

## Ian Hamilton Finlay, 1925–2006: sculpture as a fusion of poetry and place

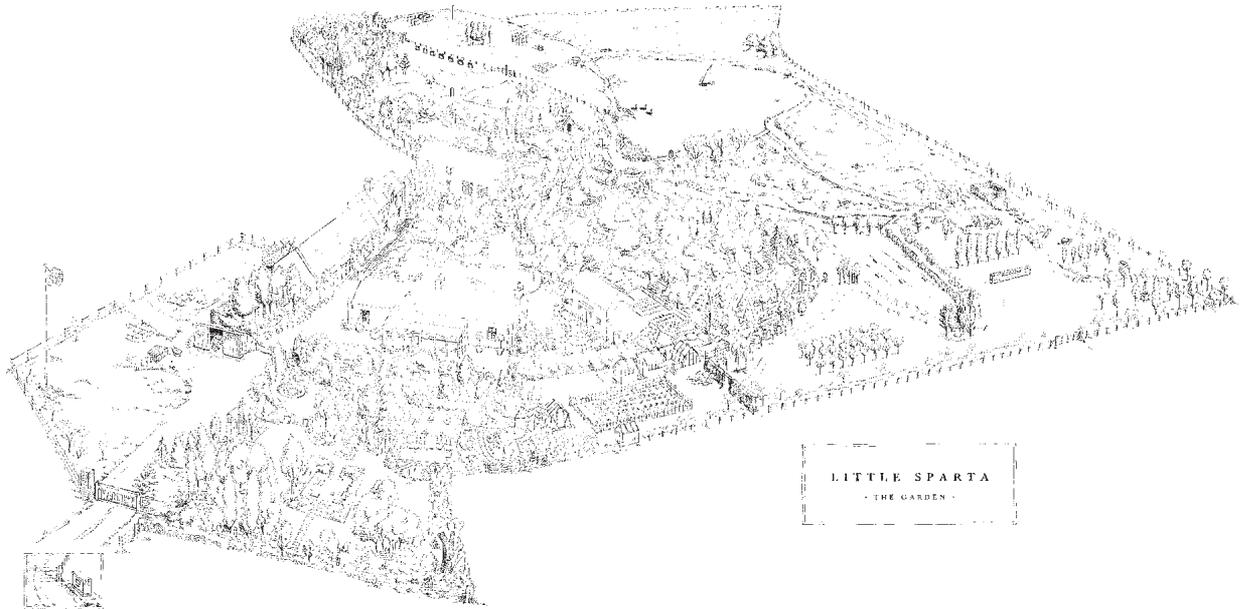
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On Monday 27 March 2006, Ian Hamilton Finlay died at the age of eighty. We lament the passing of a Renaissance man: poet, sculptor, artist, philosopher, landscape gardener. This range of activity acknowledges the interdisciplinary thinking that infused his creative process. However, in view of his extraordinary achievement, it is a surprise to recollect that he was not trained in any of these disciplines. He did not attend university or complete any course at art school. Instead he was self-taught and won international recognition as a leading exponent of the modernist genre of concrete poetry. Indeed it was through the visual dynamic of concrete poetry that he evolved a way of fusing

words and plant-ings to create a unique type of environmental sculpture. Yet, as the word was always his starting point, Finlay preferred to be described as a poet.

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. Similarly, it was through the challenge of realizing his ideas with exquisite quality in the right materials that he initiated the practice of collaborating with artists, craftsmen and architects. Consequently his prolific output encompassed prints, textiles, books, sculpture and installations for a variety of interior and outdoor sites.<sup>1</sup>

Whether engaged with the modernism of concrete poetry in the 1960s and 70s, or a neoclassical postmodernism, Finlay consistently upheld the traditional function of art as a repository and transmitter of meaning. Thus the interdisciplinary thrust of his *oeuvre* was not only programmatic



1. Gary Hincks, *Little Sparta Overview*, 2002, pen and ink, 260 × 510 mm, Collection Gary Hincks

but also polemical in its sustained critique of certain twentieth-century conventions.<sup>2</sup> Among Finlay's concerns were the separation of poetry and the visual arts, the modernist disjuncture between avant-garde and tradition, the privileging of object-based sculpture, and the phenomenon of the sculpture park. Nonetheless, his continuing neoclassicism forged a reconciliation between modernist and postmodernist practices in his work, in the way it embraced a minimalism which synthesizes concrete poetics and the elegant simplicity of the classical inscription.

