

Contemporary garden festivals provide a laboratory for landscape designers to experiment with materials, methods, and design concepts that can be adapted to their larger urban works.

Experimenting Landscapes focuses on the Métis International Garden Festival in Québec, Canada, which has presented more than 150 temporary gardens at the cutting edge of garden design and environmental art. Despite its remote location, the festival has attracted up to 1,000 visitors per day to experience the work of both emerging design practices and renowned designers including Diana Balmori, Ken Smith, Snøhetta, Topotek 1, and Michael Van Valkenburgh.

The book features a selection of 25 projects as well as essays and reflections from festival designers to explore how the garden can challenge our assumptions, provide new meanings, and change how we see even the most familiar things.

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EXPERIMENTING LANDSCAPES

Métis International Garden Festival | Emily Waugh

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Testing the Limits of the Garden

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INTRODUCTION

TESTING THE LIMITS OF THE GARDEN

Emily Waugh

More than 90 years after Elsie Reford defied convention to grow exotic perennials as far north as the 49th parallel, the designers at the International Garden Festival at Métis continue to test the limits of the garden. Advancing Elsie’s legacy of experimentation and what she called ‘adventuring’ with different soils, plant materials, and hybrid species, the contemporary gardens at the Métis International Garden Festival continue to evolve as a living laboratory for exploration, innovation, and experimentation.

THE GARDEN AS A LANDSCAPE LABORATORY

Any gardener can tell you that, in fact, every garden is a laboratory. Whether a backyard vegetable plot, a sweeping historic estate, or a cluster of containers on a 15th-floor balcony, every time we set out to manipulate the materials of landscape, we are conducting controlled experiments.

These are not random trials, but carefully thought-out procedures to test a hypothesis about soils, exposure, climates, species selection, and so on. Like all experiments, they are rigorous observations of cause and effect: what outcome will occur if a specific factor is manipulated? If I add more acid to this soil, will my rhododendrons thrive? If I plant ferns from a higher hardiness zone, will they survive the winter in pots? If I plant native wildflowers, can I protect the shrinking population of crucial pollinator bees and insects? Through these calculated trials and resulting adaptations and innovations, gardeners are always testing the capacity of their site conditions, their climates, and their own knowledge and skills as gardeners.

A NEW HYPOTHESIS FOR A NEW KIND OF GARDEN

When the right questions are asked, these experiments can transform how we make gardens, how we expect gardens to perform, what we understand gardens to be, and, in some cases, how we understand the world around us.

In Ancient Egypt, the prosperous New Kingdom transformed the garden from agricultural-scale food production to ornamental pleasure grounds by asking, “Can we channel the floodwaters of the Nile for irrigation to sustain our own personal paradises?”¹

In the 18th century Princess Augusta dared to ask, “Is it possible for Kew Gardens to contain all the plants known on Earth?” This ambitious pursuit (taken up by Augusta’s son King George III) shifted the gardens at Kew from a collection of fol-

lies to, not only the leading botanical garden in the world, but a critical resource for expanding the British Empire.²

In the 1950s, landscape architect Garrett Eckbo rebelled against his Beaux Arts training and began to define modern landscape architecture by posing a different hypothesis: What if we fit design to the needs and desires of contemporary life? His reoccurring mantra, “Gardens are places in which people live out of doors”, altered expectations for how gardens and landscapes could perform and how designers could include function, not just aesthetics in landscape design.³

Our understanding of landscape architecture and the garden changed again in the late 1970s when young landscape architect Martha Schwartz constructed a front-yard garden using bagels and purple aquarium gravel. When the ‘Bagel Garden’ appeared on the cover of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, many readers were so offended that this work could be recognized by the profession that they cancelled their subscriptions on the spot. But this marriage of art and landscape forever changed the practice of landscape architecture.

In contemporary gardens, the incorporation of technology (both physical and digital) has allowed designers to further explore the physical potential of the built landscape. We see this in the vertical gardens of Patrick Blanc (based on the ‘botanical brick’ introduced by Stanley H. White in 1938) which challenged and subsequently changed our expectations of what a garden could look like and what conditions are necessary for plant material to grow. The 3 and even 4-dimensional modeling technology used by design offices today, has further advanced the formal and technical capabilities of the designed landscape. In every case, gardeners, designers, and landscape architects are continually reconsidering the hypothesis to push the limits of the garden.

