

ECO-ART REVISITED

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A resurgence of environmental art, not the land art of the 1960's and 1970's, but micro-scaled site specific eco-art that explores the links between human culture and nature, is now taking place. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) bulldozed into being at Great Salt Lake in Utah or Walter de Maria's 390 foot air shaft burrowed through the centre of a mountain near Munich on the site of the 1992 Olympic Games caused immense environmental disruption, usually just to express a concept. Today's eco-art involves a sensitive response to the actual site and geo-specific elements such as climate, geology and vegetation. A respect for the ecosystem and not egosystems of expression is what counts. Britain's Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash and Germany's Nils Udo are renowned for working in this way. They respond to nature by creating natural constructions: installing plantings, welding ice assemblages, balancing boulders, grafting tree forms, arranging patterns of berries and leaves. Andy Goldsworthy states: "When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue."¹

Ana Mendieta's outdoor rituals and performances in the 1970's, where she used her own body to create silhouettes in the landscape in Cuba, Mexico and the United

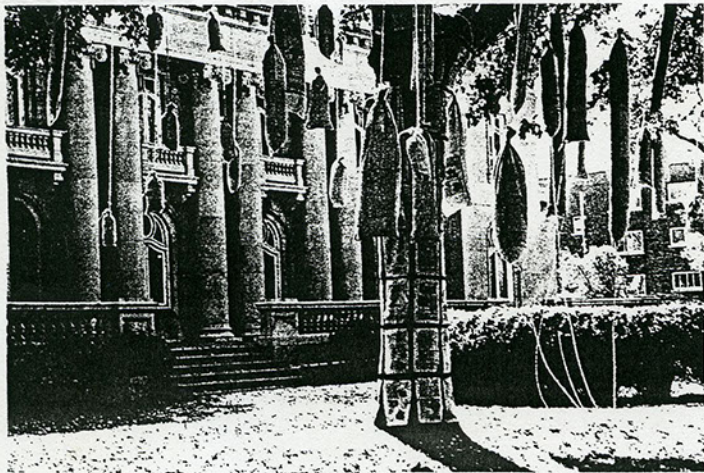
States, pioneered and presaged today's eco-art movement by nearly 20 years. Mendieta's art was a search for a point of belonging amid nature's endless transformation, flux and flow. She chose to reject minimalism's orthodoxy, the stylistic acrobatics and predictable innovations of the "art for art's sake" demagogues who had eyes in the backs of their heads "just in case" the market was watching. Mendieta's intuitive art drew on and identified with nature as a source both of privation and nourishment. Her offerings were rife with images of fertility and spoke of an intensely private union with the earth mother. In a more contemporary context, Stuttgart-based artist Helga Brenner enacted a ritual to follow the phases of the moon during the International Sculpture Symposium at Bic, Gaspé in 1995. Each day Brenner installed a circle of salt at the Pointe-aux-Anglais in the basin at low tide along an imaginary circumference and each night the ocean's tides came and it gradually dissolved. At 9:20 a.m. on the 9th of September during the full moon, Brenner installed a much larger 400 kg circle of salt in the centre of the circle she had by then completed on the mud flats when the tide was out. The salt dispersed, returning to the sea from which it had emerged by geological processes long ago when the tide finally gushed into the inlet.

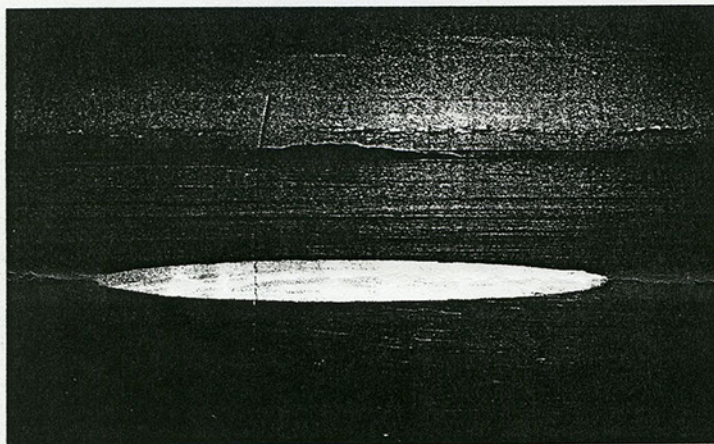
Eco-art now need not only be enacted in idyllic backwoods settings. It can also be presented in parks, abandoned industrial, temporary or urban sites, alongside highways and transit routes or even in your own backyard. The relation between public and artist is no longer determined by the gallery or museum venue. Jerilea Zempel is a New York-based artist who creates temporary works that address ecological issues in public spaces. Her works suggest that public art by definition could share eco-art's emphasis on ephemeral expression, be freed from stereotypical concerns about permanence, the imperatives of architects and planners that render so many public art projects and monuments lifeless and ultimately boring. For *Excess Volatility* Zempel brought an abandoned Volkswagen bug into Battery Park and clothed it in tree clip-

