

Hortus Conclusus

The Art Landscapes of Ian Hamilton Finlay and R.W. van de Wint

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Carved into a small wooden gate, set against the backdrop of the vast rolling Scottish hills dotted with grazing sheep, are the words 'the fluted land'. It is the entrance to a garden created by the artist Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006). The three words reflect a world all its own. They refer not only to the meandering paths that appear as grooves in the landscape, but also to the sheep and their flute-playing shepherds as echoes of the past. There is another wooden gate like this somewhere in the province of North Holland, on the edge of the town of Den Helder. This leads to a landscape created by the artist R. W. (Ruud) van de Wint (1942-2006). It is a forgotten patch of old inland dunes in the middle of an urban area. For both Finlay and Van de Wint working in their gardens was a way of life, and they lived in their landscapes. In her extensive study, *L'artiste contemporain et la nature. Parcs et paysages Européens* (2007), the art historian Colette Garraud discusses the two landscapes in the chapter 'Territoires d'artistes'. What is it that connects these *territoires d'artistes*? What



sets them apart from other landscape and sculpture gardens? Both gardens, Finlay's Little Sparta and Van de Wint's De Nollen, are managed and protected by independent trusts and are open to the public. But how can one maintain the relevance of an – almost – 'living' artwork now that neither artist is alive? How should a trust fulfil the intentions of those who made these gardens without turning them into static museum-like institutions or parks?

De Nollen.

Photo by Hendriktje Ruiter.

Art and landscape

In the 1960s Finlay published short stories and poems. For his concrete poetry he sought a bearer other than anonymous white paper. In the 1970s Van de Wint made monumental paintings – including triptychs that could be twelve –metres long – for which he sought a bearer other than the anonymous white rooms in museums. Both artists – independently of each other – found a desolate landscape in a neglected and abandoned state into which they withdrew, subsequently transforming them into a 'total artwork' in which everything is interwoven: buildings, sculpture and landscape. The composition of the site determines how the artwork is perceived and experienced. The artificial objects become assimilated into the landscape.

Ian Hamilton Finlay
with Nicholas Sloan, *Little
Sparta, The Present Order.*
1983. Stone. Photo by
Andrew Lawson.

Art in the context of landscape is best known as 'land art', an art form which, around 1968, shifted attention away from neutral museum galleries to the meaningful context of the landscape. As well as the major projects by James Turrell and Robert Smithson in the desolate deserts of North America, we in the Netherlands have land art – such as the Observatorium by Robert Morris – in the vast polders of Flevoland. In land-art projects, the material is the landscape itself, with its earth, stone or wood. Art and nature are combined in open-air museums such as Middelheim in Antwerp and Insel Hombroich near Neuss, and in sculpture gardens at museums such as the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Hoge Veluwe national park. These are all collections of artworks by various artists from different periods. Projects set in a landscape and created by

a single artist are rarer. Examples are the sculpture gardens created by Henry Moore in Perry Green near London, by Nikki de Saint Phalle in Italy, and by Eduardo Chillida in Spain. Yet all these examples are sculpture parks in which the landscape is treated as an open museum gallery or a 'plinth'. De Nollen and Little Sparta are distinct from these because they are more complicated. At first sight, they appear to have an association with eighteenth-century English landscape gardens such as Stourhead. These latter were inspired by paintings, in particular the landscape paintings of Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin.

Little Sparta

Finlay's four-hectare garden lies in the Pentland Hills, an hour's drive from Edinburgh through the peaceful rolling Scottish countryside. Passing through the wooden gate bearing the words '*the fluted land*', visitors enter the first and oldest part of Little Sparta: the Roman Garden; which screens from view the house in which Finlay used to live. The further one wanders into the garden, the more spacious and open it becomes. The garden itself has boundaries, but the sightlines run on into the surrounding landscape – and that landscape is overwhelming. The rolling Scottish heights seem to draw the clouds towards them, creating a chiaroscuro effect on the landscape. It is so breathtaking that the garden is almost a landscape in miniature. Finlay placed more than one hundred small objects in his garden. There are 'poem-objects', pillars and obelisks, small huts or structures, and one of the barns has been converted into a temple. The objects are not large. For locations within a sightline Finlay deliberately chose an intimate object, such as a piece of wood or stone half-buried in the ground and engraved with an inscription or poem, rather than a large monumental image; the monumentality is already so manifestly present in the surrounding hills. When competing against this landscape sculpture will always lose. In fact the intimate, small-scale, poetic objects emphasise the landscape, and so the two elements reinforce each other.

