





LIGHT VOLUMES

ART AND LANDSCAPE
BY MONIKA GORA

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Transgress

Sune Nordgren

WE LIVE IN A TRANSGRESSIVE ERA. The conventional boundaries between the arts have been erased. Creative people do not remain where they are supposed to be; they are no longer bound by their traditional roles. Schools and training, materials or even trade unions used to serve to define different disciplines: working with textiles and clay was considered craft, steel and plastic was design, bronze and oil paint was art. This is definitely not the case anymore. These days architects, artists, and designers work together in interdisciplinary groups, each with different tasks but shared responsibilities. Quite often they prefer loose groupings or cooperatives to individual artistry in an attempt to discard the myth of the exalted, but lonely, genius. Gradually these new formations are turning the grey zones between different means of expression into clear and transparent transit spaces.

MONIKA GORA is the perfect exponent of this transgressive era. She never asks whether the project at hand is art or architecture, or something else. The answer is the result: a clear idea transformed into reality and mediated so that others can experience it. She sees herself as a member of a team – a new project, a new team – where her contribution is indisputable, but where she also relies on other people's competence, trusting them to do their job. No one can be a genius in isolation.

IN ALL HER PROJECTS Monika Gora has worked with people with diverse professions and skills, frequently with other architects and artists, engineers and technicians, planners and builders – not to mention politicians, administrators, funders, etc. They all want to have their say – and rightly so – but it is still a delicate balance. This is another aspect of her creativity: her social skills and her inclusive attitude. It is all about engagement – and sometimes it helps to have a sense of humour. The inviting and highly interactive work *Pat the Horse* (2007) is in every respect representative of this side of her professionalism. The fat king on his suffering horse is an obvious symbol of power and repression, expected to be met with servility and obedience. To take the part of the beautiful horse was to take the part of the disempowered. To climb the three-storey scaffolding and pat the horse's head was both to take a physical risk and to show solidarity. The new perspective on the grand square – and the world – became a bonus reward.

RETURNING TO THE SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE WORK with the artist Gunilla Bandolin has inspired Monika Gora to develop other, less artistic, but more social projects. From their first co-project, the giant marine installation marking the site of the bridge between Sweden and Denmark, X-X (1992), their cooperation has been truly inventive. They have crossed borders together and indeed challenged the tyranny of disciplines. They have never compromised aesthetics, but they have questioned preconceptions and challenged prejudices. And this is something that has sharpened the social skills of Monika Gora's own work. She wants her work to be accessible, and she takes pride in the positive response of the users and the people who encounter the work on a daily basis.

YOU MIGHT SAY there is also a playfulness that characterizes Monika Gora's practice. The Glass Bubble in Malmö (2006) is a greenhouse for human growth. Again she wanted the users to be in on the project before its completion, and she created a platform for involvement that was crucial for the success in the end. The people most frequently using this stimulating "incubator" are definitely grown-ups, indeed elderly, but they still grow in their minds. Again her work is about inclusion, simplicity, and playfulness, but the starting point was the opposite – an urge for complication. In her negotiations with Mick at Octatube, the Dutch constructor of the unique components of the Glass Bubble, she wanted to make sure that the firm was able to meet her requirements. When asking him "Have you done anything like this before?" and getting the reply "Well, similar, but not exactly the same", she concluded, "So, how can we make it more difficult – make it a greater challenge?"

Behind this urge to explore there is a curiosity about context and a fascination with complexity. Monika Gora explains it as a wish to examine and understand the whole as well as all the parts, to manage the whole operation from start to finish, to master the tools for independence and completion. Her level of ambition is high but so are her demands, both as regards her own contribution and what she has the right to expect from the professionals involved. Her attitude towards the process and the lifespan of her projects, however, seems to be quite relaxed. "Everything is temporary" is perhaps an unexpected statement from her as a construction-oriented architect. "Buildings come and go – like the leaves on a tree" is another. That all is mortal and perishable should not be taken in a biblical sense; it is more practical than that. It is a sound and enlightened attitude that squares with her anti-authoritarian view on both society and artistic practice. It is a sensible, down-to-earth perspective; it is common sense in the midst of dreams. To be honest, deep inside we know that all is impermanent – we have to live with that insight, but there is still no cause for panic.







LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IS A JUNGLE – rich, lush, bewitching, difficult to overlook, maybe dangerous. You can get lost, even devoured. There are so many tempting tasks for your professional career, from small garden creation to big strategic planning, from building landscapes to theorizing about its foundations, from the arts to the sciences ... you may be overwhelmed by all these steadily evolving, intertwining, liana-like paths and eventually make the wrong decision and end up in the maw of a brute real estate company or in the abysses of a nature preservation sect. That is probably why the discipline tries to domesticate this jungle into a cultivated field, nicely flowering, productive, understandable, controllable, and teachable, in short: secure. The drawback of this domestication, however, is the loss of all those small and great inventions for human life on an urbanizing planet, itself a jungle, that can emerge if one exploits the complexity of the intricate paths instead of banning them. For the sake of landscape architecture, some professionals have chosen to permanently transgress the boundaries of the secure and consider their discipline as a tempting jungle – Monika Gora is one such landscape architect.

Fearless Lightness

Lisa Diedrich

THE UNIMAGINATIVENESS OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL FIELD has bored others, and earlier. In his foreword to Udo Weilacher's book *Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art*, published exactly 15 years ago, landscape architecture historian John Dixon Hunt notices that "landscape architecture, spreading itself across a wonderfully wide range of human territories, seems doomed to lose its sense of coherence(s), of shared energies". He detects one of the reasons for this loss in the profession's total lack of interest in conceptual issues regardless whether emergent from theory or from the arts. Landscape architecture, complains Dixon Hunt, literally fears the arts as they rely on human ingenuity that threatens to "jeopardise the earth's unique equilibria (or those that survive) for stewardship over which modern landscape architects take particular pride". Therefore they feel more comfortable with the scientifically proven, unquestionable rules found in natural sciences. At the time of Dixon Hunt's complaint, some landscape architectural pioneers looked for inspiration from land art, an artistic genre of the 1960's and 70's, familiar to them as practiced in the landscape. According to Dixon Hunt, the privilege of land art, as compared to the "essentially barren conceptual field of landscape architecture", was "its sense of creative purpose, the conviction of its practitioners and critics alike that has a firm basis in ideas. Ideas of how to respond to land, ideas of art and design, together with no fear of conjoining them (...): the intricate melding of site, sight and insight".

HERSELF A PIONEER, Monika Gora has freed her practice of landscape architecture from the earthiness of land art while continuing the work of sculpting the landscape as volume – bodily volumes or volumes of light, bodily experiences or volumes of thought. Her materials are lighter, sometimes rather more atmospheric than material, and so are her working methods. She involves all kinds of artistic explorations and expressions, including collaborative practices by inviting others to participate – be it humans, be it forces of nature – in a shared creative process. Monika Gora has also freed her practice of landscape architecture from the trust in any other normative bases



Ground modulation, playground, 1995.

than her own power of sensing, creating, and understanding. So doing, Gora escapes the still widely accepted landscape architectural restrictions of today, and even more so, as an artist she escapes landscape architecture as a whole. However, considering her oeuvre as landscape architecture after all holds all the advantages of including into the discipline a body of work and thought that exemplifies the values that the arts have to offer to it today. Gora's concern about the fragility of life on this planet is the same as expressed by devoted nature apostles but her answer is not to believe in the truth of the earth, i.e. hands off, but to believe in the truth of ideas: hands on.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE UNDERSTOOD AS A CREATIVE DISCIPLINE has great potential to achieve the promising melding of site, sight and insight in order to build up a new equilibrium between humans and their environment. Landscape architects start their creative work on site and from site, and this is the key to understand one of landscape architecture's main artistic concepts that is far too underrecognized:



Landscape architects read a specific locale with their own sensitivity and sensibility (site), while imagining perspectives for its future (sight) and raising knowledge about it and its various contexts on all levels (insight). According to landscape architectural scholar Elizabeth Meyer, landscape architects don't consider sites as "empty canvases but full of spaces, full of nature and history, whose latent forms and meanings can be made apparent and palpable through design". She observes that landscape architects would never start to develop ideas for their sites without having experienced them themselves, with their own senses and thought. She argues that this site concern should be understood as raising doubt on the supposed contradiction in the seemingly opposing activities of a rational site analysis and a creative conceptual design, as landscape architects "tend to synthesize these intellectual movements into one creative act".

ACKNOWLEDGING THIS, we have a great chance to revolt against the boringly secure field of landscape architecture and recognize the lush jungle of solutions to contemporary problems it can provide us with. In this book, Monika Gora takes us on her way and to her findings. She merges her sites, sights, and insights into a couple of liana-like stories. Starting each time from a main project in her career, she narrates how she stepped into it, what questions it brought about, how she reacted to them, what she made out of it and how this experience links with related projects and issues. She also offers us "sideways", in the form of essays, which look into her practice from more or less distant positions, with one by the art historian Måns Holst-Ekström, one by her artistic co-creator Gunilla Bandolin, and one of her own in the role of a researcher. To date, Monika Gora's practice goes on. This book will hopefully inspire others to take the jungle path of landscape architecture. Be fearless, dare to experience lightness!



Ground modulations, playground, 1995.



