

Proposals for the Biodiversity Gardens, University of Padua

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Background

The Botanical Garden in Padua was established in 1545 and is the oldest such garden in the World. In 2013, the Biodiversity Garden was created, along with a building that houses exhibition galleries. In October 2014, I visited the new Garden with my wife and saw an exhibition of paintings and drawings by the Milanese artist Giovanni Frangi. As a curator, I became interested in how the exhibition programme would develop. I started a correspondence with Telmo Pievani, met Barbara Boldan last year and was encouraged to write down some ideas on how the programme might be developed.

I have not attempted to create a budget for a programme, but exhibitions and activities are bound to increase income from the number of paying visitors. I have mentioned some organisations with whom you might collaborate and share costs but more work needs to be done in identifying botanical gardens around the world which also have galleries. At present, the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh is reviewing the use of its galleries in Inverleith House and they might well make a good partner.

Exhibition Potential

The main gallery has both advantages and disadvantages for showing exhibitions. It has no natural light and so this is ideal for showing works on paper such as botanical illustrations where reduced light levels are required. On the other hand, it has many columns which punctuate sight-lines.

Exhibitions need to be designed to work with the architecture and both of the above qualities can be turned to advantage in the showing of work, especially that which is contemporary. For example, temporary timber walls can be built between columns, increasing wall space and reducing the number of columns that are visible. Such walls can also be made of white fabric onto which video works can be projected once background lighting is reduced or eliminated. Many contemporary artists today are also experienced in creating unexpected environments that are very adventurous and engaging to visitors.

The galleries that surround the stairs on the ground and upper floor are lit from windows that look onto a terrace and over the gardens. The indoor spaces are ideal for most contemporary wall work, whilst outdoor areas have tremendous potential for sculpture, including planted work.

Some Proposals

1. Botanical Illustrations.

These are one most obvious option, with the possibility of showing both historical and contemporary work. The Shirley Sherwood Gallery at Kew regularly shows such exhibitions which might be lent. Some oil paintings, book illustrations and ceramics also associate flowers with symbolism and mythologies. The exhibition of works of high value and fragility can be complicated -and made more costly-by the increased need for higher levels of security and insurance, as well as more exacting temperature and relative humidity controls demanded by lenders.

2. Contemporary Art

The Sherwood Gallery has also shown the work of contemporary sculptors, for example David Nash who 'quarries' work from fallen trees or literally 'grows' sculpture from saplings. David is part of a generation of artists that engage with botanical subjects in new ways. These include herman de vries (shown in the last Venice Biennale), Nils Udo, Andy Goldsworthy, Sjoerd Buisman, Anya Gallacio, Wolfgang Laib, Lothar Baumgarten, Mark Dion and Hans Haacke. Such artists often work across disciplines and present their work in large scale installations which are interactive and participatory, for example to create self-sustaining plant environments or to use algae and bio-mass to create renewable energy.

Several British artists have made important bodies of work in Italy, for example Marc Quinn, whose 'Italian Landscapes'(2000) were based on flower and plant life and were based on an installation commissioned by Fondazione Prada in Milan. Of the Italian artists, Giuseppe Penone, born in 1947, is the best known. Groups of work can be lent by individual artists whilst museums around the world continue to organise group exhibitions. One exhibition which may tour next year is 'Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World', organised by the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas.

3. Photography and Video

The photographs of plant forms by Karl Blossfeldt published in 1929 are currently the subject of a touring exhibition organised by Arts Council England. However, many contemporary artists now take advantage of new digital technologies, for example Jon McCormack whose computer-generated projections of plant life result from programmed algorithms which simulate the effects of evolution and the environment and have echoes of 'On Growth and Form (1917) by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey use plant photosynthesis to create images directly onto grass walls.

4. Outdoor Sculpture

Several artists already mentioned create work in the landscape, notably David

Nash, Andy Goldsworthy and Sjoerd Buisman, some of which are intended to grow or to decay. Of Italian artists, the late Giuliano Mauri is probably the best known, but the Arte Sella sculpture park in Trento contains many works by such artists. A recent acquisition is of a stone sculpture by the British artist Peter Randall-Page, whose work has previously been commissioned by Kew for the Millennium Seed Bank.

5.Design

Beyond its traditional use as decoration on fabrics, wallpaper and ceramics, plant life is increasingly being used in contemporary design and architecture. Sedum has long been used in roofing, but new advances are being made in the use of micro-organisms to turn sand into stone, fungal mycelia in the manufacture of packing materials, and bacteria being grown into clothes.

Public Engagement and Marketing

Whilst changing exhibitions will encourage repeat visits to the Gardens, artist residencies, workshops and symposia can certainly attract different audiences and participants during the course of each exhibition. CCANW attracted applications from 655 artists from 39 countries for nine Soil Culture residencies which were advertised-including one at Kew- and this is a strong indication of the interest of artists in environmental issues. Padua's main gallery has a retractable wall which could divide the space between display and education/residency/workshop studios. Sci-art residencies could encourage collaboration with botanists. Workshops could include ones on the use of botanical inks and dyes. The proximity of Venice and its Art and Architecture Biennales should also mean that Padua has great potential to attract visitors.

Further reading

William Myers, 'Bio Design', MOMA, New York 2012

William Myers, 'Bio Art: Altered Realities', Thames and Hudson 2015

'Plant: Exploring the Botanical World', Phaidon 2016

Barbara Nemitz, 'trans plant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art', Hatje Cantz 1993

Andrew Brown, 'Art and Ecology Now', Thames and Hudson 2014

Stephen Wilson, 'Art and Science', Thames and Hudson 2010

'Eco-Art', Pori Art Museum 2011

'Radical Nature', Barbican Art Gallery/Koenig Books 2009

Sue Spaid, 'Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned lots' 2013

Clive Adams and Daro Montag, 'Soil Culture: Bringing the Arts down to Earth', CCANW 2015

Ends