Far from being historicist, Finlay's neoclassicism is not only affiliated to the recent discourse of non-object-based sculpture, but also addresses contemporary culture through contemplating issues as apparently disparate as *Terror and the Divine*. It was through his interest in the garden as a site for artworks that he began to embrace practices that are recognizably sculptural. As a result Finlay's principal legacy resides in the four-acre, neoclassical garden developed over the past forty years around his home at Little Sparta on the edge of the Pentland Hills in southern Scotland. This is the place that became the epicentre of his cultural production. As a landmark work of art – innovative, organic, unique – it is an awe-inspiring experience. Yet it is a private realm that has been created on a domestic

scale to reflect upon contemporary ideas, to salute cultural heroes and to invoke the European tradition of the classical garden.

Little Sparta stands in hill-farming country, over 300 metres above sea-level, where the continuous struggles of gardening are compounded by the seasonal onslaughts of the weather. Nonetheless this former upland croft has been transformed into an embowered haven, whose numerous glades and pools have been designed as settings for inscribed sculpture. Begun in 1967, the garden had been a conceptual entity since 1964. Finlay had become an established figure in Scottish avant-garde literary circles by 1961. 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, before moving to the hill farm of Stonypath.

The garden was created gradually through the twenty-three-year collaboration with Sue Finlay. It had been Sue's parents, Simon and Caitriona Macdonald Lockhart, who had given them Stonypath as a gift. The plantings are crucial. Hardy trees and shrubs form the skeleton of the

garden, provide shelter from the elements and are integral to the composition of Finlay's sculpture. However it was the programme of neo-classicizing, which began during the 1970s, that led to the re-naming of Stonypath as Little Sparta in about 1980, and that has shaped the place as it is today.<sup>3</sup> Only vestiges remain of the concrete poet-ics at Stonypath between 1967 and 1975, and so we must consult other sources of documentation. Even though these are plentiful,<sup>4</sup> it is preferable to visit Stuttgart for his self-contained garden at the Max Planck Institute (1975).<sup>5</sup>

As Finlay familiarized himself 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 classical use of inscriptions. Thus he began to appreciate the resonances invoked by association-endowed inscriptions, and the possibility of transforming a site through the poetics of metaphor, whether a landscape or a gallery. Finlay's use of the inscription resists focusing exclusively on the sculptural object. Instead, the object is only one element within a work composed of plantings, ground and relation to the overall site. He was emphatic about the key role of composition: 'The art of gardening is like the art of writing, of painting, of sculpture; it is the art of composing and making a harmony, with disparate elements'.<sup>6</sup>

Through his summary of the neo-classical re-arming at Little Sparta during the late 1970s, *The Monteviot Proposal* (1979) invites us to appreciate the 'disparate elements' of Finlay's sculpture: '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'.<sup>7</sup> A splendid example of Finlay's approach is the headstone carved to resemble a temple façade. It bears the inscription, 'Bring Back The Birch'. 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. In addition, the associations of the words complement the idea of each work by drawing attention to the sights, scents and sounds which amplify enjoyment of the sensuousness of 'place'. Animated by weather, the garden becomes an Aeolian harp, whose cadence is played by wind soughing through trees and shrubs. Simultaneously the rustle of a breeze delights the eye with the dance of sun dapple and leaf shadow.

Although it was never realized, *The Monteviot Proposal* has proved to be Finlay's most extensive statement about the theory and practice of his sculpture, and he would reiterate that it continued to be a valued touchstone. Clearly there is an affinity between this approach and the post-conceptual, non-object-based sculptural discourse. Furthermore, he was critical of the self-contained autonomy that allowed modernist sculpture to be placed in a variety of environments regardless of site specificity. To his way of thinking the word was the catalyst that generated associations which embraced the other elements of each composition, such as the trees and the place, even the weather. Consequently the extensive repertoire of objects considered worthy of inscription encompassed the tree-plaque, bench, obelisk, planter, bridge and tree-column base, as well as the headstone – and the roll-call of craft-collaborators amounts to a gazetteer of contemporary British stone-carving and letter-cutting.

