

Independent Study / Art History

[Tim Clark, Associate Professor, IMCA Major]

Research Paper:

Relationships in Ecology: Artists Communing with the Rest of Creation

Emily Rose Michaud

1.

Introduction:

2.

The Need for a New Discipline: Artists Emerge from the Gallery
[Alan Sonfist, Richard Long, Agnes Denes]

3.

Physical Immersion into Landscape: The Ephemeral Experience
[Ana Mendieta, Chris Drury, Marc Walter]

4.

Navigating Socio-Political And Ecological Territories: Process And Relationship Centered Art-works And Approaches To Site-Specific Response To Environment
[Dawn Dale, Int'l selection of artists, Storm King Art Centre]

5.

Conclusion

6.

Bibliography

7.

Interviews

1. Introduction:

Ecology and art are not one-way streets, rather they should be crossroads.

-Robert Smithson¹

Since the rise of modernism, numbers of artists have been attracted to an interdisciplinary, critical engagement with art that addressed land, ideas of holism and social experience. Many were actively searching for a communicative dialogue sourced from questioning the role of human culture in the natural environment. "It may be argued that the connection between human sociocultural activity and ecology has always been structurally integral to the history of humanity.² The world's multiple living systems are not distinctly separated from human life and culture, but are one. The same is true for the relationship of art and life, though the illusion remains within our culture that they are distinct. Western culture is one of the few that has a name for art. Many cultures worldwide do not have a name for it, as it permeates their everyday existence effortlessly.

Ecology was founded as a scientific discipline by Danish botanist Eugenius Warming in the late 19th century.³ In 1866, German biologist Ernst Haeckel coined the term ecology when he defined it as "the comprehensive science of the relationship of the organism to the environment."⁴ Ecology has varying definitions and is said to be about "the relationship of living things to one another and to their environment, or the study of such relationships."⁴ A more recent definition of ecology pertains to "the study of ecosystems."⁵ The history of human cultural activity has always been in contact and communication with systems of the natural world for practical reasons; the primary reason being to provide physical sustenance through food, shelter and the essential resources needed for survival.

*A strong relation to the land once existed in all primary cultures, and there was a basic resourcefulness associated with use of materials essential for cultural survival. A sense of infinity came with understanding those limits. Contemporary culture encourages a consumer attitude to materials and products, yet all materials ultimately derive from and have origins in nature. We are losing that physical, tactile sense of connectedness to a place...**John K. Grande**⁶*

1 The full quote reads: The world needs coal and highways, but we do not need the results of strip-mining or highway trusts. Economics, when abstracted from the world, is blind to natural processes. Art can become a resource, that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. Ecology and art are not one-way streets, rather they should be crossroads. Robert Smithson, quoted by Sue Spaid. Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies. 2002. (p. 53).

2 Tim Clark's notes

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugenius_Warming

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecology>

5 http://www.ecostudies.org/definition_ecology.html

6 John K. Grande. Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists. 2004. (p. 7)

Natural resources, whether raw or harnessed, serve as the primary building block from which cultural activity flourishes. Modern views of nature distance us by feeding the illusion that we are separate from it; that we are independent entities, when we are in fact enormously inter-dependent upon our living environments. Human cultural activity is nature.

*The distinction between nature and culture between wilderness and human settlement, has been a dichotomy at the heart of Western thinking, and by way of Romantic thought, it has become a central desideratum of modernism...The ancient Greeks held another view: that nature, far from being like a machine, was actually a living organism, a macrocosm analogous to the microcosm of the human being. Its diverse components- plants and animals- were an order of being separate from that of humanity, but were still imbued with vital life, having mind and soul. In the notion of a living system, of a process of functions, the modern view shares something with the ancient Greek...Eastern philosophies of Buddhism and the Tao have also had a profound impact on the way of thinking of many poets and artists who have sought in their work to bring back the vital consciousness of nature as a living entity, living and breathing in dynamic relation to the human: 'Therefore we may know the single mind of a single particle of dust comprises the mind-nature of all sentient beings and Buddhas...Who, then, is 'inanimate' and 'animate'? In the Assembly of the Lotus, all are present without division.' Quoting this observation of the 8th-century Buddhist monk, Chan-Jan, Gary Snyder observes: 'The Chinese Philosophical appreciation of the natural world as a visible manifestation of the Tao made a happy match with Indian Mahayana eschatology.' And elsewhere he quotes Dogen, the great Zen master: 'Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles and grasses.' **Mel Gooding**⁷*

This philosopher demonstrates that human nature is bound to the structures of the natural world. Dogen challenges the illusion that humans have held for centuries, and who continue to hold to this day; that our mind and bodies are distinct from an inter-related and interdependent universe. Within the contemporary art world, many overlapping and intersecting practices and relationships are growing from a desire for a more living and communicative relationship to the environment. These relationships often dwell in an ephemeral terrain and may be sourced from an attention to community, the local bioregion, seasonal cycles, weather and wind patterns, or to the culture of the flora and fