

CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

August 31, 2013—Shandaken Project, Shandaken, NY
<http://experimentallectures.org>

The Garden Is Overgrown by Alhena Katsof



Maybe I'll just start by saying I couldn't imagine a more perfect place for this talk. It might be a little bit on the long side, but I think that every second of it feels really important for tonight. I couldn't think of a better place or time.

The seed for this talk was planted in 1998 when I first fell in love with photo-montage and the work of Hannah Höch. Höch died in the year I was born, and though it's always been a little forced, I've often identified with her through that auspicious date. I think it's in part because she looks remarkably like my maternal grandmother that I feel some kind of cosmic alignment with her.

*A Note from the Author: In addition to the books, artists and writers mentioned in the lecture, I am indebted to Monika Wenke's 2010 Dissertation, *Aspects of Inner Emigration in Hannah Höch 1933 - 1945*.*

Höch was part of the women's movement in the 1920's, and she was one of only a handful of woman who penetrated the notoriously misogynistic Berlin Dada group as, at times, did Beatrice Wood, Sophie Tauber and Baroness Else Von Freytag-Loringhoven. (And I should say that I didn't double check pronunciations before started or came here tonight, so forgive me if things are a little bit mis-said, I'm gonna go for it anyways.) Höch's collages were made of assembled body parts, severed heads, masks, machines and flowers. She frequently combined male and female into one being, creating beautiful and powerful androgynous figures. As I learned more about her life, I found out that she had changed her forename from Johanne to the more Jewish sounding Hannah to signal her allegiance with all Others within the German State. I read about her close friendship with Kurt Schwitters and her relationship with the Dutch writer Til Brugman. The women remained together for nine years, living in The Hague and Berlin.

I've also read about Höch's careful stewardship of the Dada archives throughout the war, and the legend that she buried avant-garde artworks and letters in her garden, and stood vigil over them during the war years. In 2008 I went to visit and photograph Höch's cottage and garden, which remains largely untouched as a private home in East Berlin. My talk tonight is an effort to go beyond Hannah's garden, and to begin to understand the garden itself as a transformative place for ideas and memories.

I'm going to talk a little more about Höch and I invite you to come with me; we will change pace in a little bit, so stick with the historical for a little bit as we go into the garden.

Gardening had always played a big role in Höch's life. As a child she learned to graft roses from her father. Later, when she lived in Berlin, her apartment balconies were green and flowering. The garden and her plants were never more important to her though than at the time of her withdrawal from society during the Third Reich. The garden literally fed Höch during the war years, helping her to survive with fruits and vegetables, and it was the garden only, amongst all people, places and things, that could "catch her emotionally".

I'm gonna take a minute to revisit some things about Höch, her life in Germany at the time of World War II, and her garden, to set up the rest of our conversation.

So, by January 1932 the apartment that Höch shared with Till in Berlin had been burgled and many valuable documents vanished, including her diaries. When the National Socialists came to power, the situation grew more acute. The two women refused to fly the Nazi flag outside their window on official holidays and were subsequently subjected to visits from Nazi officials.

Höch received a letter from the artists' cooperative that she belonged to, requesting her to officially declare support for National Socialist Party and to prove her Aryan descent. She replied with a simple "no."

In 1933, like all avant-garde artists, Höch and her circle were deemed "Cultural Bolsheviks" and "Degenerates" by the National Socialist regime. As we know, the Communists called Dada decadent and the Nazis considered it degenerate. Dada was attacked, forbidden, confiscated and burned from both sides.

By this time, most of Berlin Dada, and Till, had left.

Höch began to look around for a place to go where nobody would be aware of her past. Two weeks after the declaration of war she bought a tiny watchman's house with a large garden, on an abandoned airstrip, on the outskirts of Berlin.

She eventually married the much younger businessman and pianist Kurt Heinz Matthies. Her husband was twenty-one years her junior, and it is possible that Hannah was essentially living in normative drag – marking the start of her inner emigration. Their relationship with was a difficult one and during a trip to Nuremberg in 1937, he was arrested for committing various sexual offenses against minors. Already in growing isolation at the cottage, he left her in 1941, Höch lived out the rest of the terror of the war by herself, alone in the cottage, surrounded by the high walls of her garden, which formed protective layers around the house.



Two decades later she explained it as such:

“I looked around for a place in a part of Berlin where nobody would know me by sight ... I moved all of my possessions here, and that’s also how I managed to save them.” Among those possessions was Höch’s vast collection of avant-garde painting and sculpture, and as she once said, it was “enough to take all the Dadaists to the gallows.”

Most of what remains of the Berlin Dada comes to us because of Höch’s burial of the archives. The artworks included pieces by Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Hulsenbeck and Wassily Kandinsky. Additionally, she had been collecting all the books forbidden by the National Socialists that she could get her hands on, and by this time owned an enormous library.

Höch was so isolated that there were times that she did not speak a word for weeks. She spent the long nights of bombardments in her garden, instead of her cellar or the far away shelter.

When the war was coming to an end, and the Russians were advancing on Berlin from the East, it was no longer safe to have the works hidden around the house, concealed in cupboards, the eaves of her roof, and the water well. Höch buried all of her treasures in the garden. The garden really was a secret garden and a garden of secrets.



The former airfield had been split up into allotments. At the time, it was common practice that the horticultural society regulated what kind of vegetation was to be planted. The National Socialists blood-and-soil ideology, surfaced even in landscape gardening.

In 1939 Joseph Pertl coined the term “degenerate horticulture” and “garden art” existed only in the racial idea of a national style incorporating exclusively indigenous plants planted in a natural design. Exotic plants were frowned upon because “it is only a small step from the exotic to the abnormal.”

Höch did not comply with these racial ideas of beauty or convention. She owned huge exotic cactuses, planted the non-indigenous Dittany and grew and crossbred various forms of poppies.

Here I’m going to read a small excerpt of a fictionalized version of Höch’s story by a young writer, Emily Highfield.



“The moon observes the night sky’s quiet acquiescence of all things modern and right. The moon is not verbose, but she’s smart. She can catch moon drops on her tongue and swallow them whole. I saw them float up through her head, illuminating the passages along the way until they settled down in her eyes and shone like pellets made of moon drops. The moon watches as the woman takes a shovel and walks out into the garden. They forged their bond years ago when she was bare-breasted walking across the fortress of the Alps. The nighttime winds would chill her through her skirts, but the moon made her warm again. Gutter gurgle, a language is born as she—and many like her—forlorn and fighting against wind, tore through stoic, lakeside surfaces to reveal the chaotic, rumbling choir below.

Tigers chew through horses hoofs and the moon smiles.

The moon watches as the woman kneels with unbuttoned, buttoned down shirt and begins to dig.

She digs for a long time. She digs with her hands, with her fists, with her shovel shifting and cracking in her hands. Dirt climbs into fingers nails and scales the hairline. Dirt - fig bearing, worm hiding, post-glacial, demon drenched, regular old dirt.

She puts down the shovel and stands above the hole in the ground. It’s deep with little worm halves wiggling their way into the pit. The worms come from the dirt, deep and dark as it is. There isn’t much time to ponder the deep dark darkness. The woman glimpses it, shudders at its warm mystery and then moves into the house.”



There are a number of different threads that this talk can follow, like climbing vines wrapped around a wooden trellis, or a barbed wire fence, it’s difficult to untangle them, and realistically, they need to stay sticky and threaded for the garden to survive.

In a way, I am thinking about this presentation as a kind of topiary. It’s my first time giving shape to these ideas, and much like someone who makes art by pruning a tree, I may let them grow back afterwards and trim them a different way next time.

I’m not going to talk a lot more about Dada, but I would, very briefly, like remind us of the impact of industrialization upon artistic and cultural practices at the time, especially in regards to the proliferation of ready-made materials and the mass production of images.

Earlier, at the threshold of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantics were making work about the shock of industrialization, speed, factories and labor encroaching on our sense of time. The Romantics wanted to connect people back to nature.



I've been haunted by a painting from this era. It appears randomly in my mind's eye and sometimes I see it against the dark of my eyes.

Ophelia is a work by Sir John Everett Millais that was made between 1851 and 1852. It depicts a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Queen Gertrude recounts the following episode:

While gathering flowers, Ophelia falls into the river from an overhanging tree. She lies in the water singing songs, as if unaware of her danger.

Her clothes trap the air, keeping her temporarily afloat. But eventually, they become “heavy with their drink,” and pull her to a muddy death.

Ophelia’s drowning has been praised as one of the most poetically written death scenes in literature. Her pose—open arms and upward gaze—resembles traditional portraits of saints or martyrs, but it’s also one of erotic permissibility and pleasure.

In departure from Queen Gertrude’s depiction of the scene, the flowers that Millais painted are imbued with a Victorian interest in the “language of flowers,” according to which each flower carries a symbolic meaning. Featured prominently of course, is the red poppy, which represents sleep and death.

Poppies only flower in uprooted soil. Their seeds can lay dormant for years without germinating, and only grow after the ground has been disturbed. In this witchy way, especially during the old wars, they were a symbol of death.



Since the World Wars, poppies has also been used as a form of remembrance. I’ll be honest though and say that I’m not sure if this use of the poppy captures the depth of the plant’s symbolic power.

It appears around Memorial Day, as a felted red pin for a coat’s lapel, worn in honor of fallen soldiers. It stems from Flanders where of some of the bloodiest fighting took place. The landscape was completely devastated, becoming devoid of buildings, road and trees. All that remained was a sea of mud and as spring came, poppies. It was then that John McCrae, a doctor serving with the Canadian Forces wrote the famous poem:



In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep,
Though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.



Scotland, with brutish windswept climate, is also abundant with poppies. Extensive coastline, cliffs and isles mean that drownings can happen frequently, especially in childhood. Margaret Tait, the Scottish filmmaker came from a long line of seafaring merchants, on the Isle of Orkney, where the surrounding beaches would lure children to swim and splash amongst the rocks, but undertows could often without warning sweep them out to sea.

Tait included many shots of poppies in her films. Most prominently in *Place of Work*, a film in which she documents the house, studio and garden where she lived since she was seven years old. The film was made just before the Scottish Council took the home away from her, and it's her 'goodbye.'

Tait has said it "was meant to define a place, or the feeling of being in one place, with the sense this gives, not of restriction but of the infinite variations available."

The writer Ali Smith, describes Margaret Tait as thus:

“A unique and underrated filmmaker, nobody like her. Born of the Italian neo-realists, formed of her own Scottish pragmatism, optimism, generosity and experimental spirit, and a clever forerunner of the English experimental directors of the late 20th century. A clear example of, and pioneer of, the poetic tradition, the experimental tradition, the democratic tradition, and in the best case, the best example, of risk-taking Scottish cinema.”

Tait died the year after her final film *Garden Pieces* was completed.



I owe my interest in Margaret to the artist and filmmaker Stina Wirfelt, who traveled recently to Orkney where she also learned about the life and work of another Island artist, Gunnie Moberg, a Swedish woman who, like herself, who had found love and melancholy along the Scottish coast. In a film about her life, Gunnie describes her gardens on the sparse, windswept Scottish Isle as such:

“When I came here there was not much here. A few bushes here and there. And I think that it made me want to expand. I don’t know how I got so obsessed with the garden but I had a very good friend, the photographer Fay Godwin, and I phoned her up one day and said ‘I’m giving up photography, I’m going to be a gardener’ and she just laughed at me and said ‘No, I’ll tell you what you’re going to do, You’re going to do a garden and then you are going to photograph flowers’ And she was right.” Gunnie grew a copious amount of poppies.



Tending to a garden along the British Isles is no joke. It's a hostile environment. Derek Jarman devoted the final years of his life to tending his gardens at Prospect Cottage in the shadow of Dungeness nuclear power station in southeast Kent where he arranged the flotsam that he found washed up on the beach, around the shingled cottage with salt-loving plants and small mystical circles of flint.

Parched by baking sun in the summer, Siberian winds in the winter and with no trees around—it's a wild landscape—a spit jutting out into the English Channel.

Jarman's friend Howard Sooley once noted, "You can't take life for granted in Dungeness: every bloom that flowers through the shingle is a miracle, a triumph of nature. Derek knew this more than anyone."



