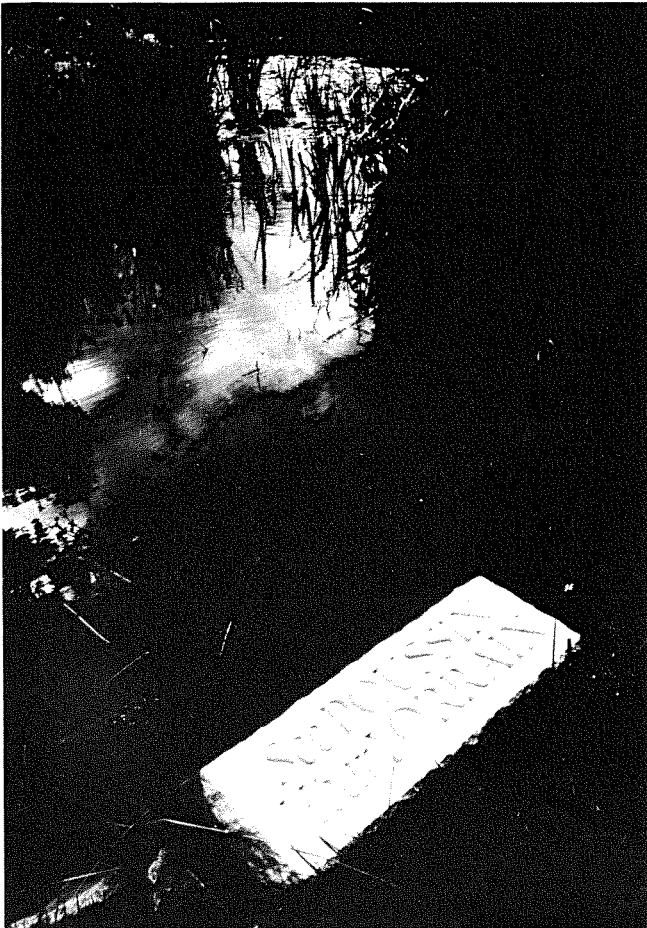
Two Poetry Gardens: Giving a Voice to the Genius Loci

Frances Butler,
with photography by
Dave Paterson, Andrew
Griffith, and Richard Rose



I **Stony Path. Corot, a column.**
(Photograph by Andrew Griffith.)

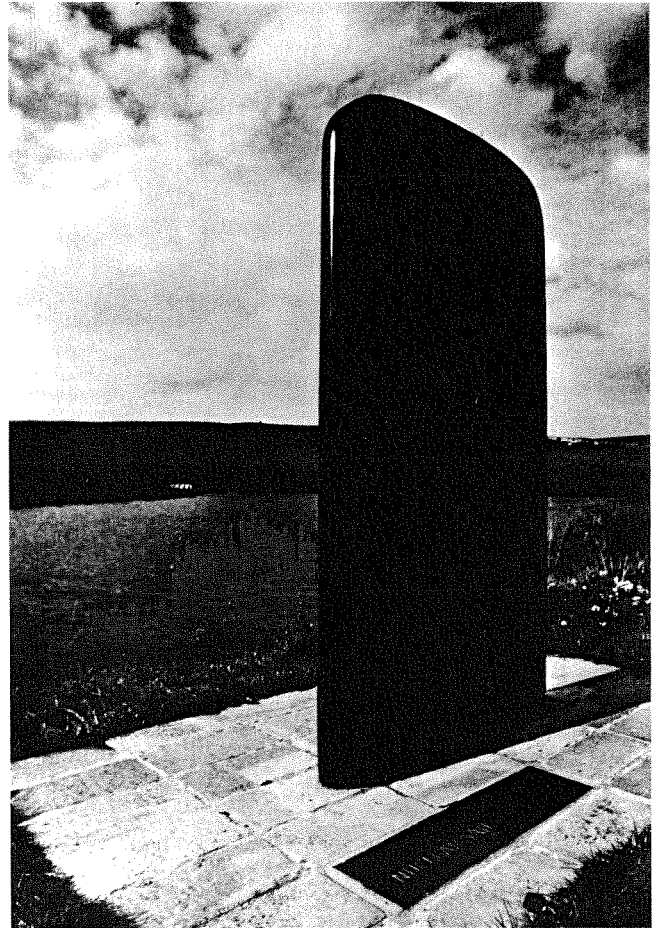
Almost 400 years ago, in his play *Othello*, Shakespeare used Iago to demonstrate the difference between language attempting to represent the observed world and language deliberately used to distort the visible into a mute sign of invisible, and often treacherous, intention. The subsequent adventures of language use in our consumer economy (which is based on advertising) have not reassured anyone that what is said is what is real. In fact, the twentieth century has seen much scholarship dedicated to a demonstration that language can never accurately define reality, but can only surround it (metonymy) or supplant it (metaphor). The recent response of many visual artists has been to turn to that which does seem to be real, the body and the ground on which it stands; consequently the last 20 years have seen a veritable rolling thunder of the movement of rocks, earth, and water for the making of Earthworks. Some of these works have alluded to the formalist preoccupations of minimalism (Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*); many more have made reference in some way to the cthonic myths of the empty center—the hearth, the cave, the spiral, or the labyrinth—into, and out of which, life goes and comes (Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Fleishner's *Chain Link Maze*); and others have explored the earliest systems of division and measurement of space by line, of sunlight by shadow into time markers, and of sound into rhythm. For the most part the imagery and symbolism evoked has been prehistoric, or at least preliterate, as



