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## HIC TERMINUS HAERET Daniel Spoerri's Garden

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

I first encountered Daniel Spoerri's work through one of his "snare-paintings." This object (actually, a set of objects) consisted of a wall-mounted tabletop onto which the remains of a meal had been fixed: drinking glasses, cigarette butts, an ashtray, cutlery, dishes, and some residual food all clung to the wooden surface, sealed within transparent glue. Peeling labels, the fading colors of the ordinary objects, and the effects of time seemed to contradict the scene's air of recent abandonment. The tabletop itself was quite fascinating, both in how it defeated gravity with its unusual verticality and in how its collection of residual objects hovered precisely between the determination of a sculptural composition and the haphazardness of found debris. It was hard for me as a viewer to determine just how to situate my own body in relation to this displacement of the everyday. It felt like everything was becoming topsy-turvy. It was likewise weird to imagine just how Spoerri selected the moment to freeze the meal. Why stop there and not after a few more bites?

Later, I read more about Spoerri's "Tableaux Piège" ("Trap Pictures," "picture-traps," "snare-pictures," or "booby-trapped paintings"; although none of these translations works entirely, all are acceptable) and how he and other artists in the Nouveau Réalisme movement were intent on making cast-offs, residuals, and detritus from the world into the core of their poetics. Still later, I read about the ephemeral qualities of Spoerri's work with food and his longstanding investigations of coincidence, randomness, and chance. With this memory of the relatively anarchical nature of his work, I was surprised to discover that he had established a permanent sculpture garden in the hills near Siena. Aside from wondering what Spoerri, who is often associated with Fluxus, would make within the parameters of permanence, I wanted to explore Tuscany, an area known for its natural beauty and graceful landscapes, which frequently appear in Renaissance paintings. So, I set off to visit the Hic



Top: Daniel Spoerri, *Chamber No. 13*, Hotel Carcassonne, Rue Mouffetard 24, Paris 1959–1965, 1998. Bronze, 250 x 300 x 500 cm. Above: Daniel Spoerri, *Eternal Breakfast*, 1994. Bronze, 63 cm. diameter.





Above: Daniel Spoerri, *Circle of Unicorns*, 1991. Bronze, 9 elements, 250 x 40 x 50 cm. Right: Daniel Spoerri, *Labyrinthic mural path*, 1996/98. Stone and grass, 60 x 40 meters.

Terminus Haeret garden this summer and, from there, I was able to speak with Spoerri by phone about his work.\*

Spoerri's interest in the idea of a park for sculpture can be traced to the *Sacro Bosco* at Bomarzo. This extravagant garden, which features topiary monsters and grotesque stone carvings (<[www.parcodemostri.com](http://www.parcodemostri.com)>), was commissioned in the 16th century by Pier Francesco Orsini. Small, but powerful and haunting, Bomarzo has fascinated Spoerri since he first discovered it in 1964. The property he turned into his own park is more expansive, and it is now home to 87 permanent works by 42 artists, including Spoerri, Dani Karavan, Meret Oppenheim, Not Vital, and Jean Tinguely. Spoerri describes the park as a kind of "album di poesie" or chapbook, in which he has annotated the passage of his time with his closest peers through a physical transformation of the land.

What is immediately striking about the *Hic Terminus Haeret* park is the relationship between the artworks and the natural environment. Unlike conventional sculpture gardens in which the sculptures stand away from the neutral framing device of surrounding trees and plants, *Hic Terminus Haeret* allows the park's natural features to envelop the work. The extensive walk that constitutes a visit is chock-full of unexpected appearances. The interplay between natural elements in the garden and the metal and stone works accentuates their reciprocal differences, heightening a viewers' awareness of both.

Rounding the corner on an uphill path, viewers suddenly find themselves above a field dotted with sculptures in a sort of oasis (*Eight Skinny Nightmares*, 2003). A nearby tower features a telescope mounted on the railing (*Voyeur*, 1996/98). The scope can be trained on three sculptures mounted on raised pedestals in the distance (*Bullock's head*, *Snow Angel*, *Dreifuß*). Typical of the programmatic changes in viewing conditions within the garden, *Voyeur* can only be seen "clearly" at a distance, since the sculptures are raised too far above the ground to be seen from the field itself. *Eight Skinny Nightmares* seems more accessible, but the tall plants surrounding this oasis/thicket make any approach daunting. The collection of nightmares leers out at the viewer from the tangled brambles.

Elsewhere, pushing through a row of trees, viewers come upon a vast petroglyph walkway (based on a pre-Columbian image of the sun god meeting the first woman in the world) that covers half the meadow (*Labyrinthic mural path*, 1996/98). Off to the right, an

Arman fountain made of ploughs and reaper blades rises from the water (*Monument for Settlers*, 1999/2000). Especially beautiful and moving is a sculpture hidden within a glade of bushes and trees. Here, Spoerri re-created the room in Paris where he began his work in the visual arts (*Chamber No. 13*, *Hotel Carcassonne*, *Rue Mouffetard 24*, Paris 1959-1965, 1998; this is the second version, the first was made in wood). The strangeness of the cast metal room is accentuated by the tilt of the floor (an homage to the "The Hanging House" built on an inclined rock at Bomarzo). Each element of the room was painstakingly reconstructed: the table with leftovers, the rumpled bed, the small gas stove, some elementary carving tools. Like a miniature painting enlarged, the amount of detail is fascinating. The mortality that *Chamber* frames in its role as a *memento mori* is mitigated by the softness of the surrounding nature. Like many works in the garden, opposites seem to be reconciled in context.

During his life in the arts, Spoerri has sought to create situations that dislocate viewers' certainties and expectations. He privileges internal poetic coherence over stylistic continuity, oscillating freely between traditional and unusual materials. This approach to art-making gives his work a particular dynamism and accords it a degree of difficulty for the viewer. In his garden, the visitor is offered a view of his eclectic approach, in its entirety. Without a doubt, Spoerri's profound intention is to set visitors off on a path of initiation and awakening. On the way, they can discover how the "raw" and the "cooked" can be united (even in antithesis or conflict) and how art can transform the most disparate of materials. The *Hic Terminus Haeret* garden is a subtle, liminal study in the overturning of things. After a visit, objects and ideas of the everyday world no longer appear as they did before.

#### Note

\* Special thanks to Daniel Spoerri for speaking with me from Vienna on July 18, 2007. Thanks also to Susanne Neumann, artist and cultural manager of the garden, for her time and photographs. All references are derived from those conversations and from *Il Giardino di Daniel Spoerri*, edited by Anna Mazzanti, (Siena: maschietto&musolino, 1998-99).

Information about Spoerri's *Hic Terminus Haeret* is available at <[www.danielspoerri.org](http://www.danielspoerri.org)>.

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