He had come to the property late in life, when he was already dying, and he set about spending his final years cultivating vibrant life around him, even as his eyesight slipped away. The garden was surrounded by northern landscape, purple sea kale along the beach, and blue leaves of yellow horned poppies littering the windswept dirt.

I have a lot more to learn about Jarman's garden, which is the subject of his film, called *The Garden*, from 1990. Lacking almost any dialog, this 90-minute assemblage of images and decay, which focus on homosexuality and Christianity set against the coastal home and garden in the shadow of the nuclear power station, is haunted throughout by the reality of Jarman's own mortality.

In the intro to the film, Jarman says, I want to share with you, this wilderness of failure.

Tonight I'd like to read some passages from an article that Jarman's friend Howard Sooley wrote after he passed away:

And I quote: "Our days of gardening were punctuated by trips to Rye or Hastings, or up the road to Madrona Nursery, or more often a walk to the sea or down to the ponds at the back of the cottage. These are hidden by a small wood of shrubby willows which poke from the shingle through a carpet of lichen and moss. Just over the tracks is a prickly tangle of twigs that, on closer inspection, is actually a forest of bonsai trees."



“By the New Year of 1994 our trips to Dungeness were all but over, as Derek’s strength dramatically started to fade. We still took our walks though, usually around Smithfield’s market. One day, passing the chapel, Derek wanted to go in and look up hymns that might be sung at his funeral. We sat on a pew at the back in the growing glow of late afternoon and opened a hymnbook. ‘I remember this one from school’ he said. Great tune, shame about the words,’ he said quietly. A few minutes later I looked up to see tears rolling down his face. I put my arm around him and could hear him reading the words of the hymn open in front of him, All Things Bright And Beautiful... ‘I understood in that moment the immensity of loss Derek was feeling as he could see the night fall on the light and life of Dungeness.’”

I’ll read just the last three stanzas of the hymn:



The cold wind in the winter,
The pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden
He made them every one

The tall trees in the greenwood,
The meadows where we play
The rushes by the water
We gather every day

He gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell
How great is God Almighty
Who has made all things well.

Jarman once remarked that “Paradise haunts gardens, and some gardens are paradises. Mine is one of them. Others are like bad children, spoilt by their parents, over-watered and covered with noxious chemicals.”



One of the attractions of the garden here tonight is that it's ephemeral. That it does not last. That it should not last.

There is a legend about the authors of *The Decadent Cookbook*, Medlar Lucan and Durian Gray, that goes like this:

After the unfortunate closing of their Edinburgh restaurant, whose menu was based on a collection of historically dubious recipes from the kitchens of Caligula and the Marquis de Sade, one of their frequent guests invited them to stay at her countryseat, Mount Cullen in Ireland.

In what proved to be a happy coincidence, they arrived at the estate, which benefited from a climate mild enough to host exotic plants, right when Mrs. Gordon was thinking about redesigning the gardens. They had been neglected for many years and she made up her mind that her two guests would be ideally suited to the task. After all, she argued, “If one can design a menu, one can design a garden.”

Indeed their names seem peculiarly suited for the task. A medlar is a fruit which is considered ripe and edible only after it has been left out to rot.

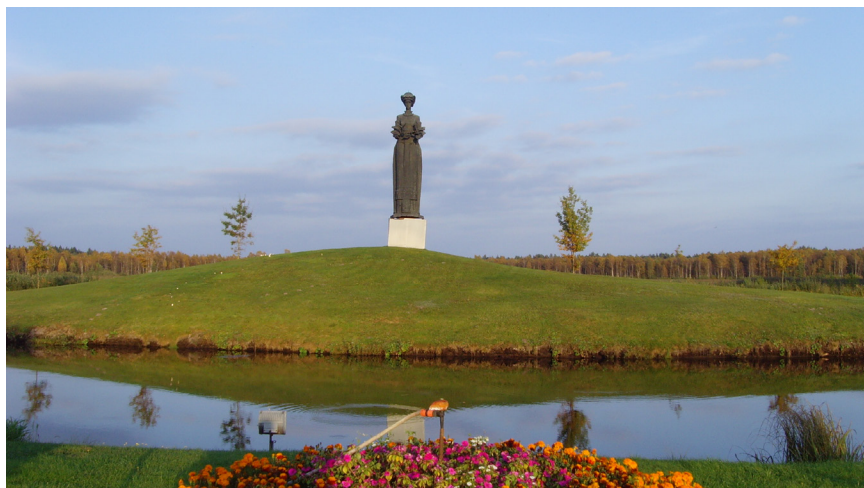
A durian is a fruit from Thailand and Southeast Asia which bears the unique distinction of stinking of a rotting corpse, and has in fact been banned from public transportation due to its rancid stench and its propensity to linger long after initially being savored.

I won't get into their plans for the garden tonight, which unfortunately was never realized, but I will refer to Humphrey Repton, of whom they wrote: "His greatness lay not in his ability to create acres of tedious English parkland but in his ruthlessness. As a gardener he was without mercy. He was quite prepared to flatten an entire mining village because it spoiled a particular sight line. The great artist is concerned as much with destruction as with creation. Perhaps more so."



Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many Socialist sculptures have been destroyed, most often as acts of rebellion and protest. Wanting to purge these symbols of oppression, statues of Lenin, Marx and Stalin were being torn down, though during the uncertainty of the 1990's, it was unclear what to do with the remains.

In Moscow, some were deposited on the lawn of the Tretyakov Gallery. A hodge-podge of Soviet Leaders and unidentified peasants and body parts—mostly heads. These remains found a temporary place to rest until as recently as 2010. I was told a rumor just yesterday that the park has disappeared to make way for a cleaner, more Western park with wifi and concessions. No one seems to know where the sculptures, over 700, were moved to.



This phenomenon took place across the region, and in many cities such as Talin, Riga and Vilnius the destruction of statues and monuments were at the center of mass protests. In Lithuania, as with many countries, there has been a debate about what to do with the remaining works. On one hand, there is a desire to destroy these symbols of oppression, and the terrible history that they represent. On the other hand, for example, some people who remember and know the risk of having one ruling ideology wipe out another—the loss of language, culture, history, traditions, and a sense of place—is too much, they argue that it's important to find a way to preserve the sculptures, as a reminder, so that these historical times are neither memorialized nor forgotten.

I'm telling you all of this because one of my most favorite sculpture parks—which is really more like a sculpture graveyard—that I've visited is in Lithuania.

One of the first Millionaires after the fall of the Soviet Union, Lithuania's Mushroom King, made a proposal, and succeeded to build a sculpture graveyard on his acreage which is very big. In essence, Lithuania gathered all the remaining statues from all around the country, from town squares and schools, and brought them to the Mushroom King, about an hour and a half from Vilnius, on the edge of the forest, where he built, with his money, the most spectacular sculpture graveyard.

Once you get past the museum kiosk, the small amphitheater, carved into the woodlands are rustic paths, reminiscent of Soviet Gulag work camps replete with propaganda music that is being pumped from antique PA's hanging from trees. Littered throughout the woods, in the trees, along the trails and in little gravel turnouts are Marx, Lenin, Stalin and various Socialist "heroes," statues made of stone, and wood, and bronze.



As a collector of rare animals, the Mushroom King has a small zoo where ostrich, peacocks, zebras and a giraffe roam free. They appear along side the entrance to the park, and you spot them through the trees, heads poking above fences and shrubs, strange animal calls mixing with the other sounds. Every once in a while, one of the animals breaks free. I was fortunate to see a zebra. And all of this is set to the surreal backdrop of his pink and purple mansion, the same colors of sunset, where the grassy hills meet the forest.

It's rumored that when Chiang Kai-Shek made his final retreat from Mainland China to the island of Taiwan, he sang the Republic of China's National Anthem all the way across the airfield. Though he had once controlled all of China, he was never to return to the mainland again.

Over the 30 years of his Presidential reign in Taiwan, President Chiang Kai-Shek oppressed dissension, banned democracy and persecuted his critics.

He passed away in 1975 but to this day, statues of Chiang Kai-Shek can be found in parks, schools, town squares, military bases and buildings of economic or social importance throughout Taiwan. They are made by state artists and almost always of bronze.



Not surprisingly, since 2007, the pro-Taiwanese independence Democratic Progressive Party have been demolishing the statues—melting them, decapitating them, and blowing them up.

Some of them have found their way to the Cihu Mausoleum. Chiang Kai-Shek's resting place, which I have heard is oddly close to the airport.

Cihu, which means "benevolent lake," is now host to the Garden of Generalissimos, a surreal and manicured landscape littered with the larger-than-life likeness of Chiang Kai-Shek. Not only in his likeness, but a likeness that only takes the form of a handful of poses, which repeat in a seemingly endless abundance. Busts, standing with cane and hat or cane and book, seated on a large presidential chair—Chiang Kai-Shek is omnipresent, looking nowhere.



Much like in the former USSR, there is a debate about what to do with the statues. As some move to dismantle them entirely, others have protested, opposing the destruction of the statues on the grounds of culture and history.

The statues have been gathered from around the island, yet thousands of them remain. And while thousands remain, there are already thousands in the garden. Chiang Kai-Shek everywhere, like a weed.



The Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay described his garden, Little Sparta, as in a permanent state of revolution.

I won't speak much about Little Sparta tonight, except to note that Finlay spent over thirty years building it, about the same amount of time that Chiang Kai-Shek ruled Taiwan. Severely agoraphobic, Finlay hardly ever left the house and garden for the last thirty years of his life, living essentially, in inner exile.

Little Sparta is especially known for the concrete poems that Finlay would plant throughout the garden.

I want to take this moment to talk briefly about the notion of 'tending gardens.' You'll hear people talk about lavishing love and care on their gardens. I would like to propose that we shift our thinking a little, and in keeping with the philosophy of the various gardeners that we're discussing tonight, would go on to agree with Lucan and Grey when they suggest that gardening is little more than systematic violence.



The 19th century Italian poet, essayist and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi understood this perfectly.

“Go into the garden” he wrote, “a garden full of plants, herbs and flowers. As charming as you please, in the loveliest season of the year. Everywhere you look you’ll find pain. The whole vegetable kingdom is in a permanent state of suffering. Over there is a rose—tortured by the sun that gave it life: it shrivels, languishes, fades. And that lily over there is being cruelly sucked by a bee—in its tenderest, most vital parts...”

The scene that Leopardi is describing here can be attributed to a specific phenomenon pertaining to a particular flower that the Greek’s called the Bee Orchid, which gets its name from the flower’s lip, it’s colored to resemble a female bumble bee. A passing male bee swoops down to satisfy his lust, and in doing so, pollen from the orchid attaches itself to the bee’s head. The bee eventually gives up trying to mate with the flower, only to deposit it on another orchid (stupid) when he tries again. Thus pollinating the orchids.



The word “orchid” actually comes from the Greek for ‘testicle’.

Many country names for Orchids can be translated as such:

‘triple cullocks’
‘sweet ballocks’
‘goat-stones’.

This orchid/bee phenomenon is most likely the same one that Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari reference, though in their telling it occurs between orchids and wasps. According to the phenomenon, a particular genus of orchid has evolved with the capacity to produce the sexual pheromones of a wasp and to visually present the appearance of the female wasp herself thus making the orchid indistinguishable by scent or sight from the sexual partner of a wasp.

It has been explained to me that Deleuze and Guattari use this phenomenon as a way to help explain the insufficiency of a language of physical boundaries and a language of psychological aims when describing the powers of transformation, in particular, when mimicry or copying is involved.

(Where’s the 2? Gone...)

Deleuze and Guattari would like to use a conception of copy in which the copy is only as good as what it can do and no longer being a “copy,” neither good nor bad, but an experimentation, making the orchid neither a deception, nor an approximation, but a real becoming.

Imagine there to be a wasp-orchid assemblage where the boundaries of the one cannot be thoroughly distinguished from the boundaries of the other.

They offer a description of the wasp-orchid relation, which exceeds the explanatory power of representational thinking. It goes like this:

“It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, (mimesis). Or, at the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp.”

I speculate that it’s exactly this notion of becoming that I’ll eventually use to theorize the garden as mnemonic device— not only a device that translates information into a form that the human brain can better retain, and therefore a method by which things are remembered, but as with any memory, a method through which things are transformed.

A becoming-garden of the graveyard and a becoming-graveyard of the garden.

