A people’s Arcadia: the public gardens of Ian Hamilton Finlay in relation to Little Sparta

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Through an appropriate coincidence, the Sculpture in Arcadia symposium marked the first anniversary of the death of Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006). It also coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the beginnings of the four-acre, neoclassical garden around his home at Little Sparta. Originally known as Stonypath, Little Sparta is over 300 metres above sea level in the sheep farming country of the Pentland Hills in southern Scotland. This is the place that became the epicentre of Finlay’s cultural production, and which has become renowned as a landmark work of art. Despite the continuous struggles of gardening and seasonal onslaughts of weather, the former upland farm has been transformed into an idyllic place (figure 1). For an artist whose gardening was consistently alert to the potency of classicism, and who perceived successive neoclassicisms as a means of articulating contemporary modernities, we should expect meditations on matters arcadian and to find Little Sparta infused with pastoral poetics (figure 2).

The mythic notion of Arcadia as a rustic idyll is attributed to the Roman poet Virgil. Through interest in particular essays by the German art historian, Erwin Panofsky, Finlay became aware of the nuances redolent in the idea of Arcadia. Panofsky had pointed out that Virgil created the poetic topos by reconstituting characteristics of the two very real topographies described by Greek writers. Virgil had transposed the simple life of arcadian shepherds from the mountainous region of Greece, as described by Polybius, to the fertile groves and meadows of Sicily, as described by Theocritus. Within Panofsky’s representation of Virgil as the creator of a new visionary realm, Finlay appreciated that the idealised paradox of the Roman’s pastoral poetry offered a philosophical contemplation appropriate to the modern garden.

Finlay’s private garden at Little Sparta was developed simultaneously as an artwork-in-progress and a nursery-of-ideas which could be transplanted into the public domain through proposals generated in response to commissions. By exploring a selection of his public gardens we can appreciate that Finlay’s representations of Arcadia fuse the inheritance of the classical garden with current notions of site-specificity. We will also see how his pastoral approach to sculpture translates these idylls into contemporary landscapes that have been created as antidotes to the dominant modes of outdoor art installation.

Certain places are already imbued with an arcadian-ness, whether by intention or by reception. The English landscape garden is such a place. In recent years London’s Serpentine Gallery was established to complement the ease and leisure to be enjoyed in Kensington Gardens, an urban Arcadia created nearly 300 years ago. The gallery’s re-designed garden was opened in 1998 and Finlay’s eight benches offer the chance to rest and, through the resonance of Virgil, to reflect upon a pastoral meditation on the pleasures of ‘evening’. In his proposal, Finlay cited Panofsky:

In Virgil’s ideal Arcadian human suffering and superhumanly perfect surroundings create a dissonance. This dissonance, once felt, had to be resolved, and it was resolved in that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquillity, which is perhaps Virgil’s most personal contribution to poetry. With only a slight exaggeration one might say that he ‘discovered’ the evening.

The Latin inscription on the initial bench concludes Virgil’s first eclogue. The other seven benches are inscribed with English translations of the same verse.
that span the years 1684 to 1996, and which register shifts in language and nuance (figure 3). One, by John Caryll (1684), reads:

For now the mountain a long shade extends,
And curling smoke from village tops extends.

Another, by Finlay and Jessie Sheeler (1995), reads:

And now from the steadings already
Smoke is rising: the shadows
Of the light blue mountain tops extend.

The distinctive reiteration of each bench emphasises Virgilian ‘evening’, which also evokes the transformation of day into night, of work into leisure — and thus, in the heart of the metropolis, aligns this classical idyll with the modern yearning for a restful, stress-free haven. There is also a suggestion that, with ‘evening’, the garden may become a bower for the amorous.5

This demonstration that distinctive nuances arise from various translations of the same text provides a salutary reflection on the similar potential for a range of interpretations of Finlay’s own work. While it was always his intention that interpretative material should be available at each of the public gardens, this has never been the case at Little Sparta. Perhaps this is because Little Sparta was created as a private garden and for many years was visited only by invitation.
Public access seems to have developed gradually as the garden’s renown was reported with increasing frequency.

Through the two overviews of Little Sparta (1984 and 2002) we can see that the glades and pools, groves and burns, moorland and parkland, lochan and pathways have all been designed as settings that empower a rich variety of inscribed objects: benches, planters, headstones, sundials, bird-tables, tree-plaques and columns, as well as bee-hives, obelisks, bridges and dry-stone walls, even an aqueduct, a grotto, a wheel-barrow and a goose hut (figures 4 and 5). The garden created gradually through the 23-year collaboration with Sue Finlay is clearly delineated in the overview of 1984 (figure 4). After their separation, Finlay created the extensive English Parkland and the extent to which the garden almost doubled in size during the 1990s can be appreciated by comparing the 1984 with the 2002 overview (figure 5). The garden has also been consistently modified in the course of its evolution since 1967. New works were regularly created and installed. These, as well as pre-existing ones, were sometimes moved and, occasionally, those deemed to be unsuccessful were destroyed. This process continued after 1990 in association with Pia Simig. By early 2006, Finlay considered that the garden had been completed (except for the ruinous barn which was to become transformed into the hortus conclusus). Thus it may well be that, for its author, the garden was imbued with different meanings at successive stages of its development.

Unlike previous landscape gardeners, Finlay chose not to create an authorised circuit as, for example, his Georgian hero William Shenstone had done at The Leasowes. Instead, visitors were (and continue to be) free to roam at will and, in the absence of interpretation, to respond according to the inclination of their own subjectivities. When discussing the public gardens I am guided by an understanding of Finlay’s intentions because these are intimated in each...
proposal. I am also aware that Finlay regarded the printed proposals as a vital part of his programme and that he consistently reiterated their significance. These proposals were published by his Wild Hawthorn Press either as prints or consummate bookworks. Some were produced in response to commissions, others to document a completed installation and many more were conceptual. The latter were sometimes realised at Little Sparta or elsewhere, but frequently they remaining unrealised. Nevertheless as the commissioned works were often variants of those at Little Sparta, it could also be said that the proposals are equally illuminating about this private garden as well as those in the public domain.

The Monteviot Proposal (1979) is characteristic of many in that it remains a conceptual statement. However, even though it was never realised, The Monteviot Proposal has proved to be a seminal work, and Finlay has acknowledged it as such over the years. Through The Monteviot Proposal Finlay had outlined ways of translating arcadian-ness into the modern world. It also defined the approach to sculpture that he had cultivated by gardening at Little Sparta during the 1970s. Thus the proposal represents the cross-fertilisation of his developing neoclassicism with his experience as a leading exponent of the modernist genre of concrete poetry. It also constitutes Finlay’s
most extensive statement about the theory and practice of his sculpture, and its relation to the public domain.

Finlay’s interest in gardens originated in his practice as a concrete poet.9 Once familiar with the history of garden design he became aware that the traditional concept of the garden-as-artwork necessitated a poetic, philosophical and political synergy. He also came to understand that the terse economy of text favoured by concrete poetry was evident in the elegant simplicity of the classical inscription. Thus it was through his exploration of the garden as a site for artworks that he began to embrace practices that are recognisably sculptural — and it was through his synthesis of classical forms with the visual dynamic of concrete poetry that he evolved a way of fusing words, objects and plantings to create the pastoral sculpture that draws the viewer’s attention to the environment of a place. The word was always his starting point, and it is the word that encapsulates the idea of each work. As he considered that words could function in various forms and dimensions he embraced the challenge of realise his ideas. By initiating the practice of collaborating with carefully selected artists, craftsmen and architects, he was able to produce works in media appropriate to the chosen site and scale, and with the exquisite quality that he demanded.10

Ironically the conceptual nature of Finlay’s practice coincided with the impact of the Conceptual Art generated during the 1960s. Although he would have rejected the description Conceptualist, his ideas were nonetheless words in a notebook until he generated the collaboration/s that would create their realisation in media. As we have seen with his proposals, many would exist as printed works alone. Even though the idea of each landscape installation was encapsulated by the word and image of its proposal, Finlay’s sculpture came into being through engagement with his chosen collaborator and through the essential integration of the inscribed object with the context of the garden. As in the European tradition that he consistently invoked, the classical garden would mediate the idea of the work with the viewer’s perception so that Finlay’s meaning would be revealed gradually.11 Hence we can appreciate the irony that Finlay’s practice displays more of an affinity with conceptual, non-object-based sculptural discourse than with the autonomous, object sculpture usually associated with landscapes and gardens. Moreover, Finlay was critical of the way that modernism had privileged the self-contained autonomy of object sculpture, and of the patronage that seemed to favour it within the contemporary sculpture park. He was dismayed that, within these new types of landscape, the role of the plantings had become so marginal that their function was merely to highlight the form and materiality of the sculpture. The relationship of each of Finlay’s inscribed objects to their planted environment forms a distinctive and contradictory approach, and he regarded his unique type of pastoral sculpture as an antidote to these dominant tendencies in outdoor art installation.

Finlay had began to appreciate the resonances invoked by association-endowed inscriptions, and the possibility of transforming a landscape through the poetics of metaphor. Thus his use of the inscription resists focusing exclusively on the sculptural object. Instead, as he asserted in The Monteviot Proposal, the object is only one element within a work composed of plantings, ground and relation to the overall site:

The sculpture — if one is to call it a sculpture — was characteristic of the ornaments of that landscape, for it drew attention not to itself (though it was pleasing to look at) but to the indigenous features of the woodland — to the pleasure of hearing the breeze in the trees, and to the trees which were both ornamental and useful.12

A notable example at Little Sparta is the headstone carved to resemble a temple façade. It bears the inscription, ‘Bring Back The Birch’ (1971). We gasp at this exhortation to restore corporal punishment — before noticing that it is placed amidst a grove of hornbeams and maples and that, through the absence of birch trees, the meaning is self-explanatory. The word is the catalyst that simultaneously generates associations and embraces the other elements of each composition — such as the sights, scents and sounds — to amplify the sensuous enjoyment of ‘place’. Animated by weather, each garden becomes an Aeolian harp, whose cadence is played by wind soughing through trees and shrubs, while the rustle of breeze also delights the eye with the dance of sun dapple and leaf shadow.13

