



VIVE LE CHAOS!

*The 13th Annual International Festival
of Gardens at Chaumont-sur-Loire.*

BY LAKE DOUGLAS

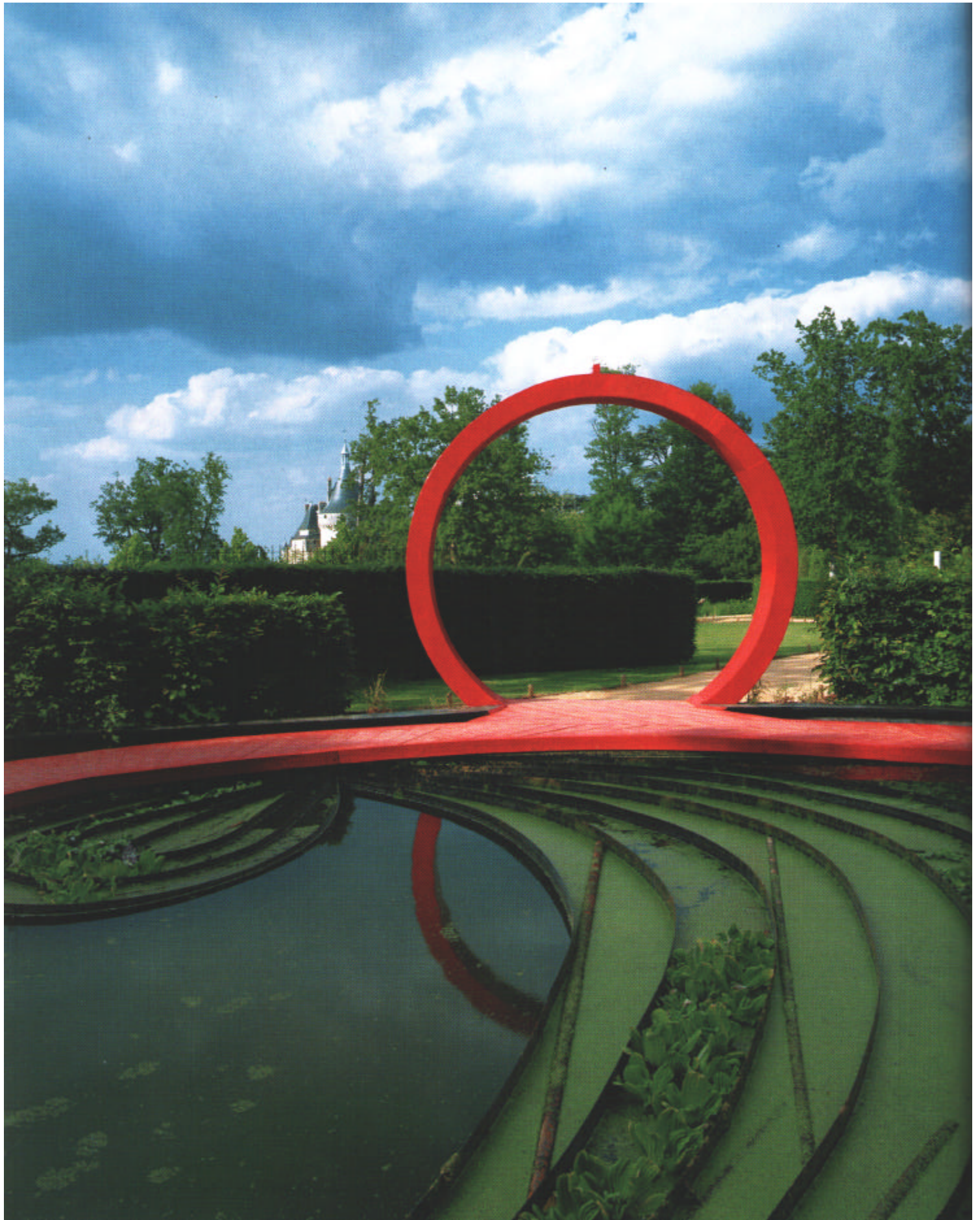
FOR MOST PEOPLE, garden festivals are either small, self-contained demonstration gardens for the homeowner-on-a-budget or overwhelmingly lavish but intellectually shallow horticultural displays. The International Festival of Gardens at Chaumont-sur-Loire, in one of the most picturesque and historic parts of France, is something altogether different, not only for its provocative and challenging content but also for its environmental context. The Loire River valley and France itself are the big pictures here, and French attitudes about landscape, art, culture, and civilization are what made Chaumont possible and sustain its annual success. And that's what separates this garden festival from all others.