While thoroughly modern, Finlay enjoyed a passionate sense of history and took delight in the tradition of the garden as an antidote to the surrounding culture – as a site of poetic, philosophical and political discourse – and associated his art with the lyric garden-making of the Georgian poet William Shenstone at The Leasowes, and with the pugnaciousness of Lord Cobham's Stowe. Finlay's works are a pleasure to experience and, while always challenging, they have often provoked controversy due to his startling use of shock tactics, which generally combine surprise and an impish sense of humour. Aircraft carriers become bird tables and feathery 'aeroplanes' swoop down to refuel. Through the movement of shadow, sundials were celebrated as examples of avant-garde Kinetic Art. Hand grenades



2. Chris Broughton, *Stockwood Park Overview*, 1992, pen and ink, 420 x 297 mm, *New Arcadian Journal*, no 33/34 (1992)

replace traditional pineapple finials atop the entrance to a garden walk.

Indeed Little Sparta has flourished as much through conflict as through poetic reverie. Finlay was embattled not only by weather but also by warfare – as his garden was assaulted by critics and bailiffs alike. In some quarters his quest to redeem neoclassicism from the taint of Nazi-ism was regarded as proof of fascism. In others, his longstanding challenge to the local authority's rating definition of the Temple of Apollo as a commercial art gallery was condemned as a transgression beyond the bounds of creative activity. 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.

Even the re-naming of the garden exemplified both his puckish wit and the polemical thrust of his work at that time. Already in dispute with Scottish officialdom, he associated his campaign with that of ancient Sparta's resistance to the hegemony of Athens. As the institutions of administrative and cultural power were based a mere twenty-five miles away in Edinburgh, 'the Athens of the North', Stonypath became Little Sparta. As a wry antithesis, the re-naming was also a comment on the hard work and frugal life at Little Sparta. Fortunately patrons in main-

land Europe appreciated Finlay's sculptural fusion of landscape design, cultural association and site specificity – and the commissions in Germany (1975), Holland (1982) and France (1985) pioneered recognition of his works in Britain.

Finlay's achievement at Little Sparta can be appreciated through the bird's-eye-view drawing by Gary Hincks (fig. 1). The approach up the bridleway from the minor road through the Vale of Dunsyre is marked, just below the garden, by the monument to the epic Battle of Little Sparta (1983).<sup>8</sup> We can see that the place is made up of a number of gardens that burgeon within and beyond the pre-existing farmstead garden, which is now known as the Front Garden. The farmyard midden has become the Temple Pool and is flanked by buildings converted into temples: the former cow byre is dedicated to Apollo (left) and the erstwhile coal shed to Philemon and Baucis (right). Beyond the farmstead barn, the sylvan dell of the Woodland Garden is a labyrinth of hermetic glades that embower two pools, an aqueduct, a rill, a pantheon and a grotto. The Wild Garden encompasses plantation, moorland and lochan (or little loch). Since the early 1990s the dramatic improvement has been the extensive area to the right known as the English Parkland. We can see the confluence of the rill that flows through the Wild Garden with the burn

1 For an overview of Finlay's *oeuvre*, see Y. Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay, A Visual Primer*, 2nd edition, London, 1992; for architectural and landscape works, see P. Simig and Z. Felix (eds), *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Works in Europe, 1972–95*, Ostfildern, 1995; for the prints, see P. Simig and R. Pahlke (eds), *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Prints, 1963–97*, Ostfildern, 1997.

2 For the polemical, see Y. Abrioux, 'The Heroic Mode: The Third Reich Revisited and The Little Spartan War', *New Arcadian Journal*, 15, 1984, unpaginated, and Abrioux, as at note 1.

3 See J. Sheeler, *Little Sparta: the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, London, 2003.

4 See, for example, D. Paterson, with introductions by S. Bann and B. Lassus, *Selected Ponds*, Reno, 1976, and S. Bann, 'A Description of Stonypath', *Journal of Garden History*, 1, 2, 1981, pp. 113–44.

