A TRUE GARDEN
Eddie Paterson & Lara Stevens

Companion Curator > Paul Rae

I entered unsuspecting, it was a garden; from the gate we saw that the earth existed. Then gently closed the gate and we were in the garden. And far enough out, people went to war. Some bombs fell and shook the tent. There was one long never called heaven because down here we saw tear and fraying over the walls. The earth felt good.

–Helene Cixous, *Un vrai jardin (1971)*

A True Garden was an interactive audio performance based on French writer and feminist theorist Helene Cixous' short story *Un vrai jardin*. Participants could download the .mp3 audio file of the performance onto their personal media device between 25 September – 7 November 2015. Participants received instructions as to how, where, and when to access the System Garden at the University of Melbourne – the selected site where the work was designed to be experienced by a solo listener.

The reading, translation, and mistranslation of Cixous' story as a bedtime fable within a public garden invites reflection on both the experience of intimacy with nature and the overwhelming global challenges to rapid environmental change that threaten this fragile and fraught relation. The interactive performance was placed within the only system garden in the Southern Hemisphere – a design that aims to demonstrate the evolutionary development of plant species. The audio performance invited participants to explore different parts of the garden, bringing together rationalist enlightenment science, religion, poetry, and the politics of human-nature relations.

PRESS PLAY TO STREAM THE AUDIO FILE

OR DOWNLOAD THE AUDIO FILE HERE, A True Garden

'Original music and production by Hugh Crosthwaite'

EVENT GUIDE
(Click images to view full size or download the A-True-Garden-instructions-and-map PDF)

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True Garden
Respondent > Meredith Rogers

I first encountered the System Garden at the University of Melbourne in 1969. I was in the first year of what would prove to be a very desultory BA. I was meeting new people and experiencing new things all the time. I found a friend who lived in North Melbourne. Her Lithuanian parents imported art and she already knew about the Victoria Markets. We would skip lectures and walk to the markets to buy exotic food that I'd never encountered before – salty, sheepy feta cheese, fat green Queen olives and smaller black Kalamatas, all kinds of sausage – salami, cabana, mortadella, sopressa. Even the bread was exotic – pasta dura rolls, Kaiser rolls, mountain bread, flat bread, pumpernickel. Then we'd take our feast back to the garden. I know it's the System Garden now and that it has its own rich history, but then it was a fairly neglected, seemingly secret place. We called it the Botany Gardens only because it was behind the Botany building. Apart from the palm in the middle, which is still there, the only plants I remember were in a group of tired looking vegetable beds (it was March after all). We collected (no doubt illegally) hard dry cobs of blue Indian corn but had no idea what to do with it. Mostly we just lay on the buffalo grass surrounded by our picnic, describing ourselves to each other. The garden bore its apparent neglect with a patient melancholy that suited our youthful sensibilities.

Now in 2015 I am older, but the garden is younger. It is revived, remodeled and returned to its intended purpose as a 'System Garden' in which the original 1856 plantings based on Carl Linnaeus's systematic principles are augmented by more recent methods, such as DNA sequencing, which have had an impact on the classification and renaming of plant groups. Now the garden has 'an evolutionary narrative' embedded in its planting design.[1]

This exquisitely realised work, *A True Garden* weaves together the history of the garden, simple instructions on how to navigate the actual space and the evocative telling in English and French of another memory (perhaps). The history goes back to times before the place was a garden, when it was the ancestral lands of the Wurundjeri people, and much further back to the algae and the lichens from which all this detail and extravagant life has arisen. The instructions take us to places in the garden where we can locate that history and this present abundance. In one memorable passage, we are asked to look into a pond and see our own evolutionary moment in the algae there. The voice in our ear asks in a deceptively gentle tone: 'Is this your true reflection?' Later I will remember this moment and wonder. When I have heard Cixous' disturbing story about abuse at the hands of her nanny, her belly button pinned to the ground by the point of an umbrella, the Omphalos, the navel of the world in a garden that may be true or may be (merely?) real. At this moment, these imagined memories and my own align beside the here and now. I hear the sounds of the garden. I smell the fragrances drifting across it. I feel the sun on my back and the soft resistance of the spongy grass. I don't need now to know the classifications of the plants or the order of the evolutionary story they tell. Like Cixous, 'I [am] the garden. I [am] inside the garden and I [don't] have a name.'

1 'Garden evolution', *Voice*, vol 6 no 9, Sept 6 – Oct 10 2010, http://wayback.archive-it.org/org-197/20160102103042/http://voice.unimelb.edu.au/volume-6/number-9/garden-evolution.

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