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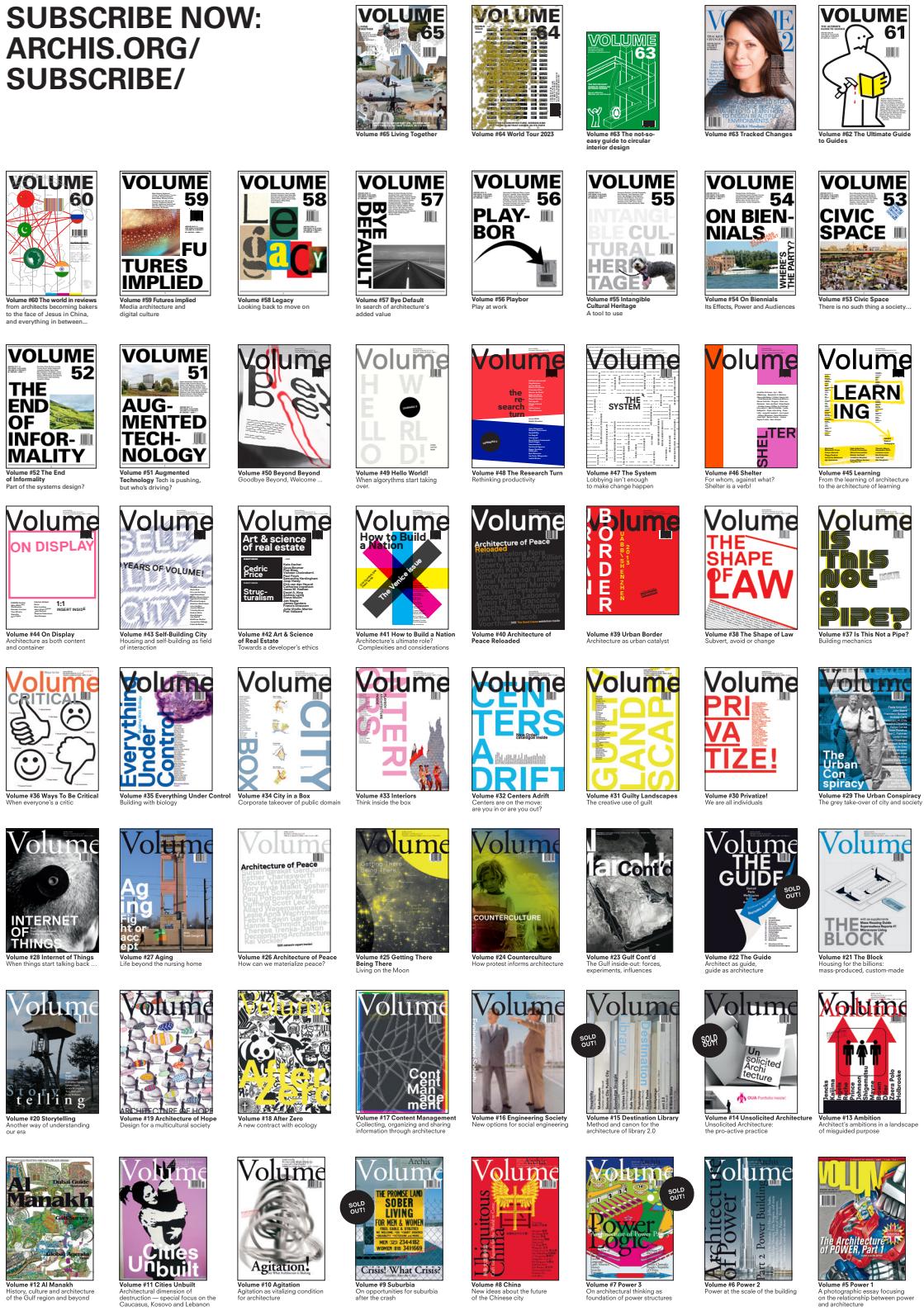
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tree of heaven

by Dirk van den Heuvel

(Un)Natural Nature

Is nature a human invention? It's hard to imagine that nature conceives of itself as something called 'nature'. As if there can be anything other than nature, or outside of nature. Only humans seem to be able to distinguish between what belongs to nature and what not, including human behavior itself apparently, with some bits of it designated as natural, others unnatural. These were just some of the impossible thoughts that crossed my mind during a walk along the gardens of the Nieuwe Instituut, Boymans van Beuningen, and the adjacent Museumpark.

We were tagged along by Frank Bruggeman, artist and gardener, together with his partner Peter. Frank nurses the garden of the Nieuwe Instituut, aptly called Nieuwe Tuin, for which he explores different ways of gardening and husbandry to achieve a more biodiverse and sustainable greenery, very different from the conventional urban parks which are subjected to rigorous design scenographies. The geometry of the Nieuwe Tuin is more 'wild' and 'natural', allowing for perennial gardening with niches harboring micro-ecologies that enable the spontaneous growth of plants and flowers without immediate distinction between weeds and accepted specimen. This biodiversity is not so much aimed at restoring a pure experience of nature, which is also assumedly indigenous and eradicates anything exotic or invasive in the name of ecological principles, it is rather trying to be inclusive and generous to what is already there and what emerges during the seasons.

One of our stops was with two trees of heaven, called *Chinese hemelboom* in Dutch, since they originally come from China, where they are called *chouchun*. As part of the first waves of global trade in the 18th century, they were brought to Europe because of their beauty and a growing interest in *chinoiserie*. Yet today, the tree is considered an invasive weed, because of its odor but most of all because of its aggressive growth. The Europe-



Nieuwe Flora and Bermyucca by Frank Bruggeman.

an Union has put the tree on its list of forbidden invasive alien species, and its natural multiplication should be contained. The specimen we visited, however, seemed undisturbed by governmental clamp down, even 'naturalized' – at least to the point they don't proliferate or overgrow their neighbors.

A second stop brought us to garden of the Sonneveld house, the 1930s modernist museum house, designed by Leen van der Vlugt for one of the directors of the Van Nelle factory, which processed among other things coffee, tea, and tobacco. The garden – not so wild but quite angular with straight hedges and clean lawns – has been restored as much as possible to its original layout, based on historical photos. There are no design drawings known. One of its features is an imported yucca, a dramatic creature with sharp, aggressively pointed leaves and vertical panicles, or torches of white flowers. On the old black and white photos held in the archive, one could easily overlook the small specimen. Today, it is a monumental and sculptural in-



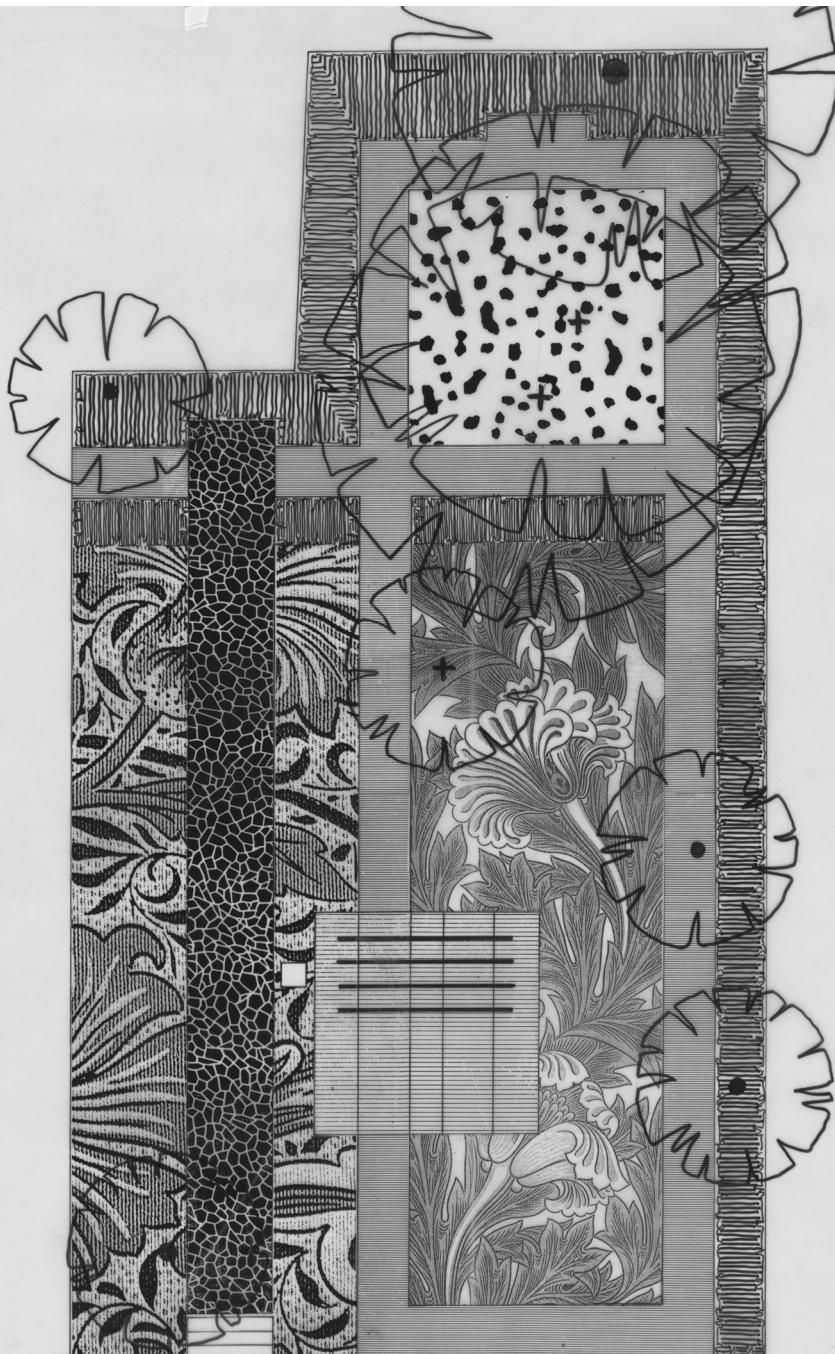
Queer Salon #4, with Frank Bruggeman, Joost Emmerik, Riek Bakker and Dirk van den Heuvel.

