



# A planetary perspective

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## Le Jardin Planétaire

At the Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, until 23 January



Above and below right: two views of the installation in the Grande Halle

The iron and glass Grande Halle de la Villette is currently put to fitting use as the framework of the 'biosphere' that maintains Gilles Clement's latest work of conceptual gardening. The Jardin Planétaire marks a peak in Clement's recent popularity, in a year which also saw him receive the Grand Prix du Paysage. This temporary garden is claimed to be a comprehensive reflection of Clement's global view of the inter-relation of man and nature. Its scheme is broadly based on his novel, *Thomas et le Voyageur* (1997).

Clement is important both as a cultural figure – the landscape artist – and as a figure of knowledge – the botanist. (The two capacities do not always go hand in hand.) The current demands on him by the media have inevitably led to his philosophy for a modified 'ecological humanism' being formulated into some neat sound-bites. In the art and architecture journal *Parpaings* he stated: 'A political project underpinned by ecology must combine with it philosophy and art, to integrate humanity in all its dimensions.'

It is important to understand that this garden is largely the product of the media figure Clement currently represents, that is: an unassuming artist-ecologist who has a reasonably positive message about man's capacity to manage the planet, emphasising where good 'gardening' practices are

currently in existence. It is for this reason that this temporary slice of urban greenery has been so heavily subsidised by corporate money. For those in search of Clement's gardening vision, it would be worthwhile comparing the spectacle in la Villette to the quieter corners of Parc André Citroën in the 15th arrondissement.

The person largely responsible for the look of the garden is the scenographer Raymond Sarti, who also designed la Villette's *Fête Foraine*, an exhibition on the symbolism of the fun fair. Sarti's practice of *mise en scène* takes him into the realms of cinema, dance, theatre and architecture (a collaboration with Paul Chemetov is in its early stages). The whole gamut of stage-setting has been employed, and it is Sarti's work that really enables the Jardin Planétaire to approach a genuine garden experience rather than being just a thematic exhibition of plants.

This work ranges from furniture design in a primitive grammar of tied bamboo and hazel wood to subtle, ambient effects. The lighting is in constant change over three-hour periods. A musical score by the Danish composer Knud Viktor incorporates such things as low-frequency vibration and recordings of rock-slides, a kind of aural envelope that plays just on the edge of cognisance.

Sarti talks of his choreographic scheme

for the floor plan as 'distance without barriers'. This refers both to the lack of physical barriers between viewers and 'exhibits' – the decking walkways edge right onto the various micro-environments of rice swamp, peat bog, etc – and to his general aim to dispense with the aura that surrounds the object displays of the gallery, museum or the botanical garden.

A good, if, perhaps, unintentional example of this occurs in one of the exhibition's thematic booths. Work by one of France's leading 'new objectivity' urban landscape photographers, Stéphane Couturier, usually shown in full Cibachrome glory in the gallery context, is here presented on a flip chart and ripped through by children at the rate of one per second.

There are some clever shifts in scale that reflect Sarti's wish to create a varying range of 'perspectives' within the fixed perspective of the hall: a cabinet with magnifying-glass appendages contains a seemingly abject slice of Mediterranean plateau, complete with a discarded sock. In a section on the tradition of the Western voyager-botanist, the use of viewing devices also forms a critique of the Enlightenment thesis of control through categorisation. A number of fake bellows cameras offer views onto Clement's own slides of the various categories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plant



collections, a reversal in which the universal survey garden becomes a mere fragment of this new kind of planetary microcosm.

Not least, the Jardin Planétaire demonstrates the logistical and technical capabilities currently available to landscapers and architects in France; and global, humanist ambitions aside, the garden's 'ready-made' eco systems could point to an interesting future in the integration of 'nature' within the urban environment.

*Robin Wilson writes on art, architecture and landscape. Raymond Sarti's Voyage du Jardin Planétaire: A Book of Sketches is published by Spiralthe*