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chronicled in Lucy Lippard's recent catalogue of these efforts, *Overlay*.¹

Of all of these Earthworks, only one makes reference to the fact that all of this has happened before—even to the moving of great quantities of earth and water—at the end of another period of high social regimentation and the contraction of the range of public symbolism into the imagery of power, in 18th-century England and France. This is the garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay in Scotland, which is named *Stony-path* after that of Heraclitus, the 5th-century Greek philosopher who posited the process of continual becoming as the only reality, and who said of his garden pathway: “The way up and the way down are one and the same.” Ian Hamilton Finlay’s garden is, in fact, a virtual



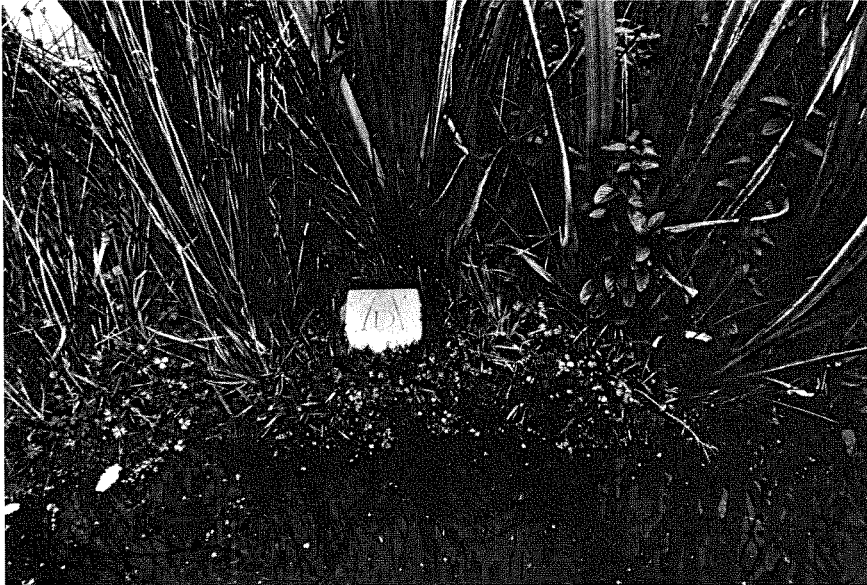
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history of the varied practices used by 18th-century gardeners for what Capability Brown first named “place-making.” Finlay’s garden follows the practices of those who, like Alexander Pope or William Shenstone, developed the Garden of Ideas, rather than those of Brown himself, who preferred eliciting unspecified or unsteretyped responses to the landscape, although he did describe his “improvements” in terms of language: “Now there, he said, pointing a finger, I make a comma, and there, pointing to another part (where an interruption is desirable to break the view) a parenthesis—now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.”²

Pope and Shenstone continued the tradition of the garden inscription, first inspired by the paintings of

2 Stony Path. See Poussin, Hear Lorrain. Inscription by John Andrew. (Photograph by Dave Paterson, in Finlay, Ian Hamilton, and Dave Paterson. *Selected Ponds*, The West Coast Poetry Center, Reno, Nevada, 1975.)

3 Stony Path. Nuclear Sail, inscription by John Andrew. (Photograph by Dave Paterson in *Selected Ponds*.)



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4 Stony Path, The Great Piece of Turf. (Photograph by Dave Paterson in *Selected Ponds*.)

5 Stony Path. The Japanese an Ambassador to Scotland-Dragonfly. (Photograph by Dave Paterson in *Selected Ponds*.)

Nicolas Poussin, especially his two versions of the theme *Et in Arcadia Ego*, in which the inscription on the tomb recalls the presence of death in the midst of life, and further continued in a more elegiac vein after the paintings of Claude Lorrain and Gaspar Dughet (also called Poussin) and more melodramatically after the paintings of Salvator Rosa. Finlay, too, makes use of the garden inscription to focus both mind and body to a quality of attention that can be called the filled moment, and which, in Shenstone's phrase, gives voice to the genius loci.

Here we ascend some airy seat,
Or little temple's close retreat,
Beneath a shady bow'r:
And oft some moral sentence find
To please, or to instruct the mind,
And pass each tedious hour.⁵

Shenstone recorded his 20 years of inscriptional gardening in a book, *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening*, and Ian Hamilton Finlay credits Shenstone's influence by naming one of his own writings, *Unconnected Sentences on Gardening*. These titles, as well as the program of both gardens, the circuit walk on which one encounters a variety of scenarios or a variety of views of the same garden event, attest to a similar interest in the spatial expression of a political ideology—the assertion of the validity of multiplicity of human symbolic action and response.⁴ In the 18th century the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby or the prints of William Hogarth countered the belief of the previous generation that human symbolic

action was so uniform that infallibly human intention could be read through the contractions of the eyebrows, as Charles Lebrun tried to demonstrate in his iconographic treatise, *A Method to Learn to Design the Passions* (1734), with its pictorial circuit tours of varied responses to one central action. Ian Hamilton Finlay today stresses the necessity for multiplicity of statement to elicit the range of debate that is a necessary component of effective public symbolism, as opposed to the stripped-down corporate graphics or the abstract formalism that he feels are supported by contemporary government art programs in an effort to dilute public understanding of the pleasures and powers of citizen debate on political issues.

Ian Hamilton Finlay and his wife, Susan, began the garden in 1966, in true 18th-century style, by moving a lot of earth and water—digging a pond, damming a creek, and creating on their several acres of Scottish moorland three bodies of water, giving rise to one of the alternate names of the garden, the Inland Sea. Finlay regards the ship as one of the principal expressions of freedom of movement. There are both full size dinghies and many miniature ships on his waters. Bernard Lassus, author of the book, *Les Jardins Imaginaires: Les Habitants Paysagistes*,⁵ which concerns garden fantasies in France, notes that miniaturization serves to expand the boundaries of one's own space, in what he calls the measurable expanding to the immeasurable. Finlay uses miniaturization with great sophistication.

He first sets an infinite stage for his ships by labeling the water: HIC JACET PARVULUM QUODDAM EX AQUA LONGIORE EXCERPTA. This translates roughly as: Here lies a little extract of water from a larger stretch of water. He then uses real size to provide the right scale for the surroundings for his ships. One stone Aircraft Carrier on a plinth is a bird feeding tray; the birds are the airplanes. Another stone submarine, the U.S.S. Nautilus, glides out of a green and rustling sea; the wind stirred boughs of surrounding evergreens. In another ship reference, to the galleons used as fountains by the Romans, and to one of the water jokes of the gardens at Tivoli, a bronze ship named the *Villa d'Este* jets water from its bilge into a pond.

Carrying the Roman motif farther, one garden is filled with busts on plinths, they are all models of ships. Another Roman conceit makes columns from inscribed stone bases set before living trees. This project has also been carried out in the gardens of the Kröller Müller Museum in the Netherlands.

The Northern Renaissance has been celebrated through the use of Dürer's signature to frame a scene reminiscent of his print of Adam and Eve, and another to sign a beautifully planted collection of wild flowers and marsh grass recalling Dürer's *Great Piece of Turf*.

