

The 'fourth nature' in the Landscape Lab

– the recent work of Birgit Schuh

by Susanne Altmann

“In addition, such a gardener also has to certainly understand the compass / in order to divide the garden artfully into proportions / drafting it / and then to set the whole form down on paper or parchment / evenly measured in respect to the number and the shape / ... / so that after this disegno, he is able to give account and conclusive information at any time...”¹

Wolf Helmhardt von Hohberg, a German aristocrat and estate owner, wrote the above advice in a didactic treatise in 1688. In it, he set down instructions about how to ideally manage an estate and perform all the required tasks needed to this end. The text appeared in a time when man's intervention into the natural environment was also beginning to be dealt with on a theoretical level. However, this discourse did not only take form in agriculture, but was also exhibited in the recreational parks and ornamental gardens. Hohberg richly illustrated his remarks with drawings of garden beds, labyrinths and other design elements in order to offer universal instructions to respective gardeners. Interestingly, he employs the term *disegno* to describe these types of drawings. The term *disegno* (or 'Disegno' in the original text) has been used at least since the time of Giorgio Vasari, when ideas about independent composition and the potential of design circulated through the fine arts, and *disegno* was considered to be ideas that have verily taken physical form. In an epoch when the art of gardening was emancipated from the periphery to an art form in itself, the early landscape designer (as the term suggests) was consciously or unconsciously required to have artistic ambitions. In this sense, human intervention into the landscape was not only started on the drawing board, but can also be seen as an aesthetic and reflective gesture.

It is exactly this connection between the active intervention in the landscape, the artistic planning and preparation and the ensuing documentation that Birgit Schuh examines in many of her works. Already in 2012 with *Landscape Lab*, a series of postcard-sized drawings were created that look like aerial photographs of landscapes such as a highway junction, a park and a viaduct to name just a few. The use of the bird's eye view evinces a strong degree of abstraction. The artist expands this even further into an artistically perceived rendering, almost a full-fledged ornament in and of itself. In a photographic context, the slightly slanted position blurs the borders between a reflection of reality and the possible design – stylistically supported by the watery application of color. Birgit Schuh registers and interprets this evidence of the human propensity towards design and appropriation. This is the program of her self-proclaimed Landscape Lab. With this project, she has devoted herself to intentionally aestheticized arenas such as gardens or parks, as well as to natural environments that have been transformed in various ways due to purely utilitarian interests.

In her two works, *Map PG* and *Map GG* produced in 2012, she juxtaposes both principles of land use – attaining pleasure and utilitarian function. In this way, she opens a broad operational field in which to reflect upon nature, landscape and the diverse ways they are appropriated.

The two large drawings, each almost two and a half meters wide, start from a *disegno* that is more of a rational medium. *Map PG* is based on a historical map of the Plauen Ground (a narrow section of the Weisseritz River valley). Similarly, *Map GG* is also based on a Baroque map of Grosse Garten. Both sites are located in Dresden and represent distinctive symbols of the cityscape. However it is not the local distinctiveness that the artist emphasizes, but rather the archetypal qualities of these maps are more important. In any case, the Plauen Ground confronts us with a landscape which was formed within an intact natural environment and that gradually developed into what we see today.

Even in the 19th century, Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and his contemporaries made pilgrimages there to paint and draw this idyllic place that was relatively near to the city. In the 18th century, the valley served as a picturesque setting for the festivals of the Baroque aristocracy, without having any severe changes made to it. Nevertheless, traces of early industrialization can be found in the works of the Romantic artists as well. The road through the verdant valley was soon widened for trade, the course of the Weisseritz River was domesticated for the mills and later flanked by new train tracks leading westwards. Also, a lot of building, quarries and more recently, a monumental highway bridge has changed the face of nature. Even so, the Plauen Ground has retained a bit of its original state. Birgit Schuh's drawing points to this and, in a certain sense, goes beyond the changes to the landscape's infrastructure because she concentrates on its graphic characteristics in terms of elements of composition. Light lowlands and dark highlands take on a life of their own that is beyond functional intervention. The wet ink, the wild hatchings join together to give the whole a gestural, seemingly unruly sprawling atmosphere.