By comparison with the garden of the Serpentine Gallery, the deconsecrated churchyard of St George’s, Bristol, is a very different kind of urban space. This commission invited Finlay to regenerate the site in relation to the musical function of the concert hall built inside the former church, which happens to be an impressive example of early nineteenth-century Greek Revival architecture. Within a wall of mature lime trees, three terraces divide the steep hillside into a series of hermetic compartments. Since 2002, these have been inhabited by appropriately unintrusive sculptures that draw upon
Virgil’s poetry and the letters of the Czech modernist composer, Leos Janáček, to suggest the transformative enchantments of music\(^1\) (figure 6).

Invocation of music has been consistent in Finlay’s sculpture, and the works at St George’s recollect The Monteviot Proposal in which Finlay acknowledged that the arcadian terrain of the pastoral idyll had been animated by the music and song of hardy shepherds. He had proposed, for example, that a variety of columns should be placed amidst the woodland trees to suggest: ‘a reticent music, as if the flutes of the stone were the sound of the old-fashioned shepherds’ flutes somehow made visible to the eye\(^1\)\(^5\) (figure 7). Finlay tantalised by problematising the object and simultaneously pointing to environmental sensations: ‘The work will be both an object (poem? sculpture?) and an invitation to enjoy the sound’. The sound alluded to was the music created by ‘the real wind in the real trees’. ‘The sound of the breeze’, he reiterated, could be experienced as ‘a kind of chamber music’.

The Monteviot Proposal was produced during 1979, the same year as the victory of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party in the British general election. Both events were to impact on the discourses of regeneration that stimulated the...
provision of sculpture for new types of designed public landscape in Britain. Through *The Monteviot Proposal*, we can appreciate the role of Little Sparta as a nursery-of-ideas, as well as the way that Finlay positioned his sculpture within the context of public and regenerative landscapes.\(^\text{16}\)

The site addressed by the proposal is an example of the late 1970s imperative to redevelop derelict terrain as a heritage and tourist asset. The commission was part of a scheme to transform into a visitor attraction overgrown and disused woodland within a working timber estate in southern Scotland. The title page exemplifies Finlay’s site-specific approach to sculpture, and intimates how the inscriptions would translate the woodland into a pastoral landscape:

**A PROPOSAL FOR THE LOTHIAN ESTATES, MONTEVIOT, COMPRISING The reclamation of a WOODLAND POOL, with the planting of TREES, POEMS & various PILLAR-FLUTES; The provision of PICNIC-SITES in the form of glades, each with appropriate poem-inscribed TREE-SEATS; A series of OVAL PLAQUES to be fixed to trees, these bearing tree names and lovers’ names; A variety of SOUNDING-FLUTES and PAN-PIPES. A means of unifying all this in A SINGLE VISION of RURAL ACTIVITY, for the pleasure of the visitor.**\(^\text{17}\)

Significantly, the proposal affirmed that gardens are landscapes of ideas: ‘This pool was man-made but having for a time been overgrown & almost entirely concealed in reeds & mosses, it had been most carefully reclaimed, leaving the idea — for landscapes are ideas as much as they are things — of an almost natural spot’. It also acknowledged nature as a human construct and urged the patron to ‘realise that much that appears natural is man-made & that we create & preserve what we call “wild” for our use & delight’.

Each work proposed for Monteviot is also an example of the way that the sculpture draws attention to its natural environment: ‘Here, the words exist in relation to their surroundings […] to draw attention to aspects and pleasures of the surrounding woodland, without the words in any way imposing themselves on the viewer’. Thus, the purpose of the tree-plaques was not only communicated by their inscriptions. They would be fastened to trunks ‘here and there’ to encourage visitors to seek them out, creating ‘a sense of depth & solitude, providing a reason for straying a little distance from the main path & making wandering as it were permissible’.\(^\text{18}\) Some of the tree-plaques would bear the name of the tree, as in the Linnaean Latin classification familiar through the labels in arboreta and botanic gardens, such as the ‘Abies Alba’ (Silver Fir) (figure 8).
Other tree-plaques would be inscribed with the names of classical lovers who had famously carved their names into the bark of trees. The painter Sir Joshua Reynolds had visualised this romantic practice by portraying Joanna Leigh in 1776 as the loving wife in the act of inscribing her husband’s name, and we are all familiar with the popular usage that conjoins the heart with the couple’s initials. The ‘Oenone/Paris’ and ‘Angelico/Medoro’ of The Monteviot Proposal (figure 8) are from Ovid and Ariosto while, in his influential commission from the Domaine de Kerghuenec sculpture park in France, Finlay also invoked Shakespeare’s ‘Rosalind/Orlando’ as well as Rousseau’s ‘Julie/Saint Prieux’. The Monteviot Proposal clarified his purpose: ‘So silviculture and literary culture were set side by side and each had its due & natural place within a single world’ — a poetic world that unites cultural and natural forms, and where: ‘These inscriptions sometimes suggested the fragments of antique poetry, & being fragmentary were for that reason all the more evocative’. I’d like to reiterate that these tree-plaques illustrate the way that Finlay’s use of the inscription resists an exclusive focus on the sculptural object. Instead, the object is only one element within a work composed to activate the arcadian experience. Twenty-three years later at St George’s, Bristol, Janáček’s words on the wall-plaque epitomise Finlay’s pleasure in the pastoral: ‘On the path I’d plant oaks which would endure for centuries and into their trunks I’d carve the words I shouted in the air’. It can also be appreciated that the words selected for this wall-plaque also constitute a lyric signature to the sculptural process that has characterised Finlay’s poetic gardening.

In Britain, the perception that Little Sparta offered a model for public, regenerative landscapes was stimulated by two European commissions. During 1988, the catalogues of the Glasgow Garden Festival and the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail confirmed that Finlay had been invited to participate in these projects as a result of his installations at Dutch and French sculpture parks. At the Domaine de Kerghuenec in Brittany, the Tree-Plaques (1986) were placed high up on the trunks of the mature woodland trees to achieve the effects proposed for the Monteviot estate (figure 9). Earlier, at the Kröller-Müller in Holland, an overgrown copse of mature trees was transformed into the hermetic Sacred Grove (1982) through installation of the monumental tree-column bases on which were inscribed the names that created a pantheon of European cultural heroes (figure 10). These two installations appear to have been regarded as the most prestigious of an increasing number of European projects.
commissions. As such they were to be influential in Britain because public patrons had been apprehensive of Finlay’s controversial reputation. In some quarters his engagement with warfare condemned him as a militarist. 21 In others, his quest to redeem neoclassicism from the taint of Nazi-ism was regarded as proof of fascism. 22 Elsewhere, his challenge of the local government’s rating definition of the Temple of Apollo, as a commercial art gallery, was criticised as civil disobedience and condemned as a transgression beyond the bounds of creative activity. 23 His taste for polemic and his vigorous prosecution of The Little Spartan War, as a counter-attack against Strathclyde Regional Council, doubtless alarmed potential British patrons.

The Temple of Apollo is proclaimed by the Corinthian columns painted on the façade of the former cow byre and by the dedication: ‘To Apollo. His Music. His Missiles. His Muses’. This inscription identified the garden as a poetic silo from which polemic missiles were launched at specific targets in the surrounding culture — as befitting the tradition of the poetic garden at odds with the wider world. For many years, this garden temple symbolised Finlay’s programmatic and polemological campaign of resistance to what he perceived to be a debased cultural environment. 24 It should be remembered that all his endeavours, whether combative or lyric, were integral to this strategy — and such an imperative naturally encompassed his representations of Arcadia. Finlay regarded the neoclassicism of his pastoral sculpture as an antidote to modernism in art practice and patronage, and to the pervasive influence of bureaucracy — and especially the tendency to commission sculpture as an economic asset to the heritage, leisure and tourism industries. As we shall see, symbols of warfare were among the metaphoric arsenal of his campaign to reconstruct Arcadia as a fusion of the traditional and contemporary classical garden. This process was particularly enacted through the pastoral installations at Little Sparta.

The renaming of Stonypath is a useful example of his programme. Finlay came to associate his campaign against Scottish officialdom with that of ancient Sparta’s resistance to the hegemony of Athens. Thus it was because the institutions of administrative and cultural power were based a mere 25 miles away in Edinburgh, ‘the Athens of the North’, that Stonypath was renamed Little Sparta in 1980. As a wry antithesis, the re-naming was also a reflection on the hard work and frugal life at Little Sparta. Indeed the Spartan associations of resolution, discipline and endurance have more in common with the ruggedness of the Arcadia that continues to be Sparta’s neighbour in southern Greece, than with the arcadian idyll of Virgil’s poetry. In fact the sparse, sheep-rearing terrain of the Pentland Hills has an affinity with the geographical Arcadia, where flocks continue to roam and shepherds’ pipes can still be heard in the mountains. The resonance of this actual, upland Arcadia, combined with the title Little Sparta, infer that the practicalities of gardening necessitate a state of constant warfare — against the assault of bureaucrats, bailiffs and critics, and the insurgencies of weeds, wind-blown seedings, rabbits and mink, the overgrowth of plantings, and the depredations of weather. So, it should not be surprising that at Little Sparta the arcadian-ness of Finlay’s pastoral sculpture invites contemplation not only of the idyllic but also of mortality.

Let us recollect the arcadian sentences from Panofsky that Finlay cited in the proposal for the Serpentine Gallery garden: ‘In Virgil’s ideal Arcady human suffering and superhumanly perfect surroundings create a dissonance. This dissonance, once felt, had to be resolved, and it was resolved in that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquility […]’. Finlay’s interest in articulating the incongruity of dissonance was also stimulated by another of Panofsky’s essays that focuses on the classicising of the mediaeval memento mori as the motto,
‘Et in Arcadia ego’.

Familiarly translated as ‘Even in Arcady I, Death, hold sway’, this motto directly introduces the presence of mortality and imbues the dissonance central to the arcadian pastoral with a frisson of horror. Finlay made explicit this darker aspect of the classical idyll through his published ‘Footnotes’ to Panofsky’s essay.

This emblematic sequence explores the encounter of the arcadian shepherds with the tomb in their idyllic landscape through a sequence of representations after European painters (figure 11), in this case the Italian, Guercino (c.1622). In each one Finlay contemporised the horror implicit in the inscription, ‘Et in Arcadia ego’, by transforming the tomb into a variation on his icon of terror: the battle-tank and insignia of the Third Reich’s elite, Nazi, SS panzer divisions (figure 12). Thus the subsequent translation of this ‘footnote’ into the garden through the relief on a planter introduced a startling memento both of violent death and the abject into his upland Arcady (figure 13).

Finlay was equally intrigued by Panofsky’s contention that English culture had uniquely sustained the elegiac substance of the motto: ‘Et in Arcadia ego’. At Little Sparta, Finlay literally situates visitors as the arcadian shepherds of the painting (c.1636) by the French artist, Nicolas Poussin, in the act of contemplating the provocative tomb in such an idyllic place — inscribed as it is with the motto: ‘Et in Arcadia ego’ (figure 14). However, this particular...
‘tomb’ is an emblem of provocative defiance. As the Monument to the First Battle of Little Sparta, 4th February 1983, it commemorates the repulse of the attempt by bailiffs to seize works from the Temple of Apollo in lieu of the sum demanded as rates. The inscription proves to be Virgilian, from the eighth eclogue: ‘Flute begin with me, Arcadian notes’. But the modern Arcadians are puzzled to find that it is accompanied by the motif of a light machine gun (figure 15). Installed at Little Sparta, the monument reveals a synthesis of arcadian themes: of Polybius’ rugged Greek terrain, of Virgil’s idyll and Panofsky’s elegiac — all of which are mediated through Finlay’s polemological strategy. The medal that commemorates the battle bears the same motif and inscription, and is accompanied by a commentary that invites reflection on the need for an assertive pastoral when Arcadia becomes embattled:

The machine-gun is a visual pun (or play!) on Virgil’s flute, with the vents of the barrel-sleeve as the finger-stops. But — *Et in Arcadia ego* — is the flute to begin, or the gun — or is the duet in fact to be a trio: does the singer (if he is to continue in his pastoral) need both?

Finlay’s question suggests that the pastoral, of necessity, can encompass the ferocity of his combative stance in order to counter the likely ‘death’ of his upland Arcady, Little Sparta, should the local government succeed in claiming commercial rates for the garden temple.

This monument stands as an epitome of Finlay’s celebrated observation that: ‘Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks’. It is worth noting that the garden works that address the horror of Arcady, as mediated through the symbols of modern warfare that register Finlay’s response to the ideas articulated by Panofsky and Virgil, tend to be specific to Little Sparta. Although it is the idyllic resonance of Virgil’s Arcadia that is transplanted abroad, we should appreciate nonetheless that these gardens are also exemplars in the campaign to provoke a consideration of the kind of cultural installation appropriate to the public domain. To this end, Finlay regarded his installations at the Kröller-Müller and Domaine de Kerghuenec...
sculpture parks, and elsewhere, as self-contained neoclassical interventions within landscapes dominated by modernist object sculpture. The catalogue of the Glasgow Garden Festival (1988) has provided a useful record of Finlay’s approach. While it documented the works by Finlay and the other 45 artists from whom installations were commissioned, the catalogue’s text appears to applaud Finlay’s role in the contentious debate about sculpture out-of-doors by highlighting the site-specificity of his pastoral conception of sculpture.

The late 1970s had seen the beginning of attempts to use sculptures as agents of regeneration through the creation of new public spaces, both urban and rural. While sculpture parks and trails had been introduced to Britain in 1977, the widespread inner city disorder during 1981 had prompted urgent calls to regenerate Britain’s apparently declining urban centres. This in turn provided the catalyst for the series of garden festivals that took place between 1984 and 1992 and which effectively functioned as temporary, urban sculpture parks. Glasgow proved to be the most sculpture-rich of all these festivals.

Finlay’s contribution to the Glasgow Garden Festival was the serpentine Country Lane with Stiles. Characteristic of his appreciation on the European mainland, the first public commission of the ‘Stile’ installations was in Holland during 1983. Composed of stone setts bordered on either side by red bricks, the Glasgow ‘Lane’ created the impression of a well-trodden path that, enclosed by planted embankments, led the visitor over a series of stiles:

Four different stiles, in four very different styles, from that of De Stijl (Dutch, 20th century) to traditional Scots and English. Each has a corresponding bench, and all are in the setting of a banked country lane. The banks are planted with birches, willows, hazels and rowans, as well as such hedgerow flowers as foxgloves, bluebells, honeysuckle, buttercups and ox-eye daisies. Within an installation designed for public participation, the four stiles and benches combined the De Stijl (figure 16), as an icon of urban modernism, with traditional vernacular forms (figure 17). As usual, the prototype for one of the latter can be experienced at Little Sparta. The inscription is placed at the top of the post because it is designed to be read in the act of crossing the stile: ‘THESIS/Fence — ANTITHESIS/Gate’. Once you have swung your leg over and turned, you read on the other side of the post: ‘SYNTHESIS/Stile’. Characteristically, the pleasures of walking and of the countryside would be complemented by the sound of wind-rustle and the smell of flower-scent, which proved to be as much a part of this experience as the contemplative inscriptions that punctuated the ‘Lane’.

As one would expect, the Glasgow catalogue emphasised the positive role of sculpture in the task of urban regeneration. However, it was Finlay’s contribution to the festival that was singled out as a means of discussing the problems of placing sculpture out-of-doors. The critic Richard Cork identified the dilemma facing commissioning bodies: on the one hand, there were the practical difficulties of importing autonomous works into a verdant setting; on the other, a site-specific approach entailed the sculptor conceiving the work in the context of its immediate landscape. Cork noted that the distinctiveness of Finlay’s approach generally, as well as in Glasgow, lay in ‘a high degree of landscape design’. Indeed, in another essay, Yves Abrioux maintained that Finlay’s pastoral sculpture appealed to French public patrons...

FIGURE 17. Ian Hamilton Finlay (with Laurie Clark), Stile I, from A Country Lane, 1988 (courtesy: Wild Hawthorn Press).
precisely because of its site-specific approach that created a fusion between sculpture, landscape design and cultural association. Although it was precisely this conjunction that was appreciated in the Glasgow ‘Lane’, it should be remembered that Finlay’s pastoral approach was integral to his polemological programme and that the sculpture park, as a symptom of the debased cultural environment discussed earlier, was a prime target of his neoclassical critique — whether it was articulated by pithy broadsides or subversive installations.

Finlay considered that his favoured synthesis of natural forms and cultural objects was absent from the sculpture park because the exemplary tradition of European gardening had become passé, and thus the role of the plantings was purely to emphasise the form and materiality of autonomous works: ‘The contemporary “sculpture park” is not — and is not considered to be — an art garden, but an art gallery out-of-doors. It is a parody of the classical garden native to the West’ (c.1981). Moreover, as the traditional concept of the integration of sculpture within the garden had been discarded by modernism, Finlay considered that the self-contained autonomy of object sculpture combined with its privileging by contemporary patronage had supplanted the appropriate use of sculpture: ‘Every summer, in Europe’s “sculpture parks”, Art may be seen savaging Nature for the entertainment of tourists’ (1986). Furthermore he was dismayed by the apparently random placement of object sculpture regardless of site specificity: ‘The contemporary “sculpture park” is an ill-designed indoor museum with the roof left off’ (1998).

The Glasgow catalogue coincidentally contextualised Finlay’s critique through an essay entitled ‘Invasion from the Artist’s Studio’, in which Walter Grasskamp warned against the danger of an art ‘whose first breeding ground was in galleries, museums and private houses, [and which] could not but appear out of place in the public arena’. Grasskamp stressed the importance of legibility and a relationship with the site, without which ‘the symbolic barrenness of the autonomous sculpture’ would be perpetuated by works that failed to refer ‘in clearly readable fashion to a collective, current body of meaning’. While Grasskamp’s critique chimed with Finlay’s, Cork and Abrioux deemed the Glasgow ‘Lane’ to be an exemplary piece of site-specific sculpture. Interviewed by Cork, George Mulvagh, the festival director, also noted his appreciation of the environmental and participatory synthesis of Finlay’s installation. He considered that it invoked the countryside ‘but in the town’, and that it provided ‘a private experience in the sense that you go through the lane with high foliage on either side’.

I will conclude by discussing Finlay’s largest public installation in Britain. The commission to regenerate Stockwood Park in Luton (1986) was completed in 1991 and comprises variations on the arcadian idyll already encountered as a characteristic of Finlay’s public gardens. Luton desired a modern interpretation of the green landscape garden of the eighteenth century. Finlay’s proposal drew upon the Liber Veritatis of Claude Lorrain to acknowledge that the landscapes of the seventeenth-century French artist were influential on the development of the English landscape garden. In this example, Finlay’s tree-plaque adorns a proposal ‘after Claude’ (figure 18). In the spirit of The Monteviot Proposal, the Luton Tree-plaque invites us to wonder who or what might utter the words: ‘I Sing for the Muses and Myself’: perhaps the breeze, or the tree? — perhaps even the wood nymph? (that mythological inhabitant of trees). The willow certainly works as an eye-catcher and, like

![Figure 18. Ian Hamilton Finlay (with Gary Hincks), Pastoral Landscape with a Tree-Plaque, after Claude Lorrain (Liber Veritatis, 1649), from Six Proposals for the Improvement of Stockwood Park, 1986 (courtesy: Wild Hawthorn Press).](image)
the temples of a landscape garden, each sculpture is placed so that it is successively concealed and revealed in the course of a promenade within this spacious grove.

Through the proposal’s invocation of Claude Lorrain, Stockwood Park exemplifies the ways in which Finlay’s public gardens translated the elite and exclusive Arcadia of the eighteenth-century landscape garden into the domestic scale of a contemporary Arcadia for ‘everyone’. One might equally say that Finlay’s proposals and installations pastoralised the Victorian idea of the public or People’s Park into a People’s Arcadia. In the overview of Finlay’s miniature landscape garden we can appreciate the siting of each work (figure 19). From left to right we can see the Buried Capital, the Herm of Aphrodite (amidst trees), with (above) the Double Tree-Column Base and Flock of Stones. Further to the right we see the willow to which the Tree-plaque is attached, and the curved screen of The Errata of Ovid.

On the left, the Buried Capital intimates the presence of the former Palladian mansion, demolished in the 1960s. The size of the ‘capital’ introduces a sense of awe at the scale of the buried ruins. To its right, the Herm of Aphrodite resides in the midst of the stand of silver birch trees. The presence of the goddess of love recollects a garden’s purpose as ‘A Lovely Place’ (locus amoenus) as well as ‘A Place for Loving’ (locus amorem), while each line of the ‘concrete’ inscription offers an anagram of Aphrodite’s name: I HARD POET / HOT DIP EAR / O DIRE PATH.

To the right of the stand of silver birch trees, the Double Tree-Column Base serves to identify their presence by example — ‘Betula Pendula/Silver Birch’ — and to stimulate our curiosity about the other species planted in the garden. It also evokes the historical relationship between tree trunks and the architectural column, while the scale of the base indicates that the sculpture will be complete when the birch trees are mature. The Flock of Stones lies adjacent to the two specially re-excavated sections of the Georgian ha-ha. This is the stone-lined ditch that functioned as a sunken wall to allow views from the garden while keeping the flocks outside. As a waggish transgression, this ‘flock’ has been placed inside the ha-ha, within the garden, and its inscription legitimises our presence within the formerly private and elite domain. The ‘flock’ also happens to combine the playful benefit of stepping stones for children with that of a picnic spot. Beyond, we see the willow to which the Tree-plaque is attached.

The focal work is the curved screen whose form is also evocative of the Georgian landscape garden through alluding to the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe. The eight inscribed wall-plaques of The Errata of Ovid constitute a poetic use of the convention for addressing the printed typographical errors (or errata) that inadvertently change the meaning of a text through accidental metamorphoses. By suggesting typographic errors within the influential book, Metamorphoses, by the Roman author Ovid, we are invited to visualise the transformations that take place through gardening. In Ovid’s book, humans not only metamorphose into natural forms, but sometimes leave their names with the flowers, trees, birds, water and sounds that they have become, as for example: ‘for DAPHNE read LAUREL’, ‘for ADONIS read ANENOME’. However, two of the errata eloquently conjoin classical allusion and concrete poetics:

for NARCISSUS read NARCISSUS
for ECHO read echo
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The key to Finlay’s pastoral sculpture always lies in the associative use of words within a composition whose plantings complement inscribed stone to draw the viewer’s attention to the natural environment of the place.

As the Little Sparta Trust takes up the challenge of sustaining the garden for posterity, the problems of conservation have introduced a fresh appreciation of Finlay’s public gardens. Indeed, the varying numbers of visitors that daily enjoy them has illuminated the robust design of Finlay’s response to public commissions. By comparison, Little Sparta was created as a private realm, and nurtured outside the world in which grant aid is determined by visitor numbers. With the increase in visitors, it has become apparent that the fragility of Little Sparta will be eroded by unlimited public access.

New Arcadian Press and Little Sparta Trust

NOTES

1. The hill farm of Stonypath had been the gift of Sue Finlay’s parents, Simon and Caithriona Macdonald Lockhart. Although Ian and Sue Finlay moved into Stonypath in the autumn of 1966, it was the spring of 1967 that saw the initial work in the garden. However, the garden had been a conceptual entity since 1964 when Finlay had begun to envisage concrete poetry that was integral to gardens. See Patrick Eyres (ed.), New Arcadian Journal, 61/62, 2007; Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selected Landscapes.


3. Stephen Bann has usefully described Finlay’s ‘landscape improvements’ as ‘self contained’, see Abrioux (note 2), p. 121. This has proved to be an appropriate term for the public gardens even when they have been inserted into pre-existing landscapes with sculpture, such as the Kröller-Müller and Domaine de Kerghuennec sculpture parks. For more detail on the public gardens in relation to Little Sparta, see Patrick Eyres, ‘Ian Hamilton Finlay and the cultural politics of neoclassical gardening’, Garden History, 28/1, 2000, pp. 152–166, and Patrick Eyres, ‘Naturalizing Neoclassicism: Little Sparta and the Public Gardens of Ian Hamilton Finlay’, in: Patrick Eyres and Fiona Russell (eds), Proposal for the Serpentine Gallery Garden (London: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1998), unpaginated, for the Eight Benches, Tree-Plaque and the Paved Area. The kernel of the latter incorporates the tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales, the gallery’s former patron, which was added after her death in July 1997.

4. For example, in 1983 a column was installed as an eye-catcher at the far end of the Lakelet and its pedestal bore the inscription (from Saint Just): ‘The World has been Empty since the Romans’ (see illustration in Abrioux [note 2], p. 263). However, it was considered inappropriate and relocated as a tumbled ruin beside the grotto.

5. Thus his prolific output was able to encompass prints, textiles, books, sculpture and installations for a variety of interior and outdoor sites. Throughout his productive career, it was the diverse contexts of display that always determined the scale and medium, whether an artwork was destined for a building, garden, park, or landscape, or exhibition and publication. For an overview of Finlay’s œuvre, see Abrioux (note 2); for architectural and landscape works, see Pia Simig and Zdenek Felix (eds), Ian Hamilton Finlay: Works in Europe, 1972-1995 (Ostfildern: Editions Cantz, 1995), unpaginated, with John Dixon Hunt (introduction), Werner Panofsky, ‘Et in Arcadia ego: on the Conception of Transcience in Poussin and Watteau’ (1935), in: R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (eds), Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 223–254. For Finlay’s mediation of Panofsky’s Arcadian discourse, see Yves Abrioux, Ian Hamilton Finlay, A Visual Primer (London: Reaktion Books, 2nd edn 1992), pp. 241–247.

6. For more detail, see Eyres (note 3), ‘Neoclassical gardening’, pp. 152–166. By 1961, Finlay had become an established figure in Scottish avant-garde literary circles. In 1963 he published his first collection of concrete poems and the following year began to envisage concrete poetry that was integral to gardens. From 1964 to 1966 he started to implement these ideas through the printed poem-gardens and the garden poem-sculptures around his former homes at Ardgay in the Highlands and Coaltown of Callange, near St Andrew’s in Fife.

Hannapfel (photographs) and Harry Gilonis (commentaries); for the prints, see Simig and Pahlke (note 8), 


14. Due to health difficulties, Finlay did not create a proposal for St George’s, Bristol. However, his intentions are recorded in the summary of the project by Jonathan Stacey, Director of the Music Trust: letter to Ian Hamilton Finlay, 5 February 1999 (Archive: St George’s, Bristol). The three pairs of benches that offer rest and reflection are complemented by three other evocative works: the wall-plaque, medallion and teak post. See Eyres (note 3), New Arcadian Journal, no. 61/62.

15. Finlay (note 12), The Monteviot Proposal. All quotations in this paragraph are from this source; the emphases are Finlay’s.


17. Finlay (note 12), The Monteviot Proposal. All quotations in this paragraph are from this source; the emphases are Finlay’s.

18. Finlay’s emphasis, ibid.

19. For the Forest of Dean, see R. Martin, The Sculpted Forest: Sculpture in the Forest of Dean (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 1990), p. 57.

20. These are Lycurgus, Corot, Robespierre, Michelet and Rousseau, all of whom are represented in the Pantheon at Little Sparta.


27. Yves Abrioux et al. (note 22), p. 244. For detailed discussions of The Little Spartan War, see Abrioux (note 22); Bann and Eyres (note 23); Eyres, New Arcadian Journal (note 23).


30. One exception among his permanent public installations is The Arcadian Dream Garden at St Mary Axe in the City of London (2004), which borders the piazza that surrounds The Gherkin. Unlike the Serpentine Gallery garden, this is an environment marked by work and haste, and by the simultaneity of architectural splendour and alienation. It is also a landscape of wealth generation that is no stranger to wartime bombing and terrorist assault. Here passers-by are invited to contemplate the incongruous conjunctions of Finlay’s Arcady: of tranquillity within work-a-day busy-ness, of the horror of death within an idyllic terrain. See Eyres (note 1), New Arcadian Journal, 61/62, 2007.

41. Tragically, the bronze head of The Herm of Aphrodite was stolen on the night of 26/27 February 2000. Efforts to replace the head have redoubled since Luton Council was awarded grant aid for Stockwood Park by the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2006. By July 2007 Patrick Eyres had identified not only the Hellenistic statue in the British Museum from which the head had been cast, but also various means through which the new head could be made. Rebecca Willem, the curator of Stockwood Park Museum remains optimistic that restoration of The Herm of Aphrodite will be completed during 2008.
43. Ian Hamilton Finlay, inscription for the Flock of Stones: ‘FLOCK, n. a number of a kind, an amplitude. The Pythagoreans regarded men as the property of the gods, as a sort of FLOCK, which may not leave its fold without the consent of the gods. – Zeller’.
44. Bob Burgoyne, in conversation with the author (20 April 2007), mentioned that Finlay didn’t mind about this, regarding it as the way of the world. Bob Burgoyne had supervised the creation of Finlay’s improvement garden at Stockwood Park.
45. Finlay had earlier (1979) deployed the erratum slip (for a single error), with polemic playfulness: ‘Erratum: Arts Council/For “Mind” read “Void”’. For another example of the use of ‘Erratum’, see Simig and Pahlke (note 8), p. 27.