This stone, "See Poussin, Hear Lorrain," engraved by Michael Harvey, lies on the shore of the lake and summarizes another range of

allusions specific to 18th-century landscape painting. One can position oneself by the inscribed stone and allow the vista to roll out in the orderly and clarified visual array typical of the paintings of Nicolas Poussin, or one can make use of the other senses too, hearing the wind, feeling the warmth of the sun, noting the atmospherics of light and shade as suggested by a Claude Lorrain painting. To emphasize the movement of the sun Finlay has made many sundials for his garden, including one that is less than specific about the time, an incised stone image of the shadow cast by a nearby potted iris. To emphasize the reflective qualities of the water he has carved one inscription backward on its board, so that it can only be read in the water. Birch trees flicker in the light and mock the stone carved with the motto of the corporal punishment enthusiasts: Bring Back the Birch. Light and water are the most important parts of a garden, or as Finlay states in *Unconnected Sentences*: "Weather is the chief content in a Garden; Superior Gardens are composed of glooms or solitudes, not of plants and trees; and finally, Flowers in a garden are an acceptable eccentricity."

All these components are concrete perceptual pleasures, the textual devices serving to focus and heighten a range of sensations that might otherwise be (literally) overlooked by a culture which tends to emphasize the visual. The inscriptions urge the response of Rousseau's Natural Man, and appropriately, Finlay has built a little island in a lake, and on it a model of the tomb

built for Rousseau at Eremonville by the Marquis de Girardin.

See Poussin, see the tomb, for as in Poussin's famous painting, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, Death is to be found even in Arcadia. The 18th century relished the pastorate, indeed, as Panofsky has shown, the Latin inscription in Poussin's painting was generally mistranslated in the 18th-century pastoral painting into a melancholy possibility rather than a horrifying reality.⁶ However, the Romantics also relished the frisson of terror (Edmund Burke felt it was a necessary component of the sublime), and another favorite painter was Salvator Rosa, the painter of stormy nights, swirling clouds, and highway robbery. In "Poussin and Salvatore: Cops and Robbers" (*Unconnected Sentences*) Finlay carries out this note of play-act death in his garden with a bronze tortoise crawling up the bank, its shell, reminiscent of a German military helmet, inscribed *Panzer Leader*. But the reality of death and the fact of terror are also present, in a large piece at the edges of the garden, in a black-marble submarine conning tower, named, as sailors name it, *Nuclear Sail*. This, too, reflects in the water, a lengthening shadow of political reality.

This garden is a political statement, clearly described by Finlay in his *Unconnected Sentences*: "Ethical battles are 18th-century gardens continued by other means"; and "Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks." The various classical fragments in the garden refer to

Finlay's heroes of the French Revolution, Saint-Just and Rousseau, and to their admiration for the austere classicism of Poussin, or *his* admirer, Jacques Louis David. Finlay has increasingly made his garden into a statement of the need for public symbolism, which could be used for Public discourse, a function that the paintings of David fulfilled in the time of the French Revolution, but which current official art, he feels, cannot fulfill.

Thus Finlay's garden is based specifically on the necessity for language, a *vox populi*, which he feels is the only tool that we have for social solidarity, and, which cannot be abandoned for nonverbal symbolism, but must be used to reinforce the values of the Greek polis, with its body of responsible, active, and, above all, debating citizens, or risk being used by those like Iago, who use language to create distrust of language itself, to isolate, to terrorize, and, finally, to destroy individuals and culture.

Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden includes a temple in which are displayed editions of some of the garden pieces and the publications of his press, the Wild Hawthorn Press, which has published poetry books and broadsides for many years. Thus, the texts of the garden, which is open for the public to visit, are expressed in the publications of the press and are dispersed to poetry readers around the world, extending the boundaries of the garden in another sense of the measurable extending to the immeasurable.