As an artistic vision, Birgit Schuh takes the creative force of nature once more into her consciousness just as if the wilderness has re-conquered the terrain. We simultaneously delve into the sketch and into the anatomy of a landscape and are invited to explore it. This invitation is also symbolically reinforced by the calculated folds of the drawing that follow the folds of an ordinary hiking map. The three dimensional ridges of the folds animate the drawing of the landscape even further as the crumpled paper is reminiscent of a relief map. In *Map GG*, Birgit Schuh takes a very similar approach. However, here the work is not oriented on a hiking map, but on the standardized folds of architectural plans. This is not by accident – the subject of *Map GG* is actually a site that was created on a drawing board. Although Grosse Garten was planned at first as a park in the style of the Italian Renaissance, Johann Friedrich Karcher took over the planning in 1683. Karcher was a student of the French landscape architect Andre Le Nôtre, and accordingly changed the design to fit Baroque sensibilities and completed the project in 1722.² His layout with the representative palace at the intersection of the main axis, the square flower beds and exact axial placement of the water basins follow the rational principles used in representational architecture at that time. Of course, there have been modifications to the park over the centuries, nevertheless the central dramaturgy of the original design still reigns. In her drawing, Birgit Schuh also follows these formal guidelines in her technique. She stencils the well-ordered network of pathways on her map; that is before she powerfully takes her ink brush to it. In the end, she is also successful here in giving the impression of the power of nature that is almost impossible to control – that anarchistically defies the elements of design.

This reflective interpretation of nature recalls the artistic preoccupation with vegetation and landscape that is becoming more popular since the 1990's. In her book, *Fourth Nature*, printed in 2000, Brigitte Franzen has attempted to extend the three categories of natural spaces delineated by the amount of human intervention present in them.³ She sees the present involvement of the arts with nature as another category - a fourth nature. The activities in the spaces of fourth nature range, "from actual gardening, sculptural work procedures to their metaphorical treatment..."⁴ and closely follow "the definition of the garden as a third nature, as an artificial-natural hybrid."⁵

We can also comprehend Birgit Schuh's analyses of designed landscapes as a metaphorical attempt under the auspices of a fourth nature – as carried out largely on paper, but also in her photographs or sculptures. They are just as relevant for the examination of human appropriation of nature as they are to the earth and vegetation works Franzen speaks of. Birgit Schuh's artwork offers a profound and contemporary reaction to the traditional formulas of the order of nature: first (pristine wilderness), second (interventions by civilization) and third (gardens). She particularly shows a sensibility for the tensions in the third nature in two further works both produced in 2012 – *Small Map (GG)* and *Large Map (GG)*. Here she uses a starkly abstracted plan of the Grosse Garten (again in a rather prototypical form) as the starting point for a wall sculpture. She translates the emerging network of

pathways into plastic material. In contrast to the ink drawing of *Map GG*, the network now appears as a dark, positive form. The material she uses is wood that has been specially treated. The decision to use an organic material, (albeit by scientific standards, radically remodeled and adapted to present day technological perceptions), is in the end, an allegory for how nature and landscape change and are either actively or passively subject to the growing desires of mankind – with undoubtedly ambivalent results. In this specific case, modern research has made use of the malleable characteristics of wood; it reacts to heat and humidity.

As Birgit Schuh covered the flat wooden frame with hot ink, the material warped. This process led to a spatial distortion, to a concomitant three-dimensional drawing. With these very intentional deviations, the artist symbolically addresses the contrast between the distinct garden philosophies of the 18th and 19th centuries. Birgit Schuh asks, “Don’t such Baroque gardens contain a certain absolute arrogance that is opposed to later ideas dedicated to the principle of a free landscape?”⁶ She confronts this arrogance, as she already has in the drawings, *Maps PG / GG* with strategies of destruction and implicit disintegration stating that, “before nature, man-made accurateness must always capitulate.”⁷ The beauty of symmetry juxtaposed to the beauty of disintegration. This does not mean that the artist would deny her own fascination for harmonious symmetry. Rather, she puts these forms of (cultural) historical greatness to the test and thereby allegorically leaves the safety net of designed stability.

Something similar happens in the group of works entitled, *Plan GG* (2013) – even if at first glance *Plan GG* appears to be exactly the opposite of anarchy. The series is a spatial composition of drawings done in string, but it also takes on the shape of a garden layout as a sheer, inexhaustible source of inspiration.⁸ The delicate tensions seem to strictly adhere to the aesthetic of axial symmetry. In diverse hues and variations, the lines could have been originally taken from an early set of instructions for designing a garden – one that perhaps Hohberg or the French design genius and author, André Mollet might have written⁹. These early drawings did not only serve as a plan to practically build a recreational park, but were also an analysis of the existing land formations. Birgit Schuh, in taking the approach of an interpreting, analyzing and expanding fourth nature, freely moves within the frame defined by the format of the paper. She passionately stretches the string to form new shapes and does away with the mandate of landscape design utility. In the dense web of string, she builds in disruptions, celebrating the loss of control and irrationality. Nevertheless, when taking a closer look, it is evident how persistently the underlying historical garden plan continues to have an effect. Like an inextinguishable archetype, it deludes our senses as we overlook the flaws built in by the artist.

