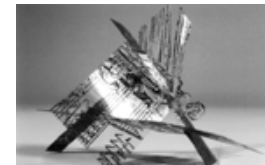


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History and Theory Graduate Studio 1995-1997 Catalogue

Hand Gardens for the Elemental Magician
Megan Spriggs

Not even the so-called elements are constant. Listen, and I will tell you of their changes. There are four of them, and two, the earth and water, Are heavy, and their own weight bears them downward, And two, the air and fire (and fire is purer Even than air) are light, rise upward If nothing holds them down. These elements Are separate in space, yet all things come From them and into them, and they can change Into each other. Earth can be dissolved To flowing water, water can thin to air, And air can thin to fire, and fire can thicken To air again, and air condense to water, And water be compressed to solid earth. Nothing remains the same: the great renewer, Nature, makes form from form, and, oh, believe me That nothing ever dies. What we call birth Is the beginning of a difference, No more than that, and death is only ceasing Of what had been before. The parts may vary, Shifting from here to there, hither and yon, And back again, but the great sum is constant.(note 1)



And this is the root and foundation of all bodies, natures, virtues, and wonderfull works; and he which shall know these qualities of the Elements, and their mixtions, shall easily bring to pass such things that are wonderfull, and astonishing, and shall be perfect in Magick.(note 2)



In *Les Raisons des Forces Mouvantes*,(note 3) Salomon de Caus demonstrates various principles of hydraulics and pneumatics by revealing the mechanisms that allow a series of garden fountains, automata, and musical grottoes to produce their wondrous effects. All of these marvels are shown to result from the careful manipulation of the four elements that he believed to be the sole components of the earthly world. Through the images and the text of *Les Raisons*, De Caus shows the way for architects, engineers, and gardeners to work responsibly in accordance with the rules of the universe.

As a member of the Calvinist Palatine court at Heidelberg, De Caus participated in the culture of the Rosicrucian Enlightenment, which encouraged the advancement of knowledge as a means to the reformation of the world.(note 4) Seventeenth-century Rosicrucianism was a synthesis of Renaissance Hermeticism, Cabala, and Alchemy, and in following these traditions, held that the universe was composed of three worlds: the elementary, the celestial, and the intellectual. The elemental world was thought of as a corruptible microcosm, an imperfect double of the eternal supralunar spheres. Through the humble and careful study of natural philosophy, one could begin to understand the workings of the heavens. Knowledge of the properties of the elements formed the basis of a powerful natural magic which was believed capable of reconciling the magus with the divine.



At the beginning of his treatise, De Caus defines the elements in the order in which they exist in the world, from top to bottom: fire, air, water, and earth. He explains that everything we experience is made of them and can be unmade by them, upon which each returns to its place in the cosmos before becoming something else.

To produce something, the elements must undergo a process of transmutation. This metamorphosis of one element into another through the active forces of the other elements is essential in natural magic. Transmutation was also a key concept in seventeenth-century alchemical theory, where by rotating the elements one into the other several times, one approached the quintessence, which embodies all four.



For De Caus, action is an emphatic statement of existence. His fascination with transmutation as

a process of becoming is made evident in his descriptions of the workings of the machines, in his frontispiece with its putti who manipulate the moving elements, and also in the imagery of the grottoes, many of which portray episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

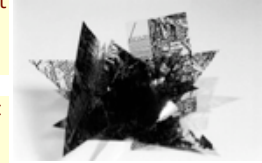
The act of making a garden demanded that De Caus summon all his knowledge of natural philosophy. The magical effects generated by his automata were intended to arouse astonishment and admiration for the intricacies of God's creation. In our time, however, these revelations are no longer held as truths. Gardening is simply a formal manipulation of nature and no longer works a transcendental magic that reveals our rightful place in the cosmic order.

Although the elements are no longer believed to be the source of all matter, they still retain great power in the contemporary mind. As Bachelard has reminded us, they are archetypes that motivate, induce, and transform our imaginings.^(note 5) With what he calls the material imagination, we contemplate the world around us, discovering affinities between matter and self, feeling oneself in peaceful harmony with our surroundings. From this stillness can come action, the will to make. The elements also inspire the dynamic imagination that drives us to transform them, to put them into motion, to impose our ideas on matter. In activities like architecture and gardening which attempt to remake the human world, the elements can thus provide a focal point for the genesis of a work.

To engage the world of *Les Raisons* with the present, a project was developed that began, as does the treatise, with the elements themselves. The engravings, each representing a single magical event from within an infinite number of possibilities, were photocopied. Scenes were dissected and reduced to their component elements, which were then joined with others of their own kind in a quadripartite panel. Here, the impossibility of fully separating them became evident. Traces of all the elements can be found throughout.

Because of this resistance to separation, the bounding areas between elements became important. These are where they flow into one another, changing form as they cross the lines. To fully express the circular process of transmutation, the panel was conceived of as round, the realms of fire and earth at the extremities joining to form another threshold.

The narratives generated by this segregation of the elements demanded that they be recombined in a different form. To provoke a confrontation between the fictional realms of the elements and the real dimension of the urban garden, a site was chosen to serve as a framework for the next series of transmutations. A small patch of uncultivated soil, it was hemmed in on all sides by urban construction. The edges of the site boundaries between public and private, garden and city were photographed and transferred to acetate. These coloured fragments of urban space were juxtaposed with the fragmented elemental boundaries to create eight three dimensional "hand gardens." Each one presents a crossing of the boundaries between the elements, one possible mode of expressing their interaction in built form. They are named for the materials that pass through their planes: FireAir, AirWater, WaterEarth, EarthFire, FireEarth, EarthWater, WaterAir, AirFire. Their transparency reveals fluid over-lappings between the real and the imagined, their delicacy the fragility of a dream yet to be realized. As a set, they exist as sections of an imagined elemental garden and trace the passage through it and back again. Each one can be explored by turning it in the hands, placing oneself within its myriad of spaces. The motion of the garden in the hands parallels the movements of the visitor through the garden and the transformative aspect of that experience. One can visit but one part or travel through the entire garden in this way. Whatever is chosen, it is hoped that these objects will speak to the visitor of the evocative properties of the material elements that, transformed by human intervention, can provide fertile ground for the renewal of imaginative gardening.



Notes:

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Rolfe Humphries (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1955), XV, lines 191-212.
2. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, tr. J.F. (London: Printed by R.W. for Gregory Moule 1651), I, 7.
3. Salomon de Caus, *Les Raisons des Forces Mouvantes avec diuerses Machines Tant utiles que plaisantes, Aus quelles sont adioints plusieurs desseings de grottes et fontaines* (Francfort: Jan Norton 1615).
4. See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1972).
5. See Richard Kearney, "The poetical imagination (Bachelard)," *Poetics of Imagining from Husserl to Lyotard* (London & New York: Routledge 1993), 88-111