A bee-coming... [laughter]

Maybe I rushed that...I should have paused with the thought... OK, serious now.



Vita Sackville-West married Harold Nicholson, an aristocratic diplomat, author, diarist and politician. Theirs was a deep partnership, and a true intimacy and they were devoted to each other throughout their lives.

Together they built and re-imagined the Sissinghurst Estate in Kent, where Vita built one of the most famous gardens in Britain.

An extraordinary gardener, Vita was also ruthless. She practiced a kind of gardening that bordered on neglect and reveled in a process of trial and error. She believed in letting self-seeded plants grow where they naturally fall and that wild flowers mixing with cultivated plants was not a disaster. She was quick to prune, trim, change. As my friend Dean likes to say, through her writing, Vita taught him that to garden, you just put something in, and if it doesn't work, you just hoick it out!

She was the kind of woman who got her hands dirty alongside the “help.”

Sackville-West was also an important poet and novelist, though she is perhaps most known for her gardening articles. In post-World War II Britain, she wrote about growing Irises as thus:

“What the iris really enjoys is being grown in a miserably poor soil, mostly composed of old lime and mortar rubble and even gravel: a gritty mixture at the foot of a sunny wall, the grittier the better.”



(That's vita and Harold on the far side over there.)

Vita and Harold ran with a fast crowd, it was a literary crowd and each of them had many affairs openly to each other, it was part of their partnership. Vita was about six feet tall, and is said to have worn men's military uniforms on occasion, to pass as a man when meeting lovers out in public.

Virginia Woolf immortalized their love affair when she wrote the book *Orlando*, inspired by Vita, and her son once famously referred to *Orlando*, "as the greatest love letter ever written." Unusually, the moment of the conception of the book was documented in Woolf's diary on the 5th of October 1927:

And I quote: "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando*: It's Vita; only with a change about from one sex to the other."

The affair eventually ended sometime in 1927 or 1928 but the friendship survived, and the two remained close friends until Virginia's death.

As Dorian Gray never tired of pointing out "nowhere are sex and death more intimately bound together than in the garden."

(That's Vita and Virginia on the other side.)



So, Lisabetta has fallen in love with Lorenzo. Lorenzo is employed by her brothers as a steward. When her brothers find out about the liaison, they lead Lorenzo to a remote spot in the countryside and murder him, burying his body in a shallow grave.

A few days later, the ghost of Lorenzo appears to Lisabetta in a dream, in which they talk and she learns where he is buried. Lisabetta and her maidservant set out for the lonely spot to ascertain the truth of the words from the dream. Unable to remove her lover's entire body, she severs his head and takes it home wrapped in a cloth.

And I quote from Giovanni Boccaccio's 14th century story, Decameron:

"Taking the head to her room, she locked herself in and cried bitterly, weeping so profusely that she saturated it with her tears, at the same time implanting a thousand kisses upon it. Then she wrapped the head in a piece of rich cloth and laid it in a large and elegant pot of the sort in which basil or marjoram is grown. She next covered it with soil in which she planted several springs of the finest Salernitan basil and never watered them except with essence of roses or orange blossom, or with her own teardrops. She took to sitting permanently beside this pot and gazing lovingly at it, concentrating the whole of her desire upon it because it was where her beloved Lorenzo lay concealed. And after gazing raptly for a long while upon it she would bend over it and begin to cry. Her weeping never ceased until the whole of the basil was wet with her tears." "Because of the long and unceasing care that was lavished upon it, and also because the oil was enriched by the decomposing head inside the pot, the basil grew thick and exceedingly fragrant."



Recently, the scholar Henry James was cataloging Vita Sackville-West's library when a paper slipped out of one of Vita's books. It was a previously undiscovered love letter that she had written to her lover Violet Trefusis, an English writer and socialite.

The poem only found last year, was written in French and translated by James, and I will read it to you now.

When sometimes I stroll in silence, with you
Through great floral meadows of open country
I listen to your chatter, and give thanks to the gods
For the honest friendship, which made you my companion
But in the heavy fragrance of intoxicating night
I search on your lip for a madder caress
I tear secrets from your yielding flesh
Giving thanks to the fate which made you my mistress.

Good night.