THE GARDEN FESTIVAL AS A VENUE FOR BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Outside of the constraints of professional landscape architecture and garden design practice, contemporary garden festivals offer a laboratory venue to designers around the world. These annual exhibitions (notably, Festival International des Jardins de Chaumont-sur-Loire, France, the Cornerstone Festival in Sonoma, California, USA, The Chelsea Fringe in London, UK, and the International Garden Festival at Métis, Canada) have spread in ambition and scope to create a hybrid of gardens, art, landscape, technology, and design that continually

¹ *Landscape Design Online: Ancient Egypt*, website accessed on 13 April 2016.

² *Cruickshank on Kew: The Garden That Changed the World*, BBC TV programme of 28 April 2009.

³ Treib, Marc, and Dorothee Imbert. *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

challenges our understanding of the garden and what it can be. Each of these venues offers a different expression of gardens, landscape, and art, but each has at its core an idea of experimentation.

The gardens at these festivals attempt to expand the boundaries of the discipline itself as they break down, blend, and rebuild the borders of traditional gardens, contemporary landscape architecture, architecture, and contemporary art. Their scales and sometimes their materials reflect traditional gardening. Their scope, methods, and conceptual basis more closely resemble contemporary landscape and architecture, and their desire to provoke and challenge is aligned with contemporary art.

Each festival has its own character, its own design sensibility, and its own approach to experimentation defined in part by its founding ethos, history, physical layout, context, and attitude toward the garden.

THE SPIRIT OF MÉTIS

At Métis there is a powerful and legible influence from a curiously consistent list of factors that we have identified through interviews with designers, expert essays, and the installations themselves. Every festival participant we spoke to during this process was able to articulate some combination of the same factors that allowed them to experiment freely at Métis: the constant presence of Elsie Reford’s pioneering spirit; the temporary nature of the installations which frees designers from the constraints of durability and performance expectations; the rugged, remote, and somewhat forbidding landscape that stirs a curiosity and almost demands a different design approach; the fact that designers must install their own work, forcing experimentation with materials and methods; and the open support of festival director, Alexander Reford, for complete creative freedom. At Métis the entire process is open. The competition for entry is an open call to designers and artists across disciplines, the jury is open to all ideas (unlike in professional practice, at Métis there is no brief), and the design and construction is open to anything the designers propose. The only limits are time, budget, and the (seemingly limitless) creative capacity of the designers.

Finally, with every experiment, there is a possibility of failure. Unlike professional practice, where failure is unacceptable—landscapes must perform to a certain specification, codes must be respected, client needs must be met—the possibility of failure is almost written into the process at Métis, giving designers permission to truly experiment.

A LEGACY OF ADVENTURING

When Elsie Reford first began gardening in 1926 (after appendicitis surgery at age 54 required her to give up fishing and slow down), she faced a number of obstacles that most other gardeners would have seen as limiting. She had no formal training and no professional design help. She faced severe allergies that often left her bed-ridden, a seemingly inhospitable climate, and a site that was selected first as a fishing lodge with no consideration for gardening conditions (climate,

soil quality, or protection from the winds of the St. Lawrence River).⁴ The greatest obstacle—and the one that Elsie Reford is most famous for overcoming—was geography. How could anyone possibly propagate rare exotic perennials so close to the 49th parallel?

With no exact references or examples to turn to, Elsie was forced to experiment, to establish her own methods, materials, and approach. Over time, Elsie became an expert plants woman—adapting conditions to meet the needs of each species she wished to establish and ultimately changing perceptions of what kind of garden could be achieved in these Nordic conditions.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE GARDEN TO ALTER PERCEPTION

The festival gardens at Métis are both an extension of and a departure from Elsie Reford’s traditional gardens. They continue her rigorous experimentation, trial and error, and ‘why not try?’ attitude, but instead of experimenting with horticultural material, they are experimenting with the nature of the garden itself.

The gardens in the earlier years of the festival (represented in Lesley Johnstone’s *Hybrids: Reshaping the Contemporary Gardens in Métis*, 2007) boldly challenge the limits of what a garden can be, asking questions such as, “What on earth is a garden?”, “Is it still a garden if it doesn’t have any plants?”, “Is a garden simply an enclosure or can it also be a fragment of the greater landscape beyond?”