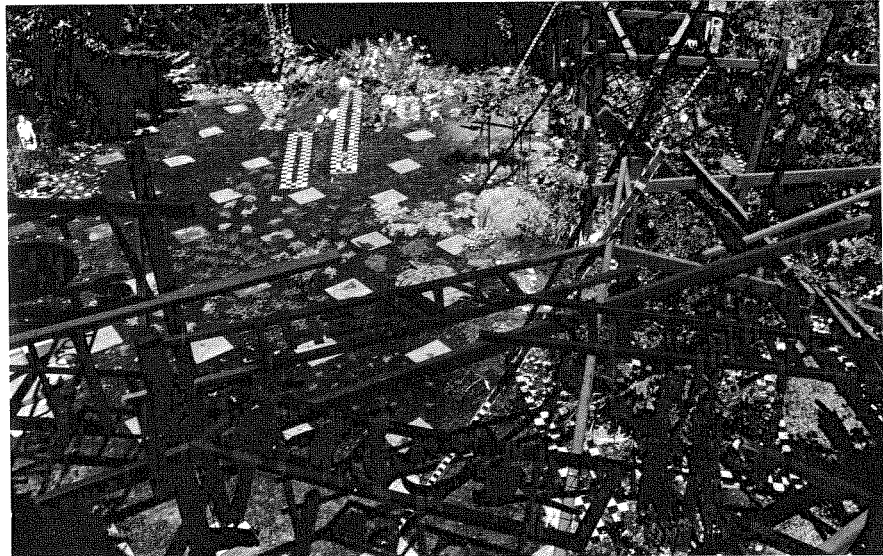
Finlay's garden is a small version of William Shenstone's garden, which was a smaller version of Stowe. Richard Graves, a friend of Shenstone, in his early poem, "Love of Order," warned of the folly of ever increasing miniaturization, urging another kind of usefulness:

Yet let not us inferior folks
Expose ourselves to great men's
jokes
But usefully our ground dispose
By planting cabbages in rows.⁷

Nevertheless, as documented by Bernard Lassus in France, or Jan Wampler and others in the United States,⁸ many of those who have any space at all, and even some who have none (e.g., James Wines and Patricia Phillips, in an article in *Art Forum*, show garden-making strategies in New York City)⁹ tend to make miniature worlds for themselves. Since the garden is an archetype, it is continuously reinterpreted.¹⁰

The mutability of the garden, the changes of weather, of plants, and of time, are given material form in my small private garden in Berkeley, California, a garden called "Light and Heavy Light," or the "Shadow Garden." This garden is a palimpsest, an overlay of additions and subtractions on a design begun by a Berkeley architect, William Coburn. The original design was based partly on aspects of my graphic design (e.g., checkerboards, the "Slash and Spritz" flying sticks popular with graphic designers in the late 1970s) and partly on his own interest in the derelict trellises still found in ethnic vegetable

gardens in a few communities in California. Inspired by ruins, the tiled borders and the trellis, in fact, proceeded to disintegrate, and in time-honored tradition, provided the materials for another garden. This one was based not on divisions on the ground, but on divisions made by changeable markers in the air, which projected both texts and images back onto the ground. As one trellis was dismantled, others were erected that were linked to the ground by long movable tiled wands, leading the eye from the fragments of tiled beds up into a maze of mobile sleds made from poles and wire mesh, which held the letters and figures. On sunny days these cast moving images onto the garden floor, alternately paved and planted in its own checkerboard of changing color and texture. The changing texts often refer to time or to the interaction of letter shape and language meaning, as expressed in timely poems by Alastair Johnston, another Scots poet: "L8R" and the typographic "Yes giving way to No." The garden includes many references to the mutable and the irregular, including the dregs of the formal parterre, the crazy paving of suburban gardens. It also acknowledges the role shadow plays in symmetry and duplication, ranging from myths about the powers and dangers of twins to William Blake's poem about the tiger. The garden has a tiger, modeled on a Chinese paper cutout, which projects into symmetry. It also has a symmetrical axis along which the checkered planting is aligned, started and finished with windows inlaid with maps of the