Chaumont, a small town less than 150 miles southwest of Paris, is located on the Loire River between Blois and Tours. Visiting the Chaumont International Garden Festival (always held between

👉 *Le Cercle d'Or* ("circle of gold") was a simple idea, well executed. The visitor encountered what appeared to be a pile of branches and tree trunks, stripped of leaves and perhaps ready to be burned, in the midst of a turf circle, surrounded by a pathway and, like other gardens, enclosed by a hedge. Walking around this initially incomprehensible jumble, the visitor began to see fragments of gold painted on the branches in the woodpile. Only at a precise—and unmarked—spot did a perfect "circle of gold" appear, painted on the branches at the rear of the pile, on axis with the entrance. Exactly what this meant was not immediately clear, but perhaps the meaning was that order can exist in chaos, even if it is initially unseen. The designer, Jean-Pierre Braz of France, suggested that "out of complexity, the image of the sun is born." Whatever the interpretation, this garden engaged the visitor with its "wow" effect, if nothing else.

👉 One of the most playful and visually interesting gardens was *Mikado* by Caroline de Sauvage, Elodie Gourrier, and Vincent Gillier of Belgium, who installed colorfully painted bamboo poles as if they had just been dropped (mikado is the children's game we call "pick up sticks"). The visitor, minimized in this scheme perhaps to the size of an ant, was forced to negotiate through what appeared to be a fragile jumble by the suggestion of a pathway of gravel and split bamboo, while wondering if all this would collapse.





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May and October) or exploring the Loire River valley should be reason enough for any landscape architect to go, but to experience one without the other would be like going to Central Park and neglecting the city around it. Just as an appreciation of Central Park is crucial to an understanding of American landscape architecture, the experience of Chaumont and its context is critical to an appreciation of the arc of European landscape design from the Renaissance forward. And like going to Central Park, going to Chaumont should be *required* for both students and professionals.

The 2002 festival was covered in *Landscape Architecture* in January 2003 ("Nature Aroused"). Louisa Jones's 2004 book, *Reinventing the Garden: Chaumont-Global Inspirations*, recorded the festival's first 10 years (see Books, *Landscape Architecture*, June 2004). Both are excellent introductions to the Chaumont Festival and its short history.

The participant with the biggest name recognition was Charles Jencks, who was one of those invited to participate (winning through the competitive process is notable, but being invited, as he was, is a bigger honor). This year's theme and Jencks's style of garden design were a perfect match. His project, *La malédiction d'Agamemnon* ("curse of Agamemnon"), asked, "Can war be a garden theme?" It was rife with complexities, contradictions, allegorical references, visual tricks, and audible features: order and chaos, indeed. More so than most others, this installation had intellectual substance as well as visual appeal: One entered through a red circle and circulated through the garden on a red wooden path, around a pool of water. However, it is possible that the visitor might have felt bombarded with too much of a good thing.

Perhaps the most popular garden with the general public (and children of all ages) was *Kaléidoscope*, by an Italian team (Filippo Pizzoni, Gianluigi Cristiano, Maria Cucchini, Chiara Vecchi, Mario Cucchi, and Massimiliano Roca). Sixteen floral strips, as well as pedestrian pathways, undulated along the ground plane in distinct waves of bright colors (orange, yellow, deep green, white, red, etc.). Scattered throughout, unobtrusive but accessible, were small plastic kaleidoscopes affixed to flexible rods (a bit like flower buds or seedpods on long stems), through which visitors peered: a bizarre and delightful way to experience this garden. "If," the designers asked, "like little ants, we enter a garden and...see it with our eyes but also with new eyes, what do we see?" A provocative question that resulted in a garden that was at once colorful and appealing, easily understood, interactive, and inexpensively realized: in short, a hit on many levels.

FESTIVAL HISTORY Chaumont's International Garden Festival was inaugurated in 1992 by Jean-Paul Pigeat, a journalist who wrote about the environment and worked on documentary films prior to becoming a curator at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in the mid-1970s. About 10 years later, he began work on what promised to be an important examination of international contemporary garden design. Though the exhibit was cut for budgetary reasons, he published *Parcs et jardins contemporains* in 1990 based on what he found while visiting garden designers throughout the world in preparation for the exhibition. (Pigeat has since published *Gardens of the World: Two Thousand Years of Garden Design*, reviewed in *Landscape Architecture*, April 2004.)

In the early 1990s, Jack Lang, France's influential minister of culture, consulted Pigeat about setting up a national program to



Each year the festival has a different theme; this year's theme was "Vive le Chaos!"

rehabilitate and focus attention on public gardens, and from that initiative came the restoration of the Tuileries and Palais Royal gardens in Paris. Interested in promoting avant-garde works by contemporary designers, Lang asked Pigeat to create what then became the first International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire in 1992, on the grounds of a fortress structure from the late-fifteenth or early-sixteenth century.

Concurrent with the origin of the festival was the creation of an educational institution (the International Conservatory of Parks, Gardens, and Landscapes) at Chaumont for year-round teaching and research. It offers workshops to town planners and community leaders for improving their communities through urban gardens, effectively spreading what is now known throughout France as the "Chaumont style" of planting (loose mixtures of grasses, annuals, and perennials). Pigeat continues to administer the festival, the educational programs, and the property itself. Though relatively young, the festival continues to prosper and attract international attention; annual attendance is now about 150,000. The

concept and realization have paid off: The festival supplies 75 to 80 percent of the financial resources needed to operate the next year's festival, with additional funding from the regional government and from private sponsors (there is, however, a noticeable and welcome absence of corporate sponsorship signage).

FESTIVAL SITE DESIGN The Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire is strategically perched on a hill overlooking the Loire River. Surrounding the structure is an unfinished nineteenth-century park created by Achille Duchêne, an influential French designer who, with his father Henri, reconstructed gardens in the style of Le Nôtre and rejuvenated European interest in French garden heritage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Belgian designer Jacques Wirtz created the festival site in an area visually removed from the château and its panoramic view of the Loire River valley. The Wirtz plan is simple: There are 27 tulip-shaped plots (each about 2,700 square feet) enclosed with clipped hedges and arranged off six circulation spines that converge in a point in the site's center. Surrounding the festival site are woods with permanent installations: sculptor Jean Lautrey's installation *Trail of Wild Iron* (1998), the *Misty Valley* (2000) by botanist Patrick Blanc, gardens inspired by Padua's six-



One of the most amusing installations was *Dés/ordonnance* by the Canadian team of Stéphane Bertrand and Jasmin Corbeil, who created a garden reminiscent of what Alice might have encountered in Wonderland. The garden was a slightly raised platform composed of square metal panels on which bright white pots sat, planted with slender Italian cypress or clipped box in checkerboard fashion. What one assumed should be a well-ordered landscape was in fact a garden out of control: the panels were all askew, tilting in random, unexpected, and confusing ways. Order was regained only when visitors stood on the panels to make them level: The more visitors, the quicker the entire garden was "tamed" into order. But when visitors left, chaos returned.

Le grand bassin fractal ("great fractal pool"), created by SIREV of France, contained a pool with a striking blue water feature resembling Venetian blinds and clumps of lotus. Water trickled down the water feature, creating gentle vertical fractal patterns and ever-expanding, yet rapidly diminishing, horizontal waves on the pool's surface. While other gardens emphasized chaos and disorder within a landscape setting, this subtle garden was an oasis of calm and serenity.



teenth-century botanical garden, experimental gardens, and the main greenhouse. The festival site has few trees, and spaces in between plots are permanently planted with deep beds of colorful annuals, perennials, and grasses displaying the Chaumont style. Changes in elevation make it possible to walk down into some garden plots, and one plot has a tree-house observation deck installed in a previous festival and retained as a permanent feature. While most garden installations are removed at the festival's conclusion, some components that are particularly popular or notable are retained from past exhibits, adding continuity and context to the site.

FESTIVAL MECHANICS Each year the festival has a different theme; this year's theme was *"Vive le Chaos! Order and Disorder in the Garden."* Previous themes have been "Pleasure" (1992); "Curiosity" (1995); "Water, Water, Everywhere!" (1997); and "Weeds" (2003). The next year's program is announced in the preceding summer in the form of a staged competition that begins with a call for entries ("Gardens and Memory" is the theme for 2005). According to the prospectus, "landscape architects, architects, engineers, designers, scenographers [scenic designers]... and students backed by their schools" are eligible to enter. There are three categories: invited designers, proposals submitted by professional designers, and students' entries. An international jury, including one designer from the previous year, selects festival participants, and the staged process lasts about six months. Recent years have attracted interest from about 450 potential designers, and about 25 designers are selected each year. The budget allocated for each installation is €12,000 (around \$15,000), and competition winners are paid a fee (€3,049 for professionals and €762 for students). Decisions are made by the end of December, and preparations for installations begin early the following January. Many of the plants used in installations are either grown on site at the conservatory's nursery or nearby in greenhouses affiliated with the festival. Conservatory students have themselves created several gardens, and they regularly participate in the installation of gardens under the supervision of the festival's four full-time professional gardeners.

2004 RESULTS Having visited the festival in 2002 ("Eroticism in the Garden"), I was eager to see how this year's Chaumont designers would interpret its theme, and I was not disappointed. "Nature is not without imagination or fantasy," according to this year's guide. "If we let it run its course, nature won't do with just a straight line, or with a simple cylinder, or a cube; it invents [freeform] shapes whose complexity is impossible to fathom. Chaos, the lack of apparent order, can be so wonderfully creative!" This year's festival poses this question to its participant designers: "Is the 'theory of chaos' susceptible to changing our way of representing our outdoor spaces, since we know that neither the straight line nor the picturesque will suffice anymore?"

This is clearly a challenging opportunity, and there was a wealth of challenging design works, from the basic and simple to the overwrought and chaotic (perhaps not an inappropriate response). Overall, each had something to offer, and all, whether simple or complicated, presented



CREATING A GARDEN AT CHAUMONT

BY ELEONORA ZILIANI, *New York City Parks and Recreation*

"Nature is not made by simple geometries. The pits and tangles are more than blemishes distorting the classic shapes of Euclidean geometry. They are often the keys to the essence of a thing."

—BENOIT MANDELBROT

VIVE LE CHAOS! Order and disorder in the garden" was the theme for the 13th International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire.

Chaos in the garden can be interpreted in many ways. For me and my two colleagues, Ilaria Rossi Doria and Chiara Principe, it was the scientific aspect of chaos that captured our imaginations. Our intent was to create a garden that combined nature, science, and art.

The basic shape and geometry of our garden were inspired by the Lorenz Attractor, an amazing three-dimensional structure that is fundamental to chaos science. Its form has often been compared to an owl's mask or a butterfly's wings (thus, the name of our garden, *Butterfly*). In our horticultural expression, the weaving, orbiting, but never repeating trajectories of this butterfly-like structure trace pathways through ornamental grasses and flowers as well as water, glass, and stone. Two large iron sculptural elements rise in arcs from the ground, echoing the orbits vertically.

The garden in its completeness can be experienced via a sinuous wooden pathway. In one corner of the garden is a functioning double pendulum that people can manipulate—an example of a simple dynamic system that exhibits unpredictable behavior: in other words, chaos.