Ian Hamilton Finlay moved to the Pentland Hills in 1966. His garden was originally called Stonypath, but in 1980 he rechristened it Little Sparta after becoming embroiled in a dispute with the local council. Strathclyde Regional Council rescinded the rates exemption it had granted on a building that Finlay had converted in 1980 into a 'garden temple' devoted to Apollo. He saw this as a lack of appreciation for his project. For him it signified the beginning of the '*Little Spartan War*', the battle between Finlay and the council. He was of the opinion that today's society lacks a definition for a modern, religious building. The change of name to Little Sparta is also a reference to the Greek sculptural elements that became an increasingly common feature of the garden. In 1983, Finlay erected a monument to the '*First Battle of Little Sparta*' at the entrance to his garden. The bronze plaque depicts a machine gun with the words '*Flute, begin with me Arcadian notes, Virgil, Eclogue VIII*' running across the top. There are recurring elements in the garden: this combination of the pastoral, the charming landscape that calls to mind flute-playing shepherds, the classical with the Roman poet Virgil and the polemic with conflict as a source of creativity. The small circles on the barrel of the gun are the equivalent of the finger-stops on a flute. The sound of gunfire is metaphorically linked to flute music. Finlay is emphasising the interdependence of art and its defence. Conflict is essential to



Ian Hamilton Finlay with John Andrew, *Little Sparta, Nuclear Sail*. 1974. Photo by Andrew Lawson.

creativity: that seems to be the underlying philosophy of Little Sparta.

With all his objects, meandering paths, copses and water features, Finlay has transformed what was originally bare moorland into a meaningful place where poetry triumphs in the drama. Garden and landscape have a magnificent beauty that totally engrosses the visitor's senses. Contrasts combine to create new images. One becomes aware of something one has never experienced before, a feeling that is perhaps reinforced by the tranquillity and expansiveness of the location. Yet I had expected this garden to be larger. And not only do parts of the garden form a miniature landscape, some of the objects are so small that they can sometimes escape one's attention. De Nollen (15 hectares), by contrast, is much more spacious. Most of the buildings are half-hidden in the landscape, but the sculptures are monumental and have a striking presence. Here Van de Wint manifests himself as the artist of the grand gesture. Van de Wint was a sculptor, much more so than Finlay. His best-known works are the ten-part painting in the plenary chamber of the Dutch Parliament and two sculptures in the garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum.



R.W. van de Wint, *De Nollen*,
Aether II. 1994-2006. 900 x
700 x 700 CM.
Photo by Hendriktje Ruiter.

De Nollen

De Nollen lies at the northernmost tip of the province of North Holland, an hour's drive from Amsterdam. From outside the garden appears almost inward-looking. In some places the steel buildings are visible above the dunes, but one sees only a reddish-brown shell or a hermetic wicker shape. This landscape is a discomfiting element in its present surroundings. Four centuries ago these dunes (a 'nol' is a shifting sand dune) were still an island. Now they are on the edge of the town, squeezed in between a main road, a railway line and a residential district behind a screen of trees. The garden has managed to keep the expanding town at bay. The contrast between the flat land and the hilly dunes is not only visible, it is also audible and tangible.



R.W. van de Wint, *De Nollen*,
Beeld 3. 1997-2002. Cortèn-
steel, 400 x 1085 x 250 cm.
Photo by Hendriktje Ruiter.

Once through the gate, one is struck by the stillness and intimacy of the landscape. What had at first appeared so closed and hermetic now turns out to be open and poetic. The sand of the dunes muffles the noise. The further one advances into the area, the more the sounds of the city fade into silence. The sand paths are narrow in some places and wide in others. Sometimes it is like walking through a body: from the outside to the inside, from one passage to another, with constantly changing sightlines. Everything is on a human scale. Enclosed areas with copses and trees alternate with open areas with water and meadows. It is like a tapestry; it forms a single whole. The natural-looking landscape flows almost self-evidently into the man-made, the artworks of steel, concrete, wicker and glass. Perhaps this is because the art has been created in and around bunkers – there are still some twenty-five of these in this former Ministry of Defence property.

A walk through De Nollen takes the visitor past sculptures swathed in copper wire, a sound-activated lighthouse, a structure that generates steam, a tower in which a solar eclipse can be seen, and the painting projects *Aether II* and *Vergilius*. That which is heavy, solid and hard on the outside is on the inside light, clear and poetic. But what is most striking is the static exterior and the dynamic interior: the sunlight that creates a constantly changing play of light on the paintings. The bands of colour in the paintings recur in a different form in the vegetation of the landscape: red sorrel, purple marsh orchid, yellow catsear. The walk then leads to the entrance of an underground passage. Entering the passage from bright daylight, one feels suddenly engulfed in darkness. There is

R.W. van de Wint,
De Nollen, Eidolon (de kelk).
(1993) 1998-2006. Mixed
media (cortèn-steel), 700 x
1050 x 1370 cm. Photo by
Hendriktje Ruiter.



R.W. van de Wint, *De Nollen, Landschap met schrijfhuisje* (Landscape with writing-house). 2003. Wood and glass. 280 x 320 x 280 cm. - Photo by Hendriktje Ruiter.

a sense of complete disorientation. One has to feel one's way forward, abandon any attempt at control, and submit to the darkness. The underground passage leads, via two long sets of steps, to oval domes.