The collection of gardens featured in *Experimenting Landscapes*—primarily, but not exclusively, from the 2008–2015 festival editions—shift the experiment from testing the limit of what a garden can be, to testing the limit of what a garden can do. And more specifically, what is the potential of the garden to change our perception of the world around us? These designers use the medium of the garden to open our eyes (and other senses) to heighten our awareness of the phenomena, processes, relationships, materials, and landscapes that we often can’t see, that we overlook, or that we have seen so often that we have simply forgotten to look.

Each of these gardens asks, if we slightly alter the composition, the viewpoint, the structure, the materials, or the experience of the landscape, can we change how people see even the most familiar things? How they understand them? How they engage with them? How they value them? Some of these gardens offer us a clear, in-depth understanding of something that we would otherwise not be able to see because it is hidden by complexity or scale. Some simply focus our attention on something to help us see it differently, or in some cases to help us see it at all. Others offer us new vantage points to see even the most familiar things in a new way. Some change our perception of function, value, and meaning by challenging our expectations of everyday things. And some offer us a completely new awareness of the landscape simply by allowing us to experience it.

⁴ Reford, Alexander. *The Reford Gardens: Elsie’s Paradise*. Montréal: Les Éditions de L’Homme, 2004.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Each garden is presented through photographs and drawings, quotations extracted from designer interviews, and a brief project description modeled after a scientific experiment report: abstract, method, result, and materials. Through five different methods (and corresponding chapter titles: *Disaggregate and Re-Present*, *Focus within Frames*, *Altered Viewpoints*, *Unexpected Materials and Contexts*, *Landscape as a Living Experience*) these gardens invite closer readings of the landscape, offering us new perspectives.

The three essays in the book complement the investigation of the Métis International Garden Festival as a landscape laboratory: the particular conditions here that allow for experimentation, how it is different than other festivals, and the relationship between the festival and contemporary landscape practice.

Although a printed book can never reproduce the visual, sensory, and experiential quality of a visit through these gardens, we hope that through these words and images, we can invite a closer reading of the Métis environment, to sharpen your focus on the landscapes and phenomena explored in the gardens, and maybe even begin to alter your perception of the world around you.

DISAGGREGATE AND RE-PRESENT

We use the expression ‘Cannot see the forest for the trees’ to describe someone who is so focused on individual elements or details that they fail to see how they come together to form a whole. The gardens in this chapter address the opposite condition—when we look only at the aggregate or the whole system and fail to see the beauty or meaning in its component parts. Instead of asking us to step back to take in a larger view, these gardens ask us to step in and focus our attention on the compositional elements that make up a particular landscape, region, or eco-system.

The designers re-focus our attention on these smaller elements by disaggregating larger systems into their component parts and then re-presenting them in isolation. By removing these often-overlooked elements from their original contexts, these gardens offer us a more in-depth understanding of something that we would otherwise not be able to see because of the complexity, scale, or density of the original system.

In some of these gardens (*Tiny Taxonomy*, *Core Sample*, *La collection du jardinier*), the materials are physically removed and collected from the local environment and re-presented as singular elements to highlight them and focus our attention on the parts themselves. The others (*Floating Forest*, *Every Garden Needs a Shed and a Lawn!*) more abstractly dissect the concept of the whole to make us reconsider the larger system itself.

By highlighting the individual components of these larger systems in an ordered schema, these gardens give us a different understanding of both the elements and the whole itself, allowing us to see both the forest and the trees.

TINY TAXONOMY
Rosetta Elkin

2010—

Abstract

Tiny Taxonomy isolates the often-overlooked plants of the forest floor and presents them as a taxonomy—a classified system that recasts these smallest of species as working components of the natural environment.

Method

The taxonomy is displayed in 42 constructed habitats designed to be seen as extrusions of the forest floor, each presenting one plant species for closer consideration. The habitats—a grid of mirrored cylinders ranging in height from 30 to 150 centimetres —bring each plant to eye level, allowing a zoomed-in connection with these most fragile and tiny plants.