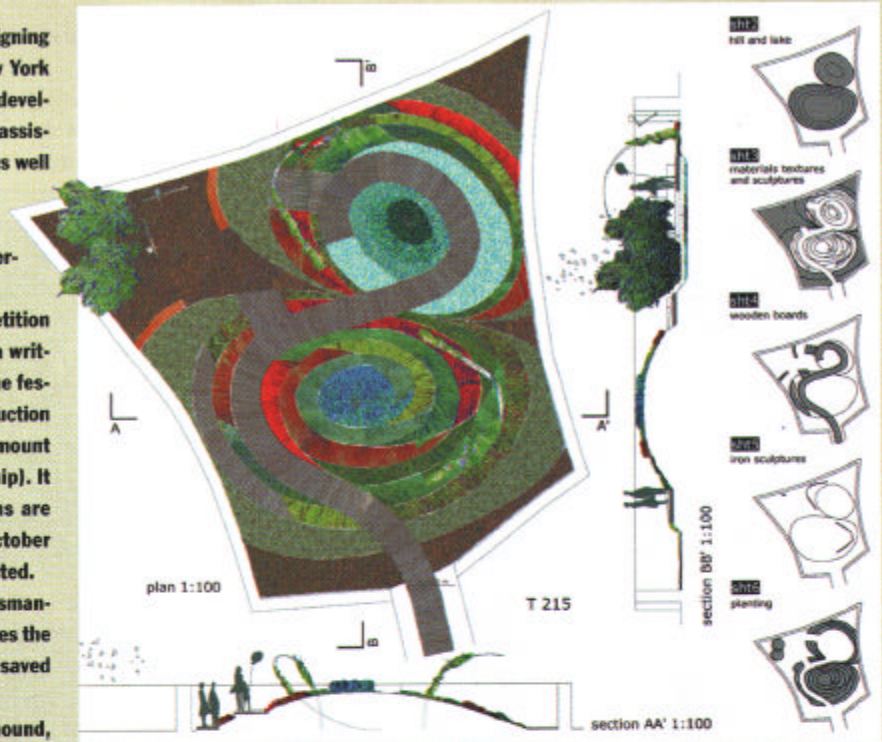
I first met Ilaria and Chiara when the three of us were studying architecture at the University of Rome. Ilaria now works as a landscape architect in Rome. Her work is focused on the restoration of historical gardens and the design of residential gardens. Chiara is an architect who works as an urban designer for the City Plan

of Rome. I work in New York as a solo practitioner designing residential gardens. I am also a designer for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. During the development of the garden design, we received valuable assistance from Giorgia Biasini, an art historian in Rome, as well as from Simon Willerton, professor of mathematics in Sheffield, Britain. Since our collaboration was transatlantic, we shared ideas and sketches via the internet and telephone.

The material required for submission to the competition consisted of a minimum of two A3 format drawings, a written description of the project, and a cost estimate. The festival provides all the necessary finances for the construction of the garden up to a maximum of €12,000 (this amount may be exceeded if the entrant has private sponsorship). It also awards €3,000 to the designers whose gardens are selected to be built. We submitted our design in October and were notified in November that it had been selected.

During the winter months, the staff at Chaumont dismantles the gardens from the previous festival and prepares the foundations for the new designs. Many materials are saved and stored and are available for reuse.

When our team arrived in Chaumont in April, the mound, part of the reflecting pool, and the wooden path were already in place. Over the course of a week, Chiara, Ilaria, our friend, Nilde Cigognetti, and I staked out the planting beds, delineated the rest of the design, and planted nearly a thousand plants. We were helped by four gardeners, one mason, and two mill workers, all of whom contributed their skills with incredible energy and passion. Gerard Dosba, the festival coordinator, and Vincent Fardeau, the master gardener, were invaluable in organizing schedules, supervising construction, and procuring materials.



During our stay, we were provided with pleasant, comfortable accommodations on the site. A resident chef prepared three daily meals for everyone. We were also able to meet other designers and observe the construction of their gardens. Participating in the magical transformation of the grounds surrounding the château with people from many parts of the world was a memorable experience. All the designers, no matter their professional level, were extremely excited to be part of the chaotic transformation of this unique portion of France.



LAKE DOUBLAS; BOTTOM: YANN MOREL; OPPOSITE: DEGRA PIRICUPE; LARA INOSSI DOHA; ELEONORA ZILANTI; PLAN



visitors with different means through which they could connect order/disorder and the environment.