5 For Finlay's garden at the Max Planck Institute, Stuttgart, see Simig and Felix, as at note 1. 'Self-contained' is the phrase used by Stephen Bann in relation to Finlay's 'landscape improvements', see Abrioux, as at note 1, p. 121.

6 I. H. Finlay (with P. Simig), *Sentences*, Edinburgh, 2005, n.p.

7 I. H. Finlay (with N. Sloan), *The Monteviot Proposal*, 1979. All eighteen pages are reproduced in P. Eyres (ed.), *Mr. Aislabie's Gardens*, Leeds, 1981, n.p.

8 See P. Eyres, 'Despatches from The Little Spartan War', *New Arcadian Journal*, 23, 1986, pp. 3–37, and P. Eyres, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: emblems and iconographies, medals and monuments', *Medal*, 31, 1997, pp. 73–84.

9 See H. Gilonis, 'Emblematical and Expressive: the gardenist modes of William Shenstone and Ian Hamilton Finlay', *New Arcadian Journal*, 53/54, 2002, pp. 86–109.

10 For examples, see Simig and Felix, as at note 1.

11 See, for example, T. Lubbock in *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Maritime Works* (exh. cat.), Tate St Ives, 2002, pp. 5–17, for a discussion of the nautical theme that is common to the works exhibited, and which permeates the garden at Little Sparta.

12 See Simig and Felix, as at note 1, and, for a more recent example, P. Eyres, 'Variations on several themes: Ian Hamilton Finlay in Barcelona', *Sculpture Journal*, IV, 2000, pp. 182–86.

13 For the self-contained gardens in relation to Little Sparta, see P. Eyres, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay and the cultural politics of neoclassical gardening', *Garden History*, 28, 1, 2000, pp. 152–66, and P. Eyres, 'Naturalizing Neoclassicism: Little Sparta and the Public Gardens of Ian Hamilton Finlay', in P. Eyres and F. Russell (eds), *Sculpture and the Garden*, Aldershot, 2006.

that cascades from the lochan. We can also see on the far right a gardener's wheelbarrow.

Placed on a lawn, this bronze cast of a utilitarian modern wheelbarrow is simply inscribed: W. SHENSTONE 1714–63. The combination of text, object and the environment of the English Parkland invites association with the poet-gardener who coined the term 'landscape gardening'. It is fitting that Finlay's tribute to Shenstone visualized the physical toil required to realize the vision shared by the two poet-gardeners.<sup>9</sup> They certainly shared the frustration of being continuously short of funds. With the benefit of hindsight, we can appreciate the ironic advantage of impecuniousness. It obliged a rigorous consideration of the function, scale, material and appropriateness of each work before slender resources were committed to production.

The genius of Little Sparta lies in Finlay's combination of artwork-in-progress and nursery-of-ideas which could be transplanted into the wider world. Initially the larger commissions came from mainland Europe and later from North America and Britain. The poetics nurtured in the private arena of Little Sparta were exported into the public domain through commissions for architectural projects,<sup>10</sup> for gallery exhibitions,<sup>11</sup> for sculpture as an element of a pre-existing landscape,<sup>12</sup> and also by commissions for self-contained gardens.<sup>13</sup> The Tree-plaques at the Domaine de Kerguehenec (1985) were envisaged in the manner described by the earlier quotation from *The Monteviot Proposal* – within the pre-existing and mature woodland landscape of the Breton sculpture trail. While the Max Planck Institute was the first commission for a self-contained garden (1975), the hermetic *Sacred Grove* at the Kroller Müller (1982) is also self-contained, even though it is within the pre-existing landscape of the Dutch sculpture park.