The Glass Bubble

It was a difficult spot: dark, narrow, and windy. Is it even possible to create a garden here? I had long been fascinated by the greenhouse, both as an incubator of life and as a roof over ones head. The house of glass serves two different fundamental human needs. Within the haven of the transparent membranes we can look after and protect the living things we choose to have around us and cherish. But it is also an exquisitely sheltered spot: the safe home from which we can start to explore the world.

THE GLASS BUBBLE, MALMÖ

The spherically shaped glasshouse is situated in the yard of a residential building for senior housing in front of Turning Torso. The barren vegetation outside the glasshouse stands in great contrast to the more luxuriant and flowering vegetation inside. (For project data see page 172.)

SHELTER, LIGHT, VOLUME, IMPOSSIBILITY,
VIEWPOINT, SANCTUARY, SURVIVAL



The Glass Bubble (2006) started with a meeting with the board of Södertorpsgården, an organization that manages buildings providing flats for elderly people in Malmö. They took a vivid interest in their buildings, they improved and extended their premises. Christer, the project manager of the municipal housing corporation, was to oversee the erection of a new building at a prominent, central site by the sea. A decision had been taken about the contractor for the building, and the time had come for the grounds. The board appreciated my previous projects, and now they chose me as landscape architect.

In the local plan for the city of Malmö, the site had been set aside for an exhibition hall. The housing fair five years previously had been a great success with exciting exhibitions and innovative architecture, but the building in question had never been erected. Now the site, on the outskirts of the new state-of-the-art housing estate, was empty. In the local plan the building opened up to the sea and to the prevalent wind direction much like the letter U. The shadow cast by the building would fall on the yard during the major part of the day. It was a difficult point of departure; the site would not allow a traditional garden. But the very difficulty of it was a challenge. Would it be possible to create a garden here – in this narrow, dark, and windy yard?





THE SHELTERED TREE, ICELAND

As a symbol for our need to shield the things we love, the orange tree would stand on the barren grounds of Iceland. (For project data see page 173.)

PROTECTION, PRECONDITIONS, PROSPECT, CLIMATE, EXTREME, PERSISTENCE, THREAT

A garden at an impossible site was a challenge that had excited me once already. In the project **The Sheltered Tree** (1994) I wanted to plant trees in extremely exposed places and make them survive with the help of conservatories. I was fascinated with the connection: the conservatory serving as an incubator for the tree, the tree and the conservatory being an image of our need to look after living things we choose to have around us and cherish. In the project Sheltered Tree a small orange tree was to grow in a field of volcanic stones in Iceland. The work was to be financed by the biggest industry in Iceland, the aluminium smelting plant in Hafnarfjörður. But their managing director asked whether the construction was in any way connected with the environmental effects of the smelting plant. If I had answered, "Of course not, this is a garden," the glassed-in orange tree would have been there today, under the care of the smelting plant. As it turned out I answered, "This is a work of art. It is in the nature of a work of art to be open to the interpretations of the onlookers," and they chose to spend the money on a plantation with no conservatory.

More than ten years later I was again face to face with a site with a harsh climate, just as The Sheltered Tree site in Iceland. This time I had a commission. What I had to show was not much of a draft – a piece of clay which I placed in the model of the building together with a couple of quick, hand-drawn sketches.

The glass structure was a free-standing, curved form, as big as possible. Its contours were as softly sweeping as those of the Crystal Palace in London in the middle of the 19th century. It was an orangery or a greenhouse in the proper sense of the word: simple, clear glass, perhaps some moisture on the glass from the plants and the soil. A protected garden in an impossible spot, planted on top of an underground garage. They chose the most extreme solution, the one whose size was the most provocative.



The project proceeded. I had a clear idea about The Glass Bubble but it was not easy to find a builder. Christer contacted Happolds in London. We went there – the members of the board, Christer and I – to discuss different construction strategies, and we took the opportunity to visit both old and new glass structures. The contract for the glass job was placed in the same way as my contract, only this time I was on the committee. We singled out the three most interesting firms. Christer, and I visited them. Octatube in the Netherlands, which is run by Mick Eekhout, inventor, constructor, and architect, was by far the best. Together we continued to develop the construction.

At the second meeting in Delft Mick said, “There are three kinds of project: things we have done before and know we can handle; border cases – things we have not done before but which can perhaps be done; and, third, things we know we cannot build. Things go wrong only in one type of project-”

“Which one,” I asked.

“When you work with things you have done previously. You relax, thinking that you are able to do it, and suddenly you make a mistake.”

“OK,” I said. “What about The Glass Bubble? Have you done anything similar before?”

“Well, we have built similar structures, not exactly the same but similar ones.”

“So how can we make it more difficult? How can we change the construction to make it a greater challenge?”