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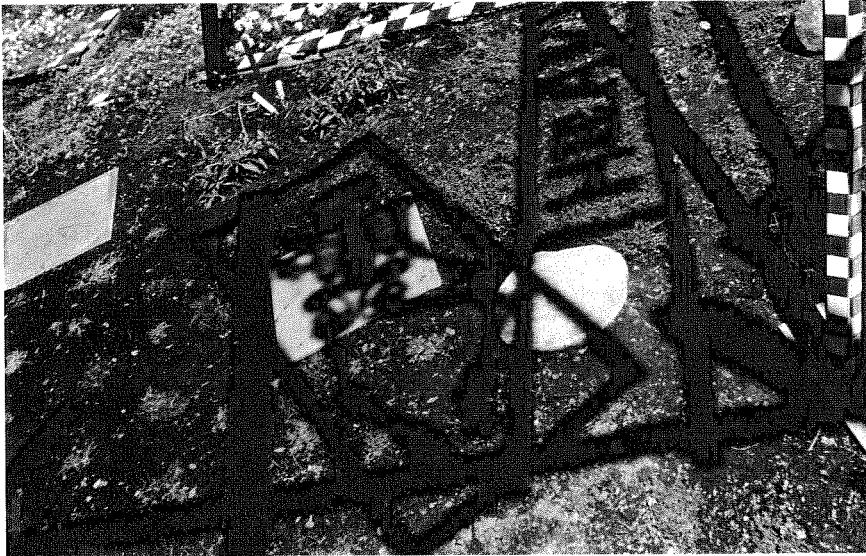
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6 Shadow Garden. Overview of the garden. (Photograph by Richard Rose.)

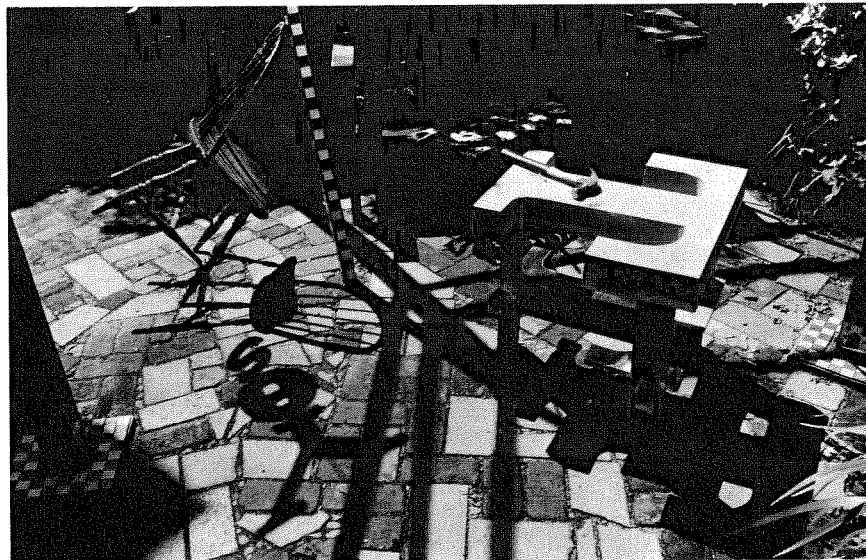
7 Shadow Garden's Symmetry: Blake's tiger, duplicated and aligned with cat.

Tiger, tiger, burning bright,
In the forrests of the night,
What immortal hand, or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

(Photograph by Richard Rose.)



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8 Shadow Garden. Skeleton, out of the closet. (Photograph by Richard Rose.)

9 Shadow Garden. Tea Pavilion, with tiled wand; (Condensed): Yes giving way to No; and T—Table with built-in shadow. (Photograph by Richard Rose.)

garden, which repeat (or reflect) each other.

A stolen shadow is equivalent to death, as folk tales and folk customs suggest. In keeping with the garden's program of presenting the social history of shadow, a skeleton is kept in an open closet along with extra words and cutouts.

Shadows, too, are transitory, and depend on the time of the year for existence. Therefore, another shadow garden was necessary, a night theater, lit by electricity, in which the traditions of the shadow puppet theater, which extends from China to Greece, could be explored. The puppets for this theater are made from clear plastic, which casts shadow only of their drilled or cut edges and creates linear shadows that shine both white and dark, light and heavy. The puppets are articulated hands and dancing figures and are used in a play, *The Gesture of Outward*, which I will publish as a book, in collaboration with the photographer Richard Rose. Thus, this private garden shares some of the same intentions of Ian Hamilton Finlay's larger public garden, because I have a press, publish poetry books, and use the garden as a source from which to generate texts and illustrations addressing the question of the existence of both historic and contemporary public symbolism, and its usefulness to public (non-commercial) discourse.

