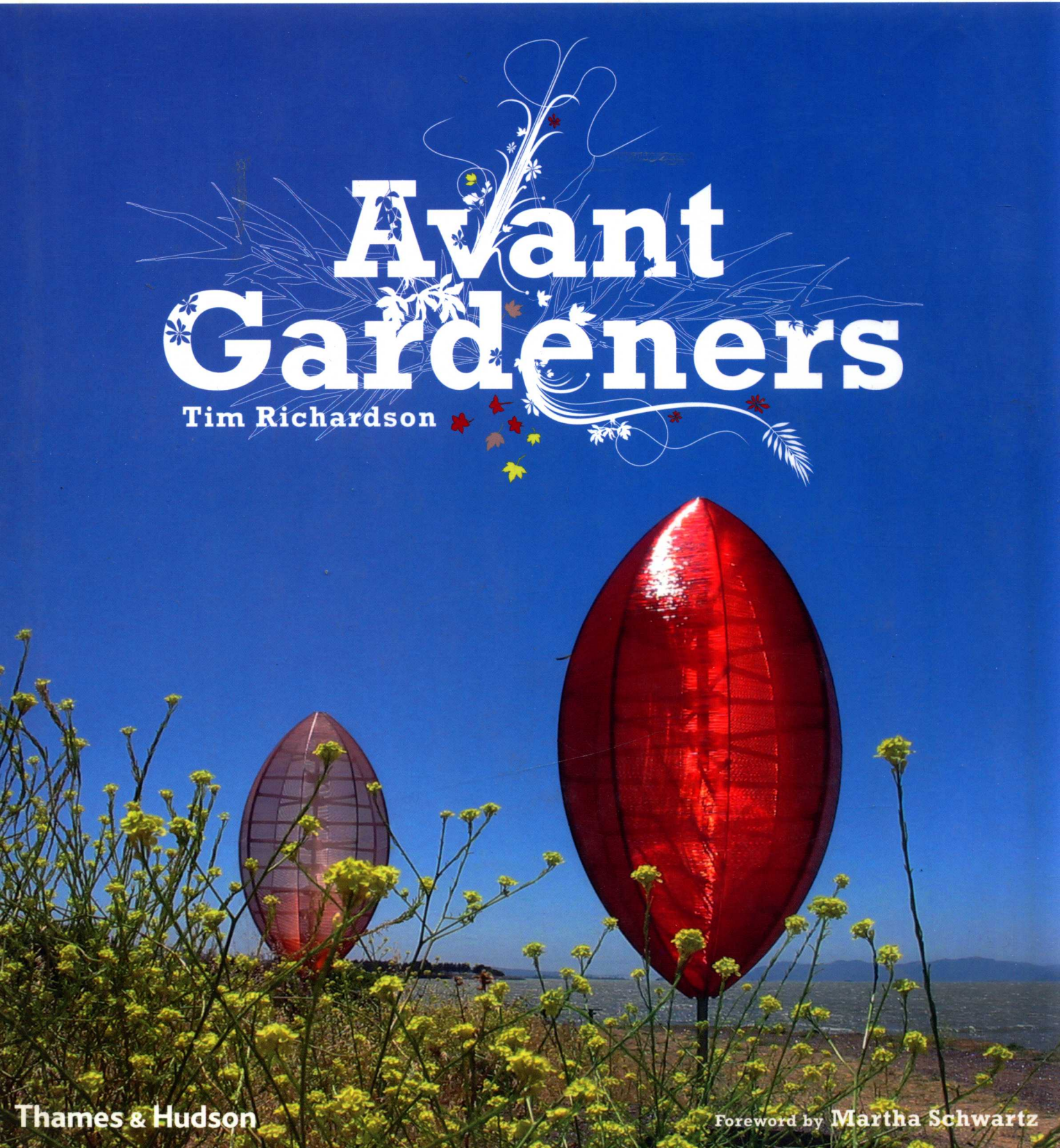
0 VISIONARIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAP

Avant Gardeners

Tim Richardson



Thames & Hudson

Foreword by Martha Schwartz

Tim Richardson
with foreword by Martha Schwartz

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PAGE 1 Castle Park, Wolfsburg, Germany (Topotek 1)
PAGE 2 Fair Park Lagoon, Dallas, Texas (Patricia Johanson)

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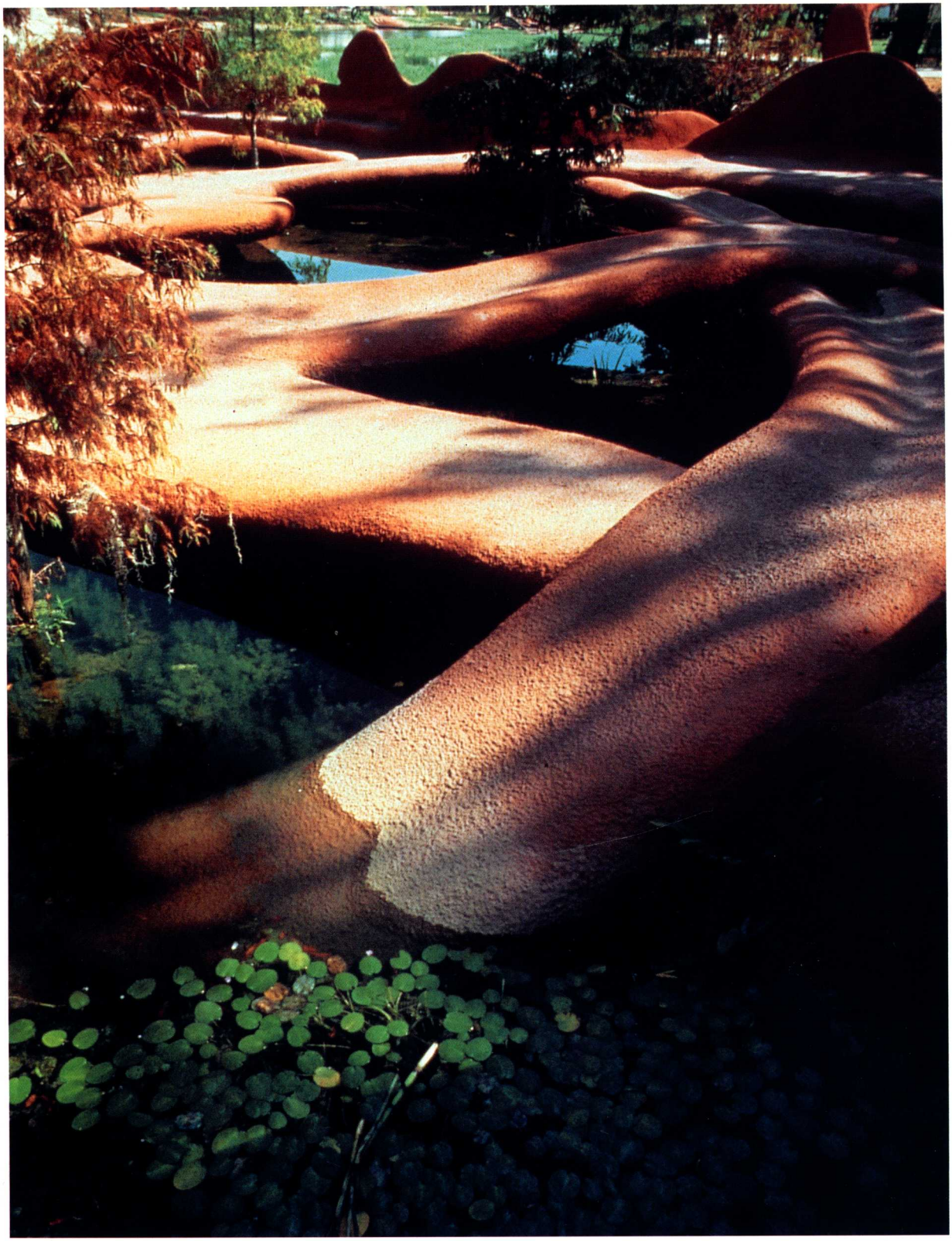

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Foreword

Martha Schwartz

I am extremely honoured to be asked to write the preface for this book, for it is the first that I have seen that elevates this topic of conceptualism to a 'genre' of, or movement within, landscape architecture. When I first reviewed *Avant Gardeners*, I was overwhelmed with the amount of work I had never seen and was surprised by how many people are and have been involved in doing this kind of work, and how rich the topic is.