pings and cuttings provided by the New York Park Management Service, "sheathed its exterior with a skin of pine needles and painted its interior a bright orange. The work looked like a living, breathing animal. Jerilea Zempel: "It is this empowering nature of private response that I want to exploit in my public pieces which I think of as 'mock-monuments'. They are combinations of found objects and cast-off vegetation, a head-on collision between nature and culture. The humor in them is important and it allays public distrust."²

Many artists are helping to re-define the relation between art and environment by extending the practice of installation beyond the gallery walls. Physically transforming a site using a variety of materials, these outdoor installations become a metaphor for our identification and desire as one species among many to go with nature rather than against it and recognize nature's permanent place in our lives, even as our city environments constantly change. New York based Anton Vidokle's installation titled *A Tree of Useful Knowledge* at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Montreal in October 1995 reproduced the pages of a 19th century Quebec textbook entitled *Manuel des sciences usuelles* onto jute. They were sewn into bags and hung from the branches or affixed in grid formation format to the trunk of a tree. The work made it clear how linear and rational our vision of history and nature is, despite the fact that all human activity involves nature in one way or another. At the same time Montreal artist Lyne Legault created an ephemeral garden installation inspired by a petroglyph form entitled PIKO near that of Vidokle. These petroglyph images were traditionally engraved on the surface of volcanic lava in Hawaii to express the human spirit in a natural environment. Traditionally, Hawaiian tribes wrapped the umbilical chord of a newborn child in a leaf and planted it a cavity found at such sites. According to legend, the spirit of the God Lono lived in these cords. If animals had not eaten it by the next day, the child's future would be blessed. Legault's actual installation entitled *Natural Balm* (*Balsamum naturea, jardin éphémère*) comprised a central mound made up of banana and eucalyptus tree bark, bamboo and grass with glyph-like drawings of walkers etched in the ground adjacent. One could see the Olympic Stadium and Jardin

Anton Vidokle, *A Tree of Useful Knowledge* (L'arbre de l'utile connaissance) (intervention au Musée des Arts décoratifs de Montréal), jute, 1995





botanique, cars and pedestrians through an empty vertical structure near the mound. The frame presented the surrounding environment as if it were a subject witnessed through a window or in a painting rather than part of a continuum of life in flux of which we are part and highlighted how adrift we have become from the ephemeral yet ever present forces of nature in everyday life. Walking by at night one could see Legault's piece illuminated from within and it became a primordial, fiery presence amid the traffic and bustle of Montreal. The Toronto-based group *Symbiosis* recently created an installation in an abandoned lyposuction (weight loss) clinic on Queen St. The installation entitled *Hesitation* by Paul Litherland in collaboration with B-312 this May involved erecting official looking city-type signs along St. Laurent Blvd. in Montreal. Though not exactly eco-art, the spirit of Litherland's work expressed a similar desire to bring art out into the open in public spaces, a genre pioneered by the Guerilla Girls in New York. Each sign consisted of a photo of people in ambiguous social situations where the body language emphasized the difficulty of communication between people in public spaces.

The most radical forms of this kind of eco-art without walls are unsigned, undated and ephemeral, enacted in public or unclaimed transitional sites. A tree planter as well as an artist, Doug Buis' anonymous planting of seedlings in Montreal which continue to grow imperceptibly are an example of how subtle an artist's interventions can be... but I have also seen an inukshuk on highway 401 near Hamilton,

Ontario on top of a hill, a beautiful sculpture of a dancer made of toilet paper and wire on Clark street in Montreal that was washed away by the rain within a few days, a habitation on St. Denis street built by an artist out of discarded wood and posters that was intermittently occupied by street people before it was torn down.

Over 50 years ago, writer and novelist E.B. White wrote that our future technologies "will insist that we forget the primary in favour of the secondary and remote... digesting ideas, sounds, images — distant and concocted, seen in a panel of light — these will emerge as the real and the true; and when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face, the impression will be of mere artifice." He added that time would arrive "when all is reversed and we shall be like the insane to whom the antics of the sane seem the crazy twistings of a griot." High-tech computer-based cyber art and art on the web are the latest generation of an authoritarian technique that emphasizes production rather than the immediate physical aspect of life. It perpetuates the myth that humanity is somehow invincible and superior to nature. High-tech art is predominantly "mind oriented" and rejects any sense of environmental continuity in space and time. Robert Hughes, in a Time Magazine article entitled *Take This Revolution...* clarified some of the myths surrounding the high tech revolution. Scorning the utopian fantasies of a void-like virtual reality fed on cyberspace and virtual reality, the high-tech offspring of post-Modernism, Hughes drew parallels between high tech art projects and

America's puritanical terror of loneliness in writing: "All Human Knowledge Will Be There. With a roll and click of the mouse, we will summon Titian's *Assumption* from the Friari in Venice onto our home screen, faithful in every respect — except that it isn't, being much smaller, with different (electronic) colour, no texture, no surface and no physical reality, and in no way superior (except for the opportunity to zoom in on detail) to an ink reproduction in a book... but how many people will realize the only way to know Titan is to study the actual, unedited physical works of his hands, in real space, not cyberspace?"

Building a sense of continuity between the artwork and greater environment links us to the universal. The sense that art has a cosmological significance is often lost when the artwork is sited in a reduced, contained, geometrized, architectural interior setting. The outdoor eco-art effect is inimitable, the ultimate in theatre, a modest acceptance of nature's place in the creative process. The

backdrop, be it in the city, a public space, a park, or the wilderness, is effectively changing by the minute as the light, atmosphere, sound around us change and generate a heightened sense of connectedness to the culture of nature because our own bodies are sensing all that change. Everything that surrounds us — plastic, wood, cement, glass, etc. — is nature transformed, in its original state or in the process of returning to nature. Nature is the art of which we are a part!

1. John Fowles and Andy Goldsworthy, *Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy sculpture 1976-1990*, (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son, 1990), p. 162.
2. Linda Cunningham, ed., *The Memorial Redefined*, (New York: College Art Association, 1989), p. 43.
3. E.B. White, "Removal" reprinted in *One Man's Meat* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1983), p. 3.
4. Robert Hughes, "Take This Revolution...", Time Magazine, Spring 1995, p. 77.

John Grande is the recent author of *Balance: Art and Nature* (Black Rose Books) to be published in a French version by Ecosociété in January 1997.



Lyne Legault, *Natural Balm (Balsamum naturea, jardin éphémère)* (intervention au Musée des Arts décoratifs de Montréal), écorce, ba-bou, verdure, système d'éclairage, 1995

L'auteur fait état de l'essor actuel d'un type d'art environnemental qui, par opposition au gigantisme du Land Art des années soixante et soixante-dix, se distingue par son respect du milieu naturel et son intégration à l'écosystème. Dès les années soixante-dix, les performances de Ana Mendieta anticipent cet «éco-art» par leur dimension rituelle, qu'on retrouve dans le travail contemporain de l'Allemande Helga Brenner. Mais l'éco-art peut aussi prendre place dans tout espace public ou urbain. L'auteur commente quelques travaux de Jenlea Zempel, Anton Vidokle, Lyne Legault qui, utilisant des matériaux organiques, réaffirment ainsi, au cœur même du milieu urbain ou muséal où ils sont installés, la présence toujours essentielle de la nature dans notre existence. Contrairement à la vogue des nouvelles technologies en art qui nous détachent d'une expérience immédiate et sensible du réel, l'éco-art veut restaurer la plénitude de notre appartenance à l'environnement et aux processus naturels.