habitant of the garden. Yet, Peter questioned it was the original plant, it could actually be a form of re-enactment we were looking at.

Especially popular in the 1970s, the yucca, originally from California, has become one of the most common plant species for ornate decoration in gardens across the northern hemisphere. But here too, perception is shifting under the impact of the proliferation of the yucca outside domestic gardens, and a new orthodoxy in ecology thinking is aimed against this ‘invasive’ species. A number of websites are devoted to the containment of yuccas as a way to keep Dutch nature as indigenous as possible, particularly the dunes. This (un)balance between proper nature and unexpected development is partly due to the ways plants travel too, just like humans, and – of course – a changing climate. The dumping of garden waste at illegal sites, along roads, in forests and so on, is another driver of unplanned proliferation of newcomers. For sure, it’s also a rich source of inspiration for other projects of Frank, such as Nieuwe

Flora, and the photo series ‘Bermyucca’, or ‘roadside yucca’, in which he documents and portrays surprise encounters with exotic species in unexpected places.

The interest in the unnaturalness of nature during our walk stemmed from a related event that very same June afternoon: the Queer Salon at Nieuwe Instituut, which was devoted to the subject of queer gardens. We had selected archival materials from the national architecture collection by designers who self-identify as queer or gay, and neatly arranged these in the auditorium as conversation pieces. Among those, beautiful drawings for gardens and park designs by Michael van Gessel, who – due to his health – could not join himself. An overlooked, yet heroic project for the Parc de la Villette competition by Riek Bakker and her office Bakker and Bleeker, where Michael van Gessel was also working at the time. Riek was happy to join the salon and share her working experience as an open lesbian designer and planner with the participants of the salon, one of the very few



Canal Garden.

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Walk in the garden of the Sonneveld house (with yucca).

in the profession it must be noted. Riek's design had won ex aequo the first round of the competition, yet eventually, architectural media and historiography have highlighted the one by Bernard Tschumi, which was chosen to be executed, and the one by Rem Koolhaas and his office OMA. Drawings by French designer Yves Brunier of his designs for the Museumpark were also on display, touching on one of the more tragic connections between queer identities and garden design, namely the occurrence of AIDS and subsequent stigmatization of queer lives as unnatural, or in proper Dutch *tegennatuurlijk*, counter-natural. Yves Brunier was a victim himself, he died in 1991, 28 years young.

Garden designer Joost Emmerik who maintains the Instagram account 'Queer Gardens', briefly touched on this in the salon when he showed some of the iconic and groundbreaking examples in queer garden design, namely Derek Jarman and his garden Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, Kent, and the Priona gardens by Henk Gerritsen and Anton

Schlepers in the east of the Netherlands. Jarman's garden plus cottage by the sea, with a nuclear power plant in the background, is an otherworldly creation with local plants and sculptures of driftwood inhabiting a barren territory of stones, shingles, flint, and pebbles. The Priona gardens gained world renown for its experimental approach toward perennial gardening, in which ill and dead plants were not removed but were accommodated as belonging to the cycles of life. Both Jarman and Schlepers died of AIDS related illnesses. From their life stories, and from their approach to gardens, one can detect the development of a different understanding of what we humans call nature, somehow eventually more accepting, generous, and consoling, perhaps beautiful, even when it remains incomprehensible why nature has to be so cruel, too.

We continued our walk, along the Museumpark and what's left of Yves Brunier's design which was realized after his death by OMA and Petra Blaisse. The recent construction of the Depot project for Boymans van Beuningen

happened without any consideration for it. Not only was much of it materially destroyed, also the ideas of movement and connection went missing. We entered the rose garden with a view on the ponds of the museum, notorious for its uses as a cruising ground by gay men. The city decided to sanitize this space, for safety purposes related to criminal actions, and had cleared much of the shrubs and hedges, which had allowed for queer cruising. Because of the Rotterdam Architecture Month, an elegant temporary pavilion was erected on the garden lawn, designed by Studio Inscape following inclusive and regenerative ecological principles of design. We wanted to have a drink here, to conclude the salon, but we learned that such consumption was also not allowed by the city. Mixed feelings abounded. The gentle summer drizzle, sweet smells of flowers and freshly mowed grass softened the experience.

Note

The Queer Salon is a series of public conversations as part of the NWO project 'The Critical Visitor', which looks into issues of diversity and inclusion in heritage spaces and is led by Eliza Steinbock, together with Hester Dibbits and Dirk van den Heuvel.

The fourth edition of the salon was devoted to Queer Gardens, with special guests Riek Bakker, Frank Bruggeman and Joost Emmerik, moderated by Dirk van den Heuvel, and archival selections by Stef Dingen.

For more info: nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/critical-visitor/queer-salons



De Nieuwe Tuin (The New Garden) with Tree of Heaven / Chinese hemelboom.

Dirk van den Heuvel

Dirk van den Heuvel is Associate Professor of Architecture at TU Delft and the head of the Jaap Bakema Study Centre, the research collaboration between the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of TU Delft and the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.

Eeestudio (Enrique Espinosa)

Enrique Espinosa is an architect co-founder of PKMN architectures (2006–2016), director of Eeestudio since 2016 and professor-researcher at Madrid/Alicante Schools of Architecture (ETSAM/UA) since 2015/2022. His practice, developed within open networks, revolves around learning processes and collaborative production, minor architectures, domesticity and public space. He is co-author of published and awarded projects such as Teruelzilla, All I Own House, Furniture Urban Alphabets or The Places -Popular Rural Cartographies-. He has participated in other contexts such as the Venice Biennale 2016 and 2018, Sampling Contexts, Edumete or LINA Platform.

Ernst Neufert

Ernst Neufert (1900–1986) was a German architect and industrial designer. He is best known for his seminal work *Architects' Data*, a comprehensive handbook of architectural standards. Neufert worked with Walter Gropius and taught at the Bauhaus before establishing his own practice and writing influential design texts.

Feifei Zhou

Feifei Zhou is a Chinese-born spatial and visual designer. Her work explores spatial, cultural, and ecological impacts of the industrialised built and natural environment. Using narrative-based spatial analysis, she collaborates intensively with social and natural scientists to translate empirical observations and scientific research into visual representations that aim to both clarify intricate more-than-human relations and open new questions.

Francesco Degl'Innocenti

Francesco Degl'Innocenti made two people cry with his last presentation.

Fritz Haeg

Fritz Haeg's work has included animal architecture, crocheted rugs, domestic gatherings, edible gardens, educational environments, preserved foods, public dances, cultural knitwear, temporary encampments, urban parades, wild landscapes, and occasionally buildings for people. In 2014 he began a long-term project and new chapter of work with the purchase and revival of the 1970's commune Salmon Creek Farm on the Mendocino Coast.

Husos

Husos is a Madrid-based practice in architecture, gardening, and urbanism, initiated by Diego Barajas (Bogotá) and Camilo García (Cali). Considering these fields as catalysts for ecosocial transformation, Husos' work combines academic pursuits, research, and design.

Irma Boom Office

Consists of Irma Boom, Anna Moschioni and Frederik Pesch.

Ivan Henriques

Ivan Henriques is a Brazilian-Dutch interdisciplinary artist whose work explores the intersection of art, science, and technology. He is best known for creating interactive installations and bio-art projects that investigate the relationship between humans, nature, and machines. Henriques frequently collaborates with scientists and engineers to develop living systems that combine organic and artificial elements, such as plants interacting with robotic devices.

Jack Kranes

Jack Kranes currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He is a graduate of the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine, Atmospheric, and Earth Science.

Jonathan Steiger

Jonathan Steiger (St.Gallen, CH, 1997) is an artist based in Amsterdam and Switzerland. Employing a diverse range of mediums including video, sculpture and writing, he explores themes revolving around landscape, aesthetics and architecture.

Juri Velt

Juri Velt moves between rural regions and cities, as well as between a writing- and a material-based practice. Trained as an architect and navigating life as a chronically ill person, their works deal with the question of "how to live together" – with a focus on companionship and other forms of resistance.

Kathy High

Kathy High (USA, 1954) is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and educator/scholar. She collaborates with scientists and activists, and considers living systems, animal sentience, queer ecologies, waste studies, and the ethical dilemmas of biotechnology and the medical industries. She exhibits her films, performances, and conceptual works internationally, is a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow, and Professor in the Arts department at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York.

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