

*Dancing with Time: the garden as art* by John Powell, (Peter Long 2019)

Reviewed for *British Journal of Aesthetics*

John Powell's book on the garden as art and the aesthetic questions that attend the idea of seeing gardens as an art form is a welcome addition to the growing interest in philosophical writing about gardens. The book begins with a case study, using the garden of Tupare in New Plymouth, New Zealand, to tease out aspects of gardens that could seem problematic to their status as works of art. This also becomes the means to question definitions of art that have emerged from aesthetics in the last fifty years. Thus, the 'no-brainer' question of whether a garden can be a work of art cannot be dispensed with too quickly as this would not provide the exercise of rehearsing the benefits and shortcomings of theories from, for example, George Dickie, Jerrold Levinson, Noël Carroll, Susan Langer, and Arthur Danto, though not John Dewey.

Tupare, we learn, is a topographically challenging garden of 3.6 hectares bordered by a fast flowing stretch of the Waiwhakaiho river. It is well described (if somewhat briefly) such that a sense of the multi-sensorial experience of the visitor is conjured up. And so to its 'art definitional' problems that are shared by most gardens. Though instigated and originally designed by one man – or at least one family – the garden has inevitably changed over time and come under different ownership regimes. The sense of an artist/creator is no longer clear. Even if we were to take Tupare during a particular period there is still no stable art object as, along with most gardens, it will also change with the seasons, and the visitor's experience - so reliant on multi-sensorial engagement - will change with weather conditions. One could include other aspects of atmosphere too, for example, can birdsong be heard or is it drowned out by garden machinery?; does one have free reign of the garden or are we crowded by other visitors and so on? Tupare is also, Powell reports, not considered a work of art by the local 'artworld'. This he feels would pose problems if one wanted to rely on an institutional definition.

Thus we have an entity that may or may not be a work of art. It was not designed by someone whose main role was that of an artist/landscape designer (Mathews was a macadam magnate). It has changed extensively since its creation, not just maturing in the way an original designer intended. It is not considered a work of art by local professional artists and their commentators. Its charms are experientially rich, relying on kinaesthetic engagement as opposed to being predominantly visually pleasing /interesting/challenging.

Powell gives a good answer to the question of why gardens in general have not been the focus of much philosophical - for which read philosophy of art - interest. As he says: "After all, gardens tend to be attractive and direct rather than confrontational and ironic, and pleasingly sensual rather than densely intellectual. In fact understood in these terms, most gardens appear somewhat quaint and old-fashioned, not at all the sort of art objects contemporary aestheticians should be troubled by. To be plain, most gardens are not fancy-pants art" (32).

Powell proceeds to make a case for why this lacuna in philosophy of art has been to the detriment of the subject. In his view the problems with gardens are exactly those that appeared with avant-garde art; these include: "instability, lack of distinct spatial and temporal boundaries, multiple authorship, multi-sensuality, ordinary 'objectness' " (32). Keeping gardens within the purview of art discussions – as they would have been in the eighteenth century - would have assisted philosophers of art

during the explosion of complex, challenging, boundary-pushing creativity in the twentieth century. Powell rightly cites Ronald Hepburn as the beginning of a return of interest in the aesthetics of nature and the focus on nature broadening from the purely visual to the immersive, temporal, open-ended, and environmentally contextual. This paves the way for an appropriate aesthetic treatment of gardens.

Chapter three offers a useful discussion of the previous shifts in aesthetics and explanations of why gardens seemed to drop out of the realm of art. Reasons are given such as: the rise of middle-class gardens; the interest in exotic plant introductions rather than overall design and this linked to a shift away from meanings such as those imbedded in the great eighteenth century gardens; the popularity of a gardenesque style that emphasised, e.g., plant interest and seasonal colour over having a stable object to be viewed; and female designers being seen as craftswomen not artists. The latter point is one of the few times that the art/craft distinction is raised, which seems strange given the subject matter.

Chapter four reviews recent philosophical garden writing including work by David Cooper, Stephanie Ross and Mara Miller, all of whom have written substantive books on the topic. (The latter has a similar focus on the art-definitional question that exercises Powell.) One of many useful points raised in this chapter relates to the lack of 'artworld' interest in gardens in contrast to the extremely lively and enthusiastic 'garden art world', which appears to operate outside and, as Michael Conan has suggested, in defiance of the institutional artworld (96)<sup>1</sup>. The inclusion of this point makes it all the more surprising that Powell does not venture much beyond philosophical aestheticians' writing about gardens. He rarely draws on the wide range of writing on gardens from other disciplines, such as landscape architecture and garden history or popular writings on gardens that take a philosophical turn. As John Dixon Hunt has pointed out, "Since gardens have never been as marginal to human existence as they are when they appear on the map of academic study, we might look beyond formal scholarship to amateur considerations of them, in trade publications, books, magazines, the range and production of which seems inexhaustible"<sup>2</sup>. This, of course, moves the collection of relevant texts from a small neat compass to a vast baggy arena of grey literature, but it is an arena that contains sophisticated conceptual writing on the questions that Powell wants to address.