Notable examples of British commissions include Stockwood Park in Luton (1986), the Forest of Dean sculpture trail (1988), the garden of the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens (1992) and the churchyard of St George's, Bristol (2002). As the Little Sparta Trust takes up the challenge of sustaining the garden, Finlay's public gardens become instructive in this fresh context. 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. By comparison, the robust design of works for public commissions has acknowledged that these places are enjoyed daily by varying numbers of visitors. The people's arcadia for Stockwood Park, Luton (1986, completed 1991) is an example that can be appreciated through Chris Broughton's bird's-eye-view (fig. 2).<sup>14</sup>

Within this spacious grove, we can amble across lawns and beneath foliage to enjoy the variety of site-specific environmental sculpture. On the left, the *Buried Capital* intimates the presence of the former Palladian mansion, demolished in the 1960s. To the right, the *Herm of Aphrodite* resides in the midst of a stand of silver birch trees. It recollects a garden's purpose as 'A Lovely Place' (*locus amoenus*) as well as 'A Place for Loving' (*locus amorem*). To one side, the *Double Tree-Column Base* serves to identify the trees – 'Betula Pendula / Silver Birch' – and to remind us of the historic relationship between tree trunks and the architectural column. The *Flock of Stones* lies adjacent to the specially excavated sections of the Georgian ha-ha – the sunken wall that allowed views from the garden while keeping the animals outside. As a waggish transgression, this 'flock' has been placed inside the ha-ha, within the garden; 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. In the spirit of *The Monteviot Proposal*, the *Tree-plaque* invites us to wonder who or what might utter the words: 'I Sing for the Muses and Myself'.

On the far right stands the curved screen containing the *Errata of Ovid*, a poetic use of the convention for addressing printed typographic errors (errata). Finlay had earlier deployed the erratum slip, with polemic playfulness:

Erratum: Arts Council

For 'Mind' read 'Void'

In Stockwood Park, he offers a quiz through the errata inscribed on eight plaques set into the architectural screen. By implying typographic errors in the text of the influential book, *Metamorphoses*, by the Roman author Ovid, he invites us to



3. Little Sparta, empty boat.  
28 October 2005  
(photo: Alison Campbell)

14 See I. H. Finlay (with G. Hincks), *Six Proposals for Stockwood Park, Luton*, reproduced with commentary by P. Eyres, 'A Peoples' Arcadia', in *New Arcadian Journal*, 33/34, 1992, pp. 61–103. See also S. Bann, 'A Luton Arcadia: Ian Hamilton Finlay's contribution to the English neoclassical tradition', *Journal of Garden History*, 33, 1–2, 1993, pp. 104–12, and L. Burckhardt, trans. L. Lendrum, *Sculpture in the Park: The Hamilton Finlay Sculpture Garden, Stockwood Park, Luton*, Luton, 1991.

15 For the Little Sparta Trust, see <[www.littlesparta.org](http://www.littlesparta.org)>, and P. Eyres, 'Planting for Perpetuity', *Historic Gardens Review*, 16, 2006, pp. 22–27.

visualize the gardenist transformations that take place; for example:

for DAPHNE read LAUREL  
for ADONIS read ANENOME

However, two of the errata eloquently conjoin concrete poetics and classical allusion:

for NARCISSUS read NARCISSUS  
for ECHO read *echo*

The key always lies in the associative use of words within a composition whose plantings complement inscribed stone to complete Finlay's environmental sculpture.

In recent years Finlay has been fêted by Scottish institutions which have perceived a Scottish-ness in his pugnacious individuality and polemical critique of establishments – whether in the arts, official patronage or local government. In 2005, during the celebrations of his eightieth birthday, Finlay was hailed as Scotland's greatest living artist.

Positive in his foresight, Finlay formulated plans with the Little Sparta Trust to ensure that the garden will be conserved

and remain open to the public (fig. 3).<sup>15</sup>

Only a month before his death, he announced to the Trust that the garden's climactic flourish will transform the farmstead barn from hazardous ruin into an open-air walled garden evocative of the mediaeval *hortus conclusus*. Work is already underway supervised by Pia Maria Simig who, as Finlay's associate since the early 1990s, has been engaged in all aspects of his *oeuvre*. This summer, during removal of the dilapidated roof, an archaeological fragment of a mythic era was excavated by chance. This faded wooden sign had graced the entrance to the garden on the day of the heroic Battle of Little Sparta. In elegant, italic calligraphy it invited the bailiffs to 'Please Sod Off'. Ian Hamilton Finlay will be sorely missed – for his cultural innovation, his ferocious reputation, his disarming charm, his visionary thinking, his softly spoken wit – and for his pleasure in the enjoyment of visitors in the garden.