When these plants—individually foraged from a distant corner of a local property—are removed from their natural environments where they are tangled up as they compete for resources, we are able to reflect on and admire their individual forms.

Although each species is exhibited in isolation, the reflective surface of the cylindrical structures re-contextualizes the plants within the surrounding forest, allowing visitors to reconnect these ‘tiny operators’ with their natural habitats.

Result

This display of foraged boreal forest natives pushes us to slow down and take a closer look at plant material, not just as commercially available species that we see potted in nurseries, but as small players in a much larger forest system.

Materials

42 mirrored cylinders, selection of locally foraged forest floor plants selected to re-present surrounding forest conditions

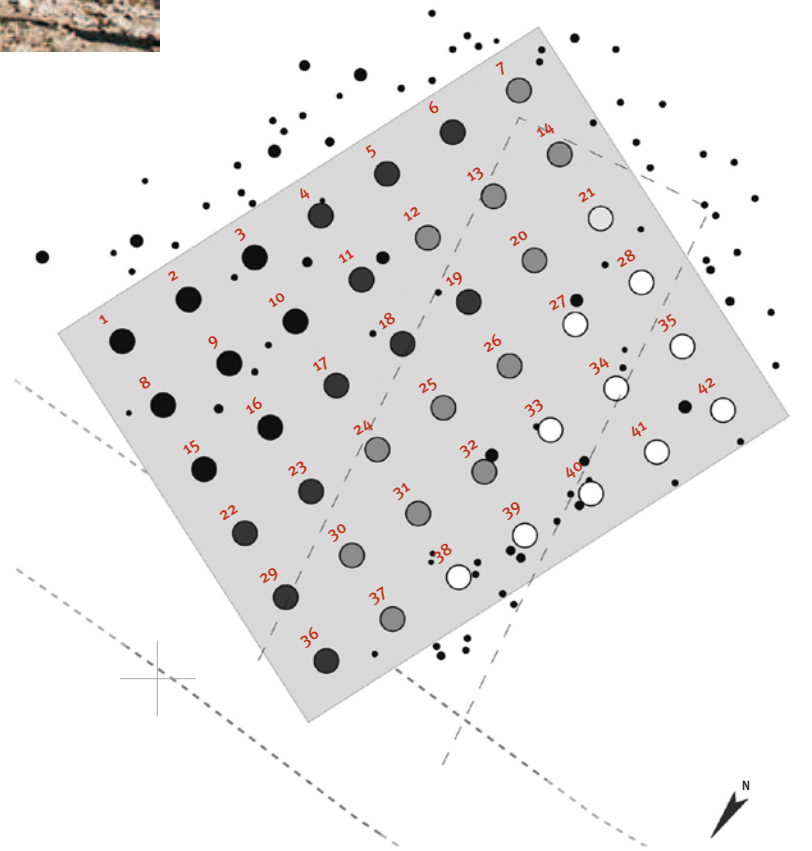


The tiny plants of the forest floor are displayed in 42 constructed habitats.



Cowslip (*primula florindae*)