Indeed a survey of that literature suggests an additional problem that stands in the way of the garden being seen as art from outside the garden art world. This is the lack of critical writing. There is detailed and sophisticated analysis of aesthetically and conceptually rich traditional and contemporary gardens, but an unspoken rule seems to haunt the literature, one that says: if one has reservations or outright negative criticisms of a garden it becomes a garden one does not write about. The way this hampers gardens being taken seriously is highlighted by Anne Wareham in her chapter 'Where Have All the Critics Gone?'<sup>3</sup>. This is echoed by Rory Stuart in *What are Gardens For?*<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel Conan, 'Introduction: In Defiance of the Institutional Artworld' in M. Conan ed. *Contemporary Garden Aesthetics, Creations and Interpretations*, Washington: Harvard University Press, 2007, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: the practice of garden theory*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p217.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Wareham 'Where Have All the Critics Gone?' in Tim Richardson and Noel Kingsbury (eds) *Vista: the culture and politics of gardens*, London: Frances Lincoln, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Rory Stuart *What Are Gardens For?* London: Frances Lincoln, 2012.

in which he attempts to fill the vacuum with both a plea for more critical engagement as an enhancement of garden visiting, and by giving three extended examples: The Old Vicarage at East Ruston, The Alnwick Garden and Veddow House Garden. A similar vacuum exists in landscape architecture text books in which picture-heavy examples of classic or innovative styles dominate and no space is given to the analysis of shortcomings or common mistakes, even though these would be eminently useful for the student.

The focus of chapter five - which helps to explain the 'dancing with time' title - is the degree to which gardens are temporal art. This is initially structured around Jerrold Levinson and Philip Alperson's 'What is Temporal Art?'<sup>5</sup>. Powell considers gardens under each of the thirteen sufficient conditions that Levinson and Alperson propose as markers of temporal art. He says that gardens satisfy nine of the thirteen sufficient conditions even though Levinson and Alperson did not have gardens in mind (such is the garden lacuna in philosophy of art). Powell adds a new condition couched in the same form but with gardens as its inspiration. "Objects of the art form are aesthetically dependent to varying degrees on the transitions, movements, actions, and patterns of biological, diurnal, seasonal, climatic, and sometimes geological changes, most of which occur in temporally experienced sequences" ( 109). He then goes on to look at aspects such as maturation, biological change and cyclical change to underline that garden are a temporal art form but also make the case that they are more than that.

However, the discussion of time, whenever it occurs in the book, is always somewhat abstract and does not really explore, and is certainly not illuminating in regard to, the way gardens can shape our experience of time. Indeed, he states that, "the time of the garden is the same as the time outside the garden" (107) and that, "Gardens do not generate a peculiar kind of time. Instead their time is the time of the non-garden world, and the time of our garden experience is also the time of our experiences outside of the garden" (108). This seems wrong. One of the reasons we visit gardens is surely to sink into a different sense of time. When garden designers choose to shape a garden it is our experience of time that they also aim to shape. They might move us swiftly along a narrow enclosed path or invite us to lose ourselves in the stillness of a reflecting pool. Some gardens seem to almost stop time as the mind rests in their harmonious form and tranquil atmosphere. Others might attempt this but fail due to over-busy planting or the over-use of sculpture punctuating the space.

Experiential time as a phenomenon and its meaningfulness to human experience is not really covered in the book. The difference between time and temporality is discussed with temporality "characterised as our response to the effects of the passage of time on objects, including ourselves, and especially on objects whose existence is importantly temporal" (111). This short section (two pages) hints at what seems to me a crucially important aspect of time in gardens – or indeed in nature. Hepburn discusses this perceptively when writing about meanings and how they enhance our aesthetic engagement with nature: how a falling leaf can be viewed with increased poignancy if considered alongside "a summer gone, its symbolising all falling, our own included"<sup>6</sup>. Seasonal change is discussed by Powell but again its experiential time-shifting dimension is not explored. Is it not a common experience to greet the first crocus of early spring with a sense of a long winter finally

---

<sup>5</sup> Jerrold Levinson and Philip Alperson, 'What is Temporal Art?' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16, 1991, 439-50.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Hepburn 'Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in R. Hepburn, *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001 p3.

ending, whereas the first autumn colours in the trees are felt as signs of a summer too swiftly drawing to a close? Calendar time, like clock time, is not experiential time and it is experiential time that is important in penetrating what is special about gardens and what can be made possible by the gardener's art.

Chapters seven and eight take the reader through theories relating to the ontology of gardens, or rather theories about the ontology of art and how gardens do or do not measure up. He eventually favours Danto's theory of art as that which can usefully be applied to gardens. This section also includes an interesting discussion of Mateusz Salwa's idea of the garden as performance<sup>7</sup>; although this is ultimately rejected by Powell, partly on the basis that "plants do not perform" (167)<sup>8</sup>, it helps to keep the focus on the temporal and immersive nature of gardens.

Powell's search for answers as to whether or not gardens can (again) be an art form and the nature of their ontological status is careful and exacting in its deliberation of conflicting theories. Even though the book begins with an analysis of an actual garden, experiencing gardens and the exact nature of our aesthetically significant relationship to them disappears somewhat into the background.

Isis Brook

---

<sup>7</sup> Mateusz Salwa 'The Garden as Performance' *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 5 (2013), 372-87.

<sup>8</sup> Someone should tell the Royal Horticultural Society whose system of awarding garden merit designation to plants is based on researching their *performance* in a range of garden situations.