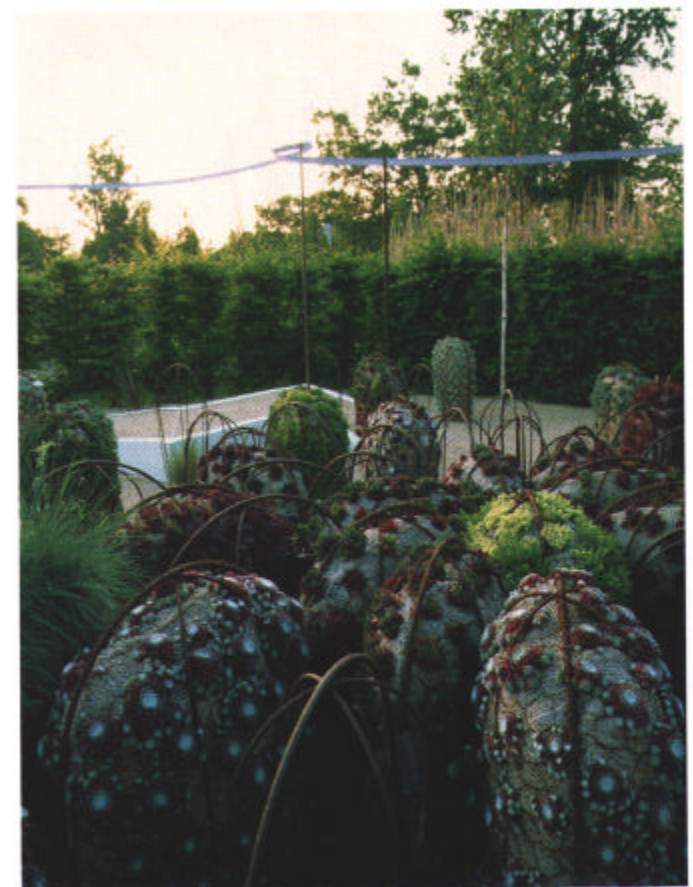
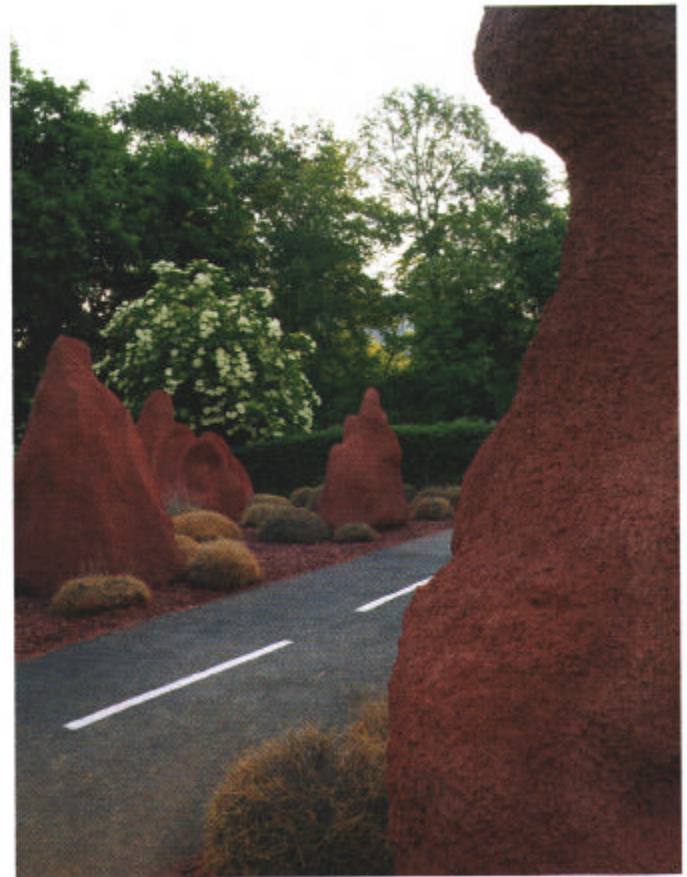
Overall, this year's theme suggested the many different approaches of those who participated, from the literal and simple to the allegorical, metaphysical, witty, and scientific. To my eye, the most successful exhibits were those that took one concept and explored it in a modest way; the least successful were those that attacked large concepts (for example, chaos theory, Fibonacci's rule, the butterfly effect) that were much more complex than space, time, budget, or creativity allowed.

Ultimately, these are the things that make this festival successful and exciting: the wide range of solutions and participants (this year's teams were from France, Belgium, Italy, England, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, Latvia, and Canada); the variety of horticultural applications; the innovative uses of materials; and the

🐜 *Dés/ordres*, by Cécile Comandré and Pavel Bolgarev of France, was an installation of gabions that started off with a colonnade of gabions, stacked neatly one on top of the other. As one moved through the garden, the gabions became progressively more disorderly—more overcome with weeds, vines, and wild vegetation. Ultimately, the gabions were no longer upright columns but ruins that had completely disintegrated into piles of rocks. This was a simple idea, but effectively executed and immediately accessible to all.