DISAGGREGATE AND RE-PRESENT



- 1 Northern blueberry (*vaccinium boreale*)
- 2 Lady fern (*athyrium filix-femina*)
- 3 Alpine bearberry (*arctostaphylos alpine*)
- Alpine violet (*viola labradorica*)
- 4 Solomon's seal (*polygonatum biflorum*)
- 5 Canada mayflower (*maianthemum canadense*)
- 6 Beech fern (*dryopteris pteopteris*)
- 7 Wood forget-me-not (*myosotis sylvatica*)
- 8 Dwarf windflower (*anemone multifida* 'Rubra')
- 9 White spruce (*picea glauca*)
- 10 Dwarf iris (*iris pumilla*)
- 11 Lily of the valley (*convallaria majalis*)
- 12 Azure bluet (*houstonia caerulea*)
- 13 Siberian squil (*scilla siberica*), pearlwort (*sagina subulata*)
- 14 Spiked sedge (*carex spicata*)
- 15 Blue-eyed grass (*sisyrinchium angustifolium*)
- 16 Sandwort (*arenaria hookeri*)
- 17 Cowslip (*primula florindae*)
- 18 Lingonberry (*vaccinium vitis-idaea*)
- 19 Dwarf astilbe (*astilbe chinensis* 'Pumila')
- 20 Yellow barrenwort (*epimedium versicolor* 'Sulphureum')
- 21 Mountain phlox (*phlox subulata* 'Rose')
- 22 Pink lady's slipper (*cyripedium acaule*)
- 23 Candelabra primrose (*primula bulleesiana*)
- 24 Bunchberry (*comus canadensis*)
- 25 Barren strawberry (*waldsteinia fragarioides*)
- 26 Tatting fern (*athyrium filix-femina* 'Frizelliae')
- 27 Fairy spuds (*claytonia virginica*)
- 28 Edelweiss (*leontopodium alpinus*)
- 29 Maiden pink (*dianthus delt.* 'Flashing Light')
- 30 Plumbago (*ceratostigma plumbaginoides*)
- 31 Common oak sedge (*carex pensylvanica*)
- 32 Alpine aster (*aster alpinus* 'Albus')
- 33 Poker primrose (*primula sikkimensis*)
- 34 Devil's paintbrush (*pilosella aurantiaca*)
- 35 Dwarf goat's beard (*aruncus aethusifolius*)
- 36 Sea thrift (*armeria maritima* 'Laucheana')
- 37 Fan columbine (*aquilegia flabellata* 'Ministar')
- 38 Pink-flowering strawberry (*fragaria x.* 'Shades of Pink')
- 39 Fairy thimble bellflower (*campanula cochlearifolia*)
- 40 Western mugwort (*artemisia ludoviciana*)
- 41 Marsh marigold (*caltha palustris*)
- 42 Livelong saxifrage (*saxifraga paniculata*)



White spruce (*picea glauca*)

"It's rare to see something as multifarious as a forest broken down into parts.
We think of taking apart a car engine to see how it works, but rarely do we treat the natural world as having parts."

Rosetta Elkin



Broom moss (*dicranales*)



Pink lady's slipper orchid (*cyripedium acaule*)

CORE SAMPLE

North Design Office

2006–2008

Abstract

Drawing from the model of the core sample—which extracts material from a site to understand its geological composition—*Core Sample* highlights the detailed landscape textures that are often overshadowed by the dominant forces of Québec’s Gaspé Peninsula region: the river, the mountains, and the ever-present winds.

Method

In a nod to Elsie Reford’s tradition of collecting, sampling and propagating to better understand the micro-conditions of her garden site, North Design Office mined the local landscape for a range of textures and materials including seeds, shells, stones, and found objects, and displayed them in a grid of transparent columns, each containing a different solitary element. The flowing topography of the site—grassy landforms that appear boundless and shifting—alludes to the landscape of the Gaspé region: the hills to the south of the festival site and the rocky islands in the seaway to the north. Planted with a variety of tall grasses (rye, barley, oats, and triticale), the mounds add dynamic movement to the site, as the grasses catch and respond to the wind.

Result

By isolating these textures and then re-presenting them within a topography that recalls the larger Gaspé landscape, the garden simultaneously focuses our attention on the beauty of the micro-scale elements of the site and the complex macro-scale composition of the region.

Materials

Locally collected landscape elements such as seeds, shells, stones, and a variety of plants; 107 2.4 metre acrylic tubes; earth mounds covered with local grasses such as rye, barley, oats, and triticale



107 acrylic tubes each display one material collected from the local landscape.

*“It’s the shifting of scale that brings more of
an acute awareness to the site.
There is magic in these smaller moments.”*

Peter North, North Design Office



Flowing landforms reflect the topography of the Gaspé region.



LA COLLECTION DU JARDINIER

Les attentives

2012 – 2014

Abstract

La collection du jardinier focuses our attention on the often overlooked beauty of the ‘un-gardened’ plant material on the Métis site—spontaneous vegetation, indigenous plants, and the discarded waste material from Elsie Reford’s gardens.

Method

In contrast to Elsie Reford’s process of rigorous control in her garden, *La collection du jardinier* highlights the beauty of the clippings, deadheads, and fallen blossoms collected daily from the gardener’s compost bins. The material is sorted, dissected, re-arranged, and presented as small sculptures that offer visitors an intimate and detailed look at the plants we see in the gardens.

