
THE SCULPTURE TRAIL

Introduction

Sculptures are a well-known addition to gardens. A sculpture can turn a somewhat feature-less lawn into something exciting. In this way it makes gardens more attractive to both art and plant lovers. An art-exhibition is something different. It takes careful examination of the sculptures and the gardens to arrive at an attractive exhibition.

The sculpture trail at Utrecht Botanic Gardens has been the result of careful and close co-operation between the organizing foundation "Arte Facto" and the garden-staff. Several questions had to be answered such as, what kind of sculptures? how many? where? etc. This paper explains how we answered these questions.

The trail

The initiative for this exhibition was taken by one of our staff-members, Mr Nieuman. It was supported by nearly everyone as a means of promoting the Gardens and maybe obtaining an interesting piece of art as a result! We could not do it ourselves as we did not have the experience nor the time. So we contacted a foundation which organizes exhibitions in Amsterdam and through them we were contacted by a foundation called "Arte Facto" who organizes exhibitions for artists in Utrecht. This contact led to the actual "Sculpture Trail" we now show.

What kind of sculptures?

This was a question which was difficult to answer. We wanted the exhibits to be made specially for the occasion. A jury was set up that would select a number of drafts.

Several restrictions were made; the sculptures should not alter the gardens irreversibly or make access to the plants impossible and the Rock Garden would be kept out of the exhibition. This enabled the artists to make their own design for whatever place they desired. The number of sculptures was set at a maximum of 25 and was an estimate based on the area of the Gardens and on the precondition that each sculpture would have enough space. Eventually 17 designs were approved and 16 were realised.

Where did we want the sculptures?

The only part of the Gardens which we considered a restricted area, was the Rock Garden. Any sculpture would have disrupted the view. The artists designed their sculptures for specific spots in the Gardens and at times we were surprised by them choosing locations as far away as possible from any botanically interesting features! It was good for the artists to have a lot of freedom as they were able to work on blending their work into the Gardens.

For example, the picture opposite shows a structure, which from certain angles looks solid and closed. A closer look reveals that it is very open and that it reflects its surroundings. This sculpture was placed at the edge of the Fort, overlooking the moat. It reflects the impression the botanic gardens made on the artist, Egon Kuchlein.

The picture on the next page shows work by Anne-Marie van Sprang. She was inspired by the scientific work carried out in the greenhouses and made a group of lenses allowing visitors to have a closer look at the plants - so they could do their own research!

Extra activities

Arte Facto saw one problem in the long term exhibition. The media often pay attention to the opening of an event and then loose interest. After a few weeks the exhibition then loses its "news-value". To prevent this several activities were organized.

- weekend-walks

These were guided tours along the "sculpture-trail" held every Saturday and Sunday at 11.00 and 14.00 hours.

The publicity value of this is that news about the trail is spread through word-of mouth, which is often a very good means of attracting new visitors. Also visitors who come during weekdays are motivated to return during a weekend to join a guided tour.

- activities for children

Two weekends were chosen as special "children's weekends". On Saturday, children were invited to come to the Gardens to make their own sculpture. This was carried out in the adjacent "Environment -

monitor", an agricultural area maintained by our staff. Here children were able to build their own art using materials found in the area.

Publicity

Our intention was to use the sculptures to attract public attention to the Gardens. It worked very well and the exhibition was highlighted in





many magazines and newspapers. To prevent the newspapers giving a wrong image of our Gardens, we took some precautions. Together with "Arte Facto" we agreed on a well defined message for the media. For us promotion of the Gardens was important and for Arte Facto, the sculptures were the prime subject. The publicity-campaign was left to Arte Facto and they were free to advertise in any newspaper or magazine they thought appropriate. This could have been a risk as they target different audiences to the Gardens. To prevent confusion we agreed on a type of message.

We told our contacts that we are a large botanic garden with an interesting collection in a beautiful setting and that we were hosts to a

sculpture exhibition. Arte Facto emphasized that the sculptures were inspired by the work and lay-out of the Botanic Gardens.

Evaluation

The exhibition is not yet over, so a full evaluation is not possible. However, several remarks can be made. There is a distinct increase in the number of visitors to the Gardens. Visitors are not asked whether they come to see the Gardens or the sculptures so it is difficult to estimate the actual number of extra visitors. However, as this year is the first year that the Gardens are open on Sunday, the increase in visitors cannot be attributed to the art-exhibition alone. Possibly we will know next year if there is a decrease in visitor-numbers.

Visitor reactions were diverse. At the information-desk near the entrance a book was placed in which visitors could write their reactions to the sculptures. Most comments were positive, both on the sculptures and on the Gardens. During a guided tour, some plant-lovers who knew the Gardens were explicit in their disapproval but fortunately these people are the exceptions. In general, the sculpture trail has had a positive effect. We wanted to reach a broad audience and new target-groups, which we achieved. Many visitors told us that they did not know the Gardens and that they will certainly come again. The percentage of younger visitors also seems to have risen.

Conclusion

It is important to recognise that we could never have done this ourselves. The people of Arte Facto were able to invest much more time than we would ever have been able to, they also had the experience to investigate the best media for promoting the exhibition. The sculpture-trail was an experiment and, although we will not hold one each year, the results have definitely encouraged us to try out these types of ventures more often.

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