🐜 Students at the Ryde School of Horticulture in Australia (with Melissa Twyford) developed *Termitaria*, a simple yet provocative garden. They re-created the Australian ecosystem that contains spinifex termites, the red mounds in which they live, and the prickly grasses on which they feed. Appearing surreal and hostile at first, this desert landscape was actually an example of environmental stability: The insects fed on the native grasses that stabilized the desert and provided cover that protected the insects from their natural predator, a local anteater. Each participant in this ecosystem had a part to play in creating order and maintaining balance. Disorder and confusion resulted from human intrusion (in the form of a highway) that destroyed insect, vegetative, and animal habitats. The message here was as obvious as the roadkill on the highway.

🌻 For *La logique du tournesol* ("logic of the sunflower"), Anna Costa and Carlo Contesso of Spain took inspiration from a seemingly random numerical sequence first observed in the early thirteenth century by the Italian mathematician Leonardo Pisano, known as Fibonacci. Starting with 0 and 1, it continues indefinitely by adding the last two numbers to get the next (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 ...). This sequence explains numerous natural patterns, such as spirals in shells, arrangements of leaves, formations of flower petals, and the patterns of seeds (like those in the head of the sunflower). In this garden, silvery succulents, vines, and grasses grew in vertical planters contained in metal frames, and a text inscribed on a metal ribbon snaked through the garden, elevated on slender rods. The text was translated into 21 languages (a Fibonacci number). With so many examples of the Fibonacci sequence in the plant world, this garden's design seemed curiously uninspired and its plant choices unusually limited (there were, in fact, no sunflowers), resulting in an opportunity not fully explored.





impression that most of these gardens evolved from scribbled gesture sketches rather than detailed, measured drawings. Seeing what is here is a preview of what landscape architecture could become in the near future. Judging from this year's festival, that future involves intellectual content, innovative uses of plants and other non-vegetative materials, humor, energy, and hands-on design. **LAWL**

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Resources

■ The regional tourist information publishes a great brochure to gardens in the region (www.jardins-de-france.com). Get a good guidebook (Michelin's *Châteaux of the Loire*), some good maps (Michelin's are the best), and take off. You'll get a renewed appreciation for the environment of this region and how it has had an impact on both human history and the profession of landscape architecture.

👉 *Métaphores*, by the Istituto Quasar (M. G. Ciaci, S. Greco, and P. Lattanzio) of Italy, contained a large sphere created by a spiral of metallic ribbon wrapped around a metal frame. A tree emerged from the sphere's top and burst through its bottom, where roots fractured the ground plane on which the sphere rested. According to the designers, the tree was attempting to "escape from man's idea of the ideal globe." Through both its branches and roots, the tree represented the best possible answer to its own survival. While "complexity" was the designers' description of their garden's theme, I found only an empty metaphor, neither inspiring nor memorable.

👉 Certainly one of the festival's most striking images is Bernhard Kütte's *Green Carpet*. The designer's goal here was "to allow the passerby to sense trouble, to physically feel chaos." A circle of grass gently and beautifully undulated like fabric; unfortunately, its poorly resolved vertical edges, faced with plastic turf, were a visual distraction and a technical flaw. The lawn contained a path that led to a slight depression in its center, out of which emerged a ginkgo tree and a blue-green bench, frozen at an angle as if in a snapshot taken during a Kansas tornado. The designer's description evoked consternation and death: "The worrying experience that this site proposes resembles certain installations for romantic gardens—pits or endless caves that suggest death." My impression, one of whimsy and delight, was just the opposite, as if I were drawn into a world of magic and mystery where I might soon encounter Dorothy and the Wizard.

👉 *Fire Stories* by the Australian team of Kate Cullity, Kevin Taylor, Perry Lethlean, Ryan Sims, Karl Myer, and Paul Thompson paid homage to the Australian wilderness, its fragile ecosystems, and the natural forces that shape its landscapes. Here, fire (and the resulting charring of vegetation and creation of ash) was presented as a positive and ecologically necessary element, essential for the rejuvenation of soils, distribution of seeds, and completion of germination. A group of charred logs (harvested from the local site and burned by garden installers) was installed vertically as totems. The visitor's encounter was a striking reminder of the natural cycle of death and life but also a powerful comment on the negative impacts of environmental damage.