I am also honoured to be thought of as a 'Mother of Invention' here, and have never contemplated a more holistic and comprehensive overview of this subject. Having my nose buried in the exigencies of trying to run a practice and make a living, I am very short of any parallax where I could view my role within the evolution of the profession of landscape architecture. In retrospect, I wish I had planned this as a strategy for changing the world, but I can assure you that had no such thoughts at the time of the Bagel Garden. It was, quite truthfully, a little joke I was playing on my then-husband, Pete Walker. I had no idea or forethought about publishing it. The only brilliant move was to invite my friend, Alan Ward, to bring his 4x5 camera and photograph the installation. Nor would it have occurred to me to send the image to be published were it not for my friend Marie Brenner, a writer for *New York Magazine*, nor could I ever have imagined that Grady Clay, the editor of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, would make the decision to put the image on the front cover. What can I say – I was in the right place at the right time. I had little foresight as to where my little experiments would take me. I could never have imagined seeing the amount of work in this book and have it somehow connected to my early antics within this profession.

In the 1970s, I entered the University of Michigan's graduate school of landscape architecture after spending five years in the fine arts department at the same university. I was very aware of the earthworks artists of the 1960s – people such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Richard Long and Mary Miss; their pieces spoke, without words and statistics, of the frailty of our dwindling resources and the beauty of our natural landscapes. This was clearly an art form I wanted to pursue. That summer, in 1974, I met Pete Walker at the SWA Group internship program in Sausalito. Meeting Pete changed the course of my life. In our first meeting, while he was running our 'prognostication' problem, he excoriated us for marching along doing what people expected us to do and not bringing anything of interest or value into the world. 'Where is the art?' he asked. He was the first person I had heard all year speak about art and its relationship to the landscape, and I realized that landscape could be what I defined it as – and that it was a worthy effort to transform culture through the art of landscape. Although my interests have broadened and deepened over time, I still am guided by the desire to make landscapes that speak to people of the human condition. This is obviously a different and perhaps a more difficult 'sell' than naturalism or the next phase of naturalism, 'eco-revelatory', but I have never disassociated human beings from nature. Therein lies the dividing line.

Now, thirty years later, the profession is so much richer, with many more people who embrace this way of working in the landscape. As landscape is all-encompassing, we continue to work within a broadly defined profession. But this profession, with its myriad practices and voices, is on the verge of another transformation, which will be leveraged through the efforts of the landscape artists in this book. I am proud to be included in this collection of work, and know that collectively we are changing the way people see and use the landscape, and how we learn to live in balance with our natural environment. Ultimately, it has to be an environment that we humans cherish, respect and can thrive in, while wishing to have a life of purpose and meaning. Our need for meaning, truth and beauty are fundamental requirements that many of our landscapes must fulfil. The designers in this book fully understand and embrace this task.

Introduction

Tim Richardson

The subject of this book is conceptualist landscape design, a term which I began to use in the mid-1990s as a useful shorthand for grouping together individuals such as Martha Schwartz, Topher Delaney, Claude Cormier and Kathryn Gustafson. What these designers had in common was the harnessing of an idea, or a set of related ideas, as the starting point for work that was characterized by the use of colour, artificial materials and witty commentary on a site's history and culture. Often a readable narrative was revealed in the landscape or superimposed onto it (though an understanding of this underlying meaning was never deemed a necessity by the designers). Such a strongly conceptualist attitude marks a significant departure from the functionalist imperatives of Modernism, the decorative or romantic tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the avowedly naturalistic stance developed in recent years (most notably by the New Perennials school of planting).

