

**Udo Weilacher: Ferme Ornée Mechtenberg.
Field Trials between Post-Industrial Wilderness and New Functionality**

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Can we really call the “Emscher region” in the Ruhr area a cultural landscape – with its extraordinarily dense transport infrastructure network, agro-industrial areas as well as predominantly decommissioned and mostly overgrown industrial sites? At first glance, this landscape is the very opposite of prevailing conceptions of a cultural landscape that is understood in terms of Arcadian images of pre-industrial agriculture and forestry. On second glance, however, it becomes clear that in the Ruhr area – like in many other European industrial regions – new kinds of cultural landscapes are emerging, where development is accompanied by dramatic changes in the socio-cultural value system. Whether these new types of cultural landscapes will become integral parts of a sustainable and stable environment in the future depends first of all on the question whether adequate creative approaches to these landscapes can be found – and not only with regard to landscape aesthetics.

Between two distinctive hills in the vicinity of Gelsenkirchen, a representative section of such a new cultural landscape is emerging. The naturally formed Mechtenberg and the artificially piled Spiral Mountain with Stairway to Heaven by artist Herman Prigann on the Rheinelle Tip paradigmatically represent the tension between artificiality and naturalness as well as the experimental field between post-industrial woodland and modern agricultural landscape. Both types of landscape are important components of the entire Emscher Landscape Park, approximately 60 percent of which consists of areas used by agriculture and forestry. Between these two poles, current strategies for a sustainable landscape development marked by urban structures are being experimentally explored.

“I am convinced that the various forms of land use, achieved with the most modern technology and rationality, can be designed aesthetically and bring about a holistic industrial ‘landscape culture’”, the internationally renowned Munich landscape ecologist Professor Dr. Wolfgang Haber¹ points out, urging landscape architecture to return from the town to the countryside. The design qualities of agricultural landscapes should be closely examined, and with good reason: for centuries and throughout the western World, the cultural landscape of peasant-based farming has been considered the ideal beautiful landscape, and European garden design, amongst others, has orientated itself towards this idea for just as long. Today, in Europe, peasant agriculture hardly exists, instead, rural space is increasingly characterised by industrial agriculture, renewable energies and tourism.

In the course of the industrialisation of agriculture and its simultaneous withdrawal from many sites that are no longer considered profitable, questions regarding who will determine the aesthetic and simultaneously sustainable and productive development of cultural landscapes in the future, as well as what kind of new creative qualities might arise, have to be faced throughout Europe. In the future, agricultural areas of every highly developed industrial and metropolitan region of the world will no longer be considered mere productive land, but “islands of beauty and functionality” which, not least because of their aesthetic qualities, have to contribute to the enrichment of rapidly growing urban environments much like large-scale acupuncture.

Due to their exposure and natural attractiveness for people looking for recreation in the urban triangle of Gelsenkirchen, Essen and Bochum, the fields on the slopes of the 84 m-high Mechtenberg play an important role. Here, in collaboration with the local farmer, new informal symbioses of the beautiful and the functional on agricultural sites are sounded out experimentally. Within the framework of the IBA “Land Art Gallery” Mechtenberg event, the place’s potential as object of Land Art was already analysed at the end of the 1990s.² It emerged, however, that in the endeavour for particularly spectacular Land Art, the day-to-day creative potential of modern sustainable agricultural methods and state-of-the-art agricultural technology was hardly taken into account. In most cases, farmers were forced to elaborately adapt their well-trying and tested working methods to the respective art concept, with the result that beauty and functionality became unbalanced. The agricultural landscape thus lost some of its productivity and the artistic landscape lost some of its natural beauty.

The Ferme Ornée Mechtenberg project, currently accompanied by the renowned Ticino landscape artist Paolo Bürgi, experimentally looks for new directions in the design of cultural landscapes and orientates itself quite deliberately towards a remarkable invention from the history of garden design, the so-called “Ferme Ornée” or “Ornamented Farm”. The French concept of the Ferme Ornée was introduced in England in the 18th century to describe a particular form of landscape garden in which agricultural sites, i.e. fields and pastures, were integrated as cultivated land. Garden design and agriculture, the beautiful and the functional, were to be reconciled in this way, similar to what was later intended and impressively attained in the Wörlitz Garden Kingdom.

Is “beauty from function and as a function”, as already demanded in 1948 by the Werkbund artist Max Bill with respect to all areas of everyday life,³ also possible in today’s agriculture? What kind of practicable symbioses between functionality and beauty can be achieved with state-of-the-art techniques of land management today? What kind of landscape images that are attractive for the region’s people can be created when a farmer, supported by a landscape architect and with the help of state-of-the-art agricultural technology, uses his very own “range of colours and brushes” in order to informally join the beauty and the functional on his agricultural sites? Which basic rules of “ornamented farming” have to be adhered to in order to make people more aware of the day-to-day qualities of their contemporary cultural landscapes again? These questions are central to the project Ferme Ornée Mechtenberg, which is to last for several years, and it is already obvious how difficult it is to draw appropriate attention to the subtle beauties of the cultural landscape within the framework of this European Capital of Culture project.

Besides, between settlement areas, industrial and agricultural sites, spontaneous industrial forest, labelled “wilderness”, has for decades been finding its way onto the wastelands of the withdrawing iron and steel industry in the Ruhr area. In the book *Neuland. Bildende Kunst und Landschaftsarchitektur*, the former IBA director Karl Ganser very aptly formulated the necessity of dealing with wilderness on former industrial sites in an experimental way without “forestry” it with usual methods⁴. According to Ganser, one objective must be the promotion or hastening of ecological efficiency, and another the cultural guidance towards allowing wilderness to unfurl as a task of and enrichment for industrial societies.

Parallel to creative management of evolving agriculture, urban forestry is no longer to concern itself exclusively with the production of renewable raw materials, but also with the cultivation of new landscape images.

As models for the development of post-industrial wilderness, the pre-industrial clichés of picturesque and orderly woodlands are useless. The construction and maintenance of scenic

woodland parks according to the common models of garden design and landscape architecture would require unacceptable levels of financial support on the extensive sites of the Ruhr area and entail a wide-scale and grave loss of ecological efficiency. Already today, many industrial forest sites contribute to the enrichment of the metropolitan environment with their unique character, as can be seen exemplarily on Rheinelbe. Over the past ten years, new experimental approaches for building awareness and the intelligent qualification of industrial forests as wilderness have already been successfully tried out on Rheinelbe and, integrated into the comprehensive consideration of new kinds of cultural landscapes, are to be continued in the future. By linking the Rheinelbe Industrial Forest project with the Ferme Ornée Mechtenberg project within the framework of the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010, there is the chance to regard this complex landscape space in its entirety as a model, and, in accordance with new guiding principles, to develop it sustainably.

¹ Cf. Wolfgang Haber, in: *Regionalverband Ruhr (Ed.): Fieldstudies. The New Aesthetics of Urban Agriculture. Basel 2010*, p. 16

² Cf. Udo Weilacher: »Rusty-brown and Phacelia blue – landmark art by the IBA« in: *TOPOS 26/1999*, p. 60–68

³ Max Bill: »Schönheit aus Funktion und als Funktion« in: *Werk 8*, 1949, p. 274

⁴ Cf. Karl Ganser: »Landschaftskunst zwischen Gestaltqualität und ›Verkunstung‹« in: von Dziembowski et al. (eds.): *Neuland. Bildende Kunst und Landschaftsarchitektur*, Basel, Boston, Berlin, 2007, p. 58