

Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

XXVIII edition, 2017
Lanzarote, Jardín de Cactus

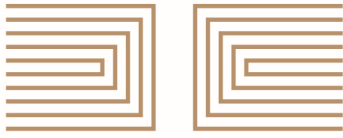
Motivation
16th March 2017

The Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche has unanimously decided to dedicate the 28th edition of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens to the *Jardín de Cactus* on Lanzarote, a place embodying the values of a cultivated landscape and representing a significant moment in the history of an island that has, on numerous occasions, come back from reversals and situations of fragility, discovering the economic means and cultural instruments required to construct innovative forms of settlement, outstanding agronomic practices, and aesthetic concepts linked to far-sighted policies, and developing them starting with its own soil.

Part of the Canary archipelago just 130 kilometres off the coast of Africa, and the first island to be encountered by anyone arriving from Europe, Lanzarote surprises us with its vast expanses of lava, which occupy a quarter of a land surface of only 846 square kilometres (the island measures barely 58 kilometres at its longest point). In fairly recent times a series of lava flows have advanced slowly on a broad front over its gently sloping ground, leaving behind a world devoid of life. These events produced twenty-five new volcanoes that generated a new complex system of craters, rifts and subterranean channels. In time the inhabitants managed to reverse this process of annihilation, creating a vital resource both for the cultivation of plants and for forms of transformation raising local awareness of the island's latent beauty. In the 20th century, César Manrique explored this seemingly sterile material and taught people to recognize its beauty, creating real projects revealing new ways of living and strategies to defend the island from over-development caused by tourism.

After being hit by numerous volcanic eruptions – the most recent one took place in the 18th century and lasted over six years – the island proved capable of starting over many times, transforming its extreme conditions – poor soil, incessant winds, lack of water – into a stimulus for regeneration and using them to provide the tools to build a conscious link with its living environment. The quality of its cultivations – the vineyards in particular – and the land area covered (3,440 hectares) attest to this character and to the island's capacity to develop inventive forms of co-existence with an apparently inhospitable territory. The Prize focuses in particular on a unique yet pervasive feature of the island taking the form of a system of quarries and craters that have caused the local inhabitants to develop farming practices that can teach us important lessons about the relationship between ecology and culture and channel the aesthetic vision of this expertise towards a collective experience and widespread knowledge of the landscape.

On this island of extinguished volcanoes, expanses of sand and ashes, lacking fresh water, exposed to the dry African winds and constantly swept by the trade winds from the north east, the inhabitants developed a relationship with their environment based on resistance, using their intelligence to transform these hostile conditions into a shared culture transmitting its universal values to us today. In this land we can rediscover the tenacious attitude of a Protestant pastor cultivating flowers and vegetables with his students on the edge of an Icelandic fjord; the same rapt invention of the Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis who painstakingly collected fragments on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens, recomposing them to resist against a slow advance of a very different nature: that of a new city swallowing up the memories of the ancient city in its bulk; or yet again the dedication of a Coptic monk, Matta El Meskin, who created a flourishing community in the Egyptian desert of Wadi en-Natrun by transforming thousands



of hectares of desert into vegetable plots, gardens and orchards.

Lanzarote, past and present, evokes many sites (*Skrúður, Núpur* 2013, *I sentieri di Pikionis di fronte all'Acropoli di Atene* 2003, *Deir Abu Maqar* 2005, to mention only a few) explored by the Carlo Scarpa Prize in the course of its studies and research into places and into the people embodying the innermost meaning of these places. In the 20th century, César Manrique (1919-1992), a Lanzarote-born artist, recognized the value of its places, introducing tools and practices capable of developing a social and political awareness of an environment previously considered poor and lacking in attractions. The contribution of this militant artist who fought against the exploitation of the island for tourism from the 1960s onwards by proposing an alternative model brings us face to face with a series of unresolved issues in the relationship between conservation and transformation in landscape. By building places like the *Jardín de Cactus* Manrique has shown us a path to follow. Together such places act like a manifesto for a different way of living on the island and for seeing its beauty through fresh eyes. Although at first glance they may seem to express the individual talent of a single artist, these places are actually the outcome of a kind of collective experiment that allowed the island, with the full political mandate of its governor José Ramírez Cerdá to acquire a new self-awareness in the last century.

From 1966 onwards, Manrique's efforts benefitted from the operational support of the president of the Cabildo Insular and from the practical involvement of a large group of artisans and local experts who contributed collectively to the construction of sites such as the *Centros de Arte, Cultura y Turismo* of Lanzarote: *Montañas del Fuego. Timanfaya; Casa-Museo al Campesino; Museo Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo. Castillo de San José; Jardín de Cactus; Jameos del Agua; Cueva de los Verdes; Mirador del Río*. Not only did such projects safeguard the existing environment and draw attention to the damage caused to it by tourism, most importantly they launched a series of sites proactively expressing an awareness of landscape that helped to manage and guide processes linked to tourism instead of demonizing them. Seen from this perspective, the Lanzarote case anticipates the concept of landscape "protection" as a responsibility that must be embedded into measures taking care of the necessary transformations and transmitting the manual and intellectual know-how ensuring their aesthetic quality.

In this context, the Prize focuses on a small *Jardín de Cactus* situated on the edge of the village of Guatiza while also looking beyond its limits to the many cultivated quarries and craters embodying the fertile equilibrium between nature and culture existing on the island.

Surrounded by a patchwork of prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) plantations, the garden, which was inaugurated on 17th March 1990, is situated in a disused *picón* quarry formerly providing local farmers with volcanic ash to scatter on their fields and later turned into a rubbish tip. Inside, a concentric system of terraces and settings nestles in the walls of the quarry, which hosts a spectacular collection of succulents that are the island's point of contact with other geographic and cultural environments, and with the American continent in particular. Taking on unexpected fantastical forms, the project continues the process of transformation of the folds and hollows of the surface of the island, using the age-old techniques: raising terraces, spreading volcanic ash on the soil, and inventing forms of windbreak.

Here Manrique's aesthetic awareness emerges above all in the teamwork, collective transmission of knowledge, and the use and promotion of practices and manual skills motivated less by ideological or nostalgic yearnings for traditional landscapes than by the wish to leave a mark typical of his time, including a love of games and an amused gaze on the world. The cactus garden concentrates into its small space all the features of a history (that of Lanzarote's landscape culture), extending an invitation to continue and renew its key aspects and characteristics.

The *International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens* has carried out its work as part of a dialogue with the two institutions responsible for running the places designed by Manrique and managing the cultural and civil legacy left by the artist: the *Centros de Arte, Cultura y Turismo* of the Cabildo of Lanzarote and the *Fundacion César Manrique*. The *Fundacion*, in particular, is engaged in the difficult daily struggle to protect the island from the pressure of property development and the stresses caused by the growing flow



of tourism.

Manrique's teaching and his socio-political message, which live on in his legacy, indicate an approach that the Carlo Scarpa Prize intends to expand in order to include the vast system of cultivated quarries and craters offering a key to understanding the contemporary landscape of this island along with other "extreme landscapes".

As part of its research and studies into Lanzarote, the Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche chose to celebrate a garden created in a quarry, consigning the seal designed by Carlo Scarpa and symbolizing the Prize to Antonio Martín Santos, the gardener from Lanzarote responsible for the *Jardín de Cactus*. His work, made up of daily gestures of care and civic devotion, draws upon the meaning of a lesson that gave rise to this unique political and cultural adventure, giving the island's inhabitants an awareness of a landscape that, despite the fragility of its condition, can find in those hands the tools to build its future.