A monograph on Schwartz's work, which I produced in collaboration with the designer in 2004, was a further catalyst for thought about the possibility that a conceptualist movement in landscape was developing worldwide. Further research revealed that most designers remained unaware of the output of contemporaries working in a similar mode (with the exception of a handful of celebrated or notorious individuals, such as Schwartz). It was a gratifying surprise, therefore, to find that in 2007 some fifty landscape designers and companies are now working, at least partly, in a conceptualist vein. Of course they all have their differing emphases and idiosyncrasies: for example, many conceptualist designers celebrate the urban and the artificial, while others are interested in the role and potential of plants and trees in human lives and in the wider ecology. But on the other hand, not a single designer in this book objected to being described as 'conceptualist'.

Conceptualist landscape architecture is related to conceptualist art, but should not be viewed as a sub-section of that broad movement. Gallery-based artefact-art does not have a monopoly on notions of conceptualism, after all (as Marcel Duchamp would be the first to agree). While conceptual art went through a crisis of confidence after it was realized that the purity of 'Idea Art' is compromised by its reliance on the commercial art world, an element of functionalism is inherent in most conceptual landscape spaces. Some would argue that this proves that landscape design is not an artform – which is fine: toppling the self-serving hierarchies of the mainstream art world is not a priority for the designers in this book.

It now appears that landscape conceptualism might be emerging as the landscape correlative to the Postmodern attitude, which overtook architecture as a way of thinking in the 1980s. Leading architects such as Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Libeskind are increasingly turning to landscape conceptualist outfits as collaborators on projects, as more and more architects who think as object-based designers recognize the importance of landscape, of what goes on outside their buildings. And increasing numbers of commercial companies and city councils are seeing in landscape conceptualism an opportunity to 'brand' their outdoor space by means of a narrative or set of interrelated symbols. Finally, landscape conceptualism is also functioning now as a useful corrective to contemporary ecological pieties. There is room for both attitudes in the built environment, but conceptualism will have to fight its corner ever harder in the face of politically expedient evocations of a romanticized ideal of the 'nature' which surrounds us as much in the city as it does in the country.

Atelier Big City

Montreal

Trio of architects who play with concepts of scale, colour, volume, material and structure.

Randy Cohen, Anne Cormier and Howard Davies formed Atelier Big City as an architectural practice in 1987. The company's useful mission statement includes the following: 'Our work combines metaphorical [and] interpretative themes with innovative materials and construction. The projects are structured on a strong conceptual approach based on the interpretation of a programme and siting strategies. Of particular interest to the group is the notion of public space in buildings and the importance of the architectural promenade . . . In each project, we attempt to generate an architectural milieu of grand sensual stimulation through the use of very simple means: colour, volume, material and structure.'

All three partners work on each project. 'It really has to go through a wringer,' Davies says. 'I think our tendency is to refine the relationship between building and landscape in a spatial and topographical way. We don't really like flat things – we like people to move over things and under things.' Davies talks of the failure of the social-analysis moment in Modernism in the 1970s, and sees his own journey as 'a rebellion against Postmodernism and aformalism, to a rediscovery of Modernism in its Russian incarnation: lots of concrete and folded forms, struts and asymmetry. It is an abstract formalism, but it has its surprises and its subtleties that make it more fun.'

Skate Plaza

MONTREAL 2007

The brief here was to design a public space in which skateboarding was permitted. As Davies admits, this has led to an element of 'negotiation' between the young skateboarders and any others who wished to use the park. 'It's a mixture of public space and play equipment,' he observes. In light of this, the designers attempted to shift the skateboarders' emphasis away from single spectacular jumps and towards a sense of continuous movement through the space. As the company's statement puts it: 'Our work has consistently dealt with questions of scale, of infrastructure, and the role of the architectural project as "mediator" in the ongoing process of occupying marginal areas.'

The designers talked to the skateboarders, but as Davies states, 'They have very specific ideas and specific activities [or tricks] that need to be performed. It was a real battle to retain any kind of architectural expressiveness.' The plaza has been conceived as a folded plane with access points related to movement patterns across the space. The surface is bent up and down to respond to the particular acrobatic needs of the skaters, while at the same time creating a public place within the city. The site's contaminated soil was removed, creating a new topography, setting up skating runs and creating planted buffer zones between the skaters and passing pedestrians.