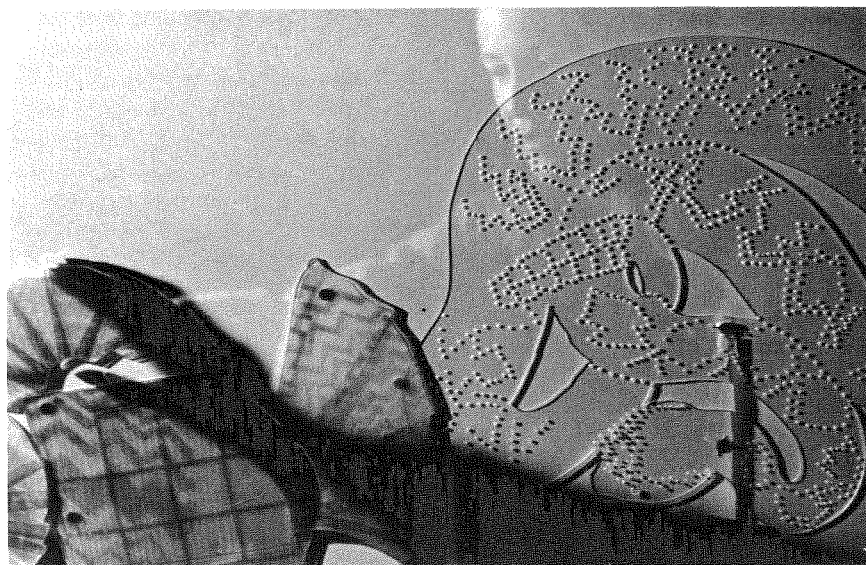
Perhaps the classical column, which has by now supported the busts of Hitler and Mussolini as well as those of Socrates and Virgil, can no

longer be used to marshal belief either in responsible politicians or in responsible citizenry; however, language and the evoked civic image do not have to be abandoned completely for imagery of the cave, with or without Platonic shadows. Probably primitive men and women were even more preoccupied with power and death than we are, but the need for contemporary, public, symbolic discourse on the realities of economic, political, and military power, and of the racial, sexual, and ethnic overlays by which it is configured, is poorly served by the continued exploration of an elegant prehistoricism psychologized into Jungian archetypes.

The critical necessity for symbolism and discussion of individual responsibility in an increasingly corporate state requires the use of all of the available instruments of human expression. We may hope that the few examples of public symbolism in the visual arts (e.g., the portraits of mercenary soldiers by Leon Golub) will be joined by presentations of multiple 20th-century options for public power. This is not the stone age nor is it the 18th century when death could be sentimentalized in the gardens of a few gentlemen.

Notes

- 1 Lucy Lippard, *Overlay* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).
- 2 Capability Brown, quoted in Elizabeth Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in 18th Century England* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1925) p. 141.
- 3 William Shenstone, quoted in John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape, Poetry, Painting and Gardening during the*



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- 4 Ronald Paulson, "The Pictorial Circuit and Related Structures in 18th Century England," *The Varied Pattern: Studies in the 18th Century*. Edited by Peter Hughes and David Williams (Toronto: A. M. Hakkert, Ltd., 1971), pp. 165–187, and Max F. Schulz, "The Circuit Walk of the 18th Century Landscape Garden and the Pilgrim's Circuitous Progress," *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Volume 15, Number 1, 1981–1982, pp. 1–25.
- 5 Bernard Lassus, *Les Jardins Imaginaires: Les Habitants Paysagistes* (Paris: Les Presses de la Connaissance, 1977). See also his introduction to Ian Hamilton Finlay and Dave Paterson, *Selected Ponds* (Reno, Nevada: The West Coast Poetry Center, 1975).
- 6 Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 295–320.
- 7 Richard Graves, quoted in Manwaring, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 8 Jan Wampler, *All their Own: People and the Places They Build* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 9 James Wines and Patricia C. Phillips, "Growing Up," *Art Forum* (October 1982), pp. 46–51.
- 10 J. B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 20.
- 10 **Shadow Garden.** The Gesture of Outward, shadow play, 1984. (Photograph by Richard Rose.)