The path that leads past the artworks appears to symbolise the path of life. The first line of Dante's *Divine Comedy* had an important symbolic meaning for Van de Wint: *'Midway on our life's journey I found myself in a dark wood, the right road lost.'* Dante has lost his way and is experiencing an existential crisis. He then makes a symbolic journey, with Virgil as his guide. Two artworks at De Nollen are named after the two of them: the painting project *Vergilius* and the *Dante's Breakfast* project in a small bunker. *Eidolon*, an underground passage with a number of structures, refers to the Greek meaning of eidolon, namely 'likeness', 'illusion' or 'apparition'. There can be a clear distinction – or no distinction at all – between reality and image, between being and appearing. For instance, the 'hole in the world' in one of the domes is not what it seems, but the star-spangled sky that is visible in the hole in the ground *is* perceived as a hole in the world. In the second dome, the visitor experiences the 'broken light': sunlight shining through a prism. Here, 'eidolon' takes on a different meaning. The colour projections of the spectrum are images of the broken light, but they are also apparitions because as soon as the sun disappears behind a cloud the colours disappear too. Yet, intangible though it is, the colour has genuinely been perceived. At De Nollen, not only are the artworks themselves equivocal; there is also a constant interaction between art and reality, with the experience of each reinforcing that of the other.

In 1980, Van de Wint ensconced himself in the dunes to create an ideal world. In a society that is changing at an ever-increasing rate, he wanted to evoke a world of elementary images that have remained unchanged for centuries: light, the transition from light to dark, the visual and physical perception of colour. He withdrew to contemplate the question: what can art mean in today's world? That he chose to do this in the isolation of an enclosed garden should be equated with escapism. Van de Wint has been criticised for turning his back on the (art) world. But this is a mistaken perception that results from equating his way of life with the confined space in which he lived it, rather than extending it to the spirit, to the mind. Art is always a form of communication. It is about how art looks at the world. How did Van de Wint view the world through art – *his* art? Perhaps, in his work, he was searching for the relationship between the exalted or sublime and the banal and tragic. This is reminiscent of the work of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. His paintings depict poetic landscapes, often vast and sometimes also impassable or inaccessible. They often contain a solitary human figure looking out over the landscape with his back to the viewer. It conjures up an image of silence and reflection. Man and the world are united in a sublime landscape; but at the same time the lonely figure in the inhospitable landscape is lost in that world. The wanderer has no purpose and no destination, he stands contemplating the unending landscape without a visible horizon. Friedrich's paintings are not depictions of a single story. Rather, they are ambivalent and have several layers of meaning. What these landscapes have in common with Little Sparta and De Nollen is not only the tragedy of the landscape, but above all the sense of one's consciousness being momentarily heightened, an awareness of one's own insignificance and loneliness as a powerful life-affirming perception that, in fact, underlines one's existence. And that touches on the sublime.

Viable

R.W. van de Wint,
De Nollen, Ventus, (1999)
2004. Cortèn-steel. 800
x 50 x 50 cm. - Photo by
Hendrikje Ruiter.

When I visited Little Sparta in 2007, a year after Finlay's death, I talked to Ralph Irving, the gardener who had worked with Finlay for seventeen years. He told me about the significance of the copses as screens or 'backdrops' for many small objects. I also met Fiona Fowler, who manages the garden. The question now facing her and the Little Sparta Trust is how to keep the garden viable now that Finlay's absence is so strongly felt. *'It must not become a mausoleum'*, she said. At the moment no-one lives at Little Sparta, but there are plans to convert the house to accommodate artists-in-residence. A garden of this kind, which in its entirety is a vulnerable, high-maintenance work of art, requires the constant attention of those involved with it. At De Nollen, too, the question is how to keep this artwork lively and viable for the future. The garden is owned by a trust, Stichting De Nollen. The two women who lived with Van de Wint at the project site still live there. They are the trust's directors, responsible for its management and publicity and for receiving visitors. It is the personal attention that makes these two 'thought-gardens' so special. Art in public spaces or in parks often gives the impression of having lost its way. Notice-boards with information have become illegible due to wear and tear or graffiti, or the art itself is neglected. At Little Sparta and De Nollen there are no signs with information.

As a result, at each of these two places the landscape retains its own individual element of mystery. The connection between art and location is protected and nurtured as carefully as possible. ■

www.projectdenollen.nl

www.littlesparta.org

FURTHER READING

Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta. The Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay*. London, 2003.

Jacqueline van Koningsbruggen, *R.W. van de Wint. Schilder; beeldhouwer; bouwer*. Amsterdam, 2002/2007.

Colette Garraud, *L'artiste contemporain et la nature. Parcs et paysages Européens*. Paris, 2007.

De Nollen in Den Helder (North-Holland) can be visited from April to December, and on appointment.

www.projectdenollen.nl

tel 00 31 223 660200

Little Sparta in Dunsyre (Scotland) can be visited from June to September.

www.littlesparta.co.uk