On a meta-level, the string drawings can be seen as a clever commentary on the generally conflicting experiences in the planning and construction processes, and ultimately, also on the sometimes haphazard methods of the natural sciences. These references are not surprising when one considers the biography of the artist, namely her studies of mathematics. This fact harkens to the characteristic Hohberg ascribed to the ideal gardener who must have a compass in hand in order to form “evenly measured in respect to the number and the shape” proportions. With her knowledge of mathematics in tow, Birgit Schuh can expertly stage her version of *disegno*, which is a collision of order and disruption, and parallel to this, invoke the heuristic qualities of rules and measures. In this way, she subsequently transformed the aforementioned large ink drawings of *Map PG / Map GG* with grid-like folds. The even grids not only give the paper a relief-like note, they also organize the pictured landscapes into systematic and manageable sections.¹⁰ This is exactly what topographic maps and plans do, – they impose a grid upon the landscape dividing it into digestible portions and so, support its appropriation. However, in order to achieve this result, the world must be measured and this was once done in a laborious and often adventurous manner. As Birgit Schuh also systematically visited the old survey columns (used to standardize measurements of distance) that were erected by the Kingdom

of Saxony and made a rubbings of their inscriptions¹¹, she was doing nothing other than placing herself in this process of recording the world and rediscovering the area for herself. She straddles between the real, tangible space of the landscape and the abstract, printed (or digitalized) map and by taking this step, experiences it with her own body. In her artistic space of the Landscape Lab, she can experiment with arrangement, and choose the order and method of taking evidence herself. She has the complete freedom even to conduct a sort of a reverse test as in her work, with the succinct title, *Mountain* (2012). *Mountain* comes across as a model, the plaster painted with ink and pigments, of a fictional peak that is minutely researched in the intimacy of the Landscape Lab. The artist transferred the contour lines step by step in a purely plastic process and placed them onto a canvas medium. There, she composed the top view as a formation of irregular concentric circles, a sort of string drawing of another kind. Experimental cartography is the result of the artwork, once more because the installation is also completed by a third element; a silhouette of the mountain is projected on the wall. The shadow becomes an archetype of landscape that always conceals a last secret – no matter with what method it is measured and recorded with.

1 Quote taken from: Stefan Schweizer, *Die Erfindung der Gartenkunst*, München 2013, p.190

2 cf: Gabriele Uerscheln, *Meisterwerke der Gartenkunst*, Stuttgart 2006, p. 143 f.

3 In the first chapter of her book, Franzen defines the first order of nature as untouched, the second as modified through civilization and the third as an aestheticized form. She then builds upon this order and presents her thesis of a fourth nature. cf: Brigitte Franzen, *Die vierte Natur. Gärten in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, Köln 2000, p.10-21 or Brigitte Franzen, *Künstlertärten*, in: Hubertus Butin, *DuMonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, Köln 2002, p. 193 ff.

4 Franzen 2002, p.195

5 Franzen 2000, p.9

6 Birgit Schuh in conversation with the author, Dresden, March 2014

7 Schuh. ditto.

8 This refers to the oldest known plan of the Royal Grossen Garten from 1683 and ascribed to Martin Göttler.

9 cf: Schweizer 2013, p.258 ff.

10 The logic of creating grids has accompanied the sites of human settlements and structures just as they are also used systematically examine the area of certain archeological and geological sites. Other artists who are also dealing with the topic of landscape have been influenced by this form. For example, the US artist Karthik Pandian with "Unearth" (2010) explored the pre-Colombian excavation site, Cahokia (near St. Louis) where such a grid was laid down. Here, a net of lines was created that intentionally exhibited a minimalism, but relinquished any claim to a wide-reaching autonomy. cf. Karthik Pandian, *Unearth*, Whitney New York 2010

11 The rubbing of the inscriptions follows the individual motifs in the printing method of algraphy. Presently (2014), within the framework of this project called Triangulization, the rubbings "Station Borsberg", "Station Buchberg" and "Station Bae-yerhöhe" have been made.

abstract of:

Birgit Schuh: Landschaftslabor

© 2014 Verlag für zeitgenössische Kunst und Theorie, Berlin

ISBN 978-3-944295-07-7