The installation leads visitors along a discovery trail through three venues, each offering a different relationship to the plant material: the working garden shed in the historic gardens, where the designers sort and prepare the plants and blossoms; the photographer’s dark room in Estevan Lodge, where visitors can have an intimate sensory experience with large quantities of plant material deposited in the large developer’s sink; and a small greenhouse in a field on the festival site, where visitors continue their detailed observation, this time in the original un-gardened landscape.

Result

The installation asks visitors to enter a different ‘time zone’ and, instead of moving quickly past things without much notice, to slow down and to sharpen their focus on the details of the individual plants that make up the formal gardens—the patterns, the variation of forms, the colours, the smells, the delicacy, the cycles of growth and decay, and life’s infinite particularities.

Materials

Waste material, cuttings, and deadheads collected daily from Elsie Reford’s gardens



Plant material is sorted, prepared, and displayed in the garden shed at the historic gardens.



The collection extends to a small greenhouse on the festival site.

“It’s a magnifying moment when you are looking at little parts of things, and taking in something very detailed. This takes a different kind of time.”

Chloé Fortin



Large quantities of recovered garden waste are presented in the darkroom at Estevan Lodge.



FLOATING FOREST

NIPpaysage

2012

Abstract

Floating Forest, an offsite installation presented by the Métis International Garden Festival at Chelsea Fringe, conceptually and literally dismantles a section of forest from Québec, Canada, and re-presents it in London, England, revealing the connection between the province's forestry industry and the construction of many of London's 19th-century buildings. These structures were built using enormous white pine trees that were felled along Québec's river valleys, squared, floated, and then shipped across the Atlantic.

Method

This seemingly simple grid of 450 red cedar rounds (used to represent the historic white pines) tell a multi-layered story of this complex relationship. The forest itself is seen in the choice of materials; the logging industry is present in both the processed timber rounds and in the characteristic grid layout of post-logging reforestation; the local and transatlantic transportation of material are seen in the floating logs as well as in the physical location of the wood nearly 5,000 kilometres from its origin; and the end use of this material is revealed in the composition of the surrounding historic wharf buildings on the Portobello dock section of the Grand Union Canal near West London's Ladbroke Grove. The rounds measure between 30 and 40 centimetres in diameter and are fixed in a rigorous orthogonal grid with a string attached to a metal grid.

Result

The floating landscape of timber rounds temporarily transforms a small section of the 220-kilometre Grand Union Canal and presents a living history of the link between Québec's forestry industry and the construction of 19th-century London.

Materials

450 cut red cedar rounds and metal strings



A grid of 450 floating timbers transform the Portobello Dock section of London's Grand Union Canal.



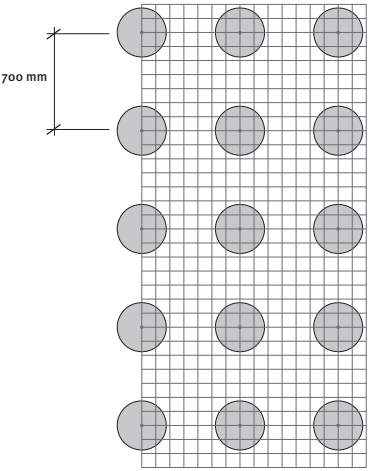
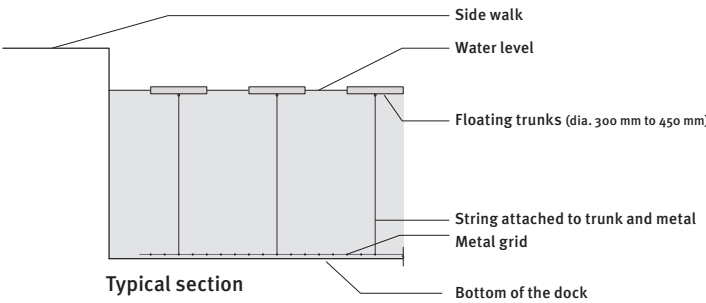
The grid pattern shifts slightly with the wind and movement on the canal.



Cedar rounds measure between 30 and 40 centimetres in diameter.

“We like to find a simple and strong way to make one gesture that can be read in multiple ways.”

Mélanie Mignault, NIPpaysage



Floating rounds are attached with string to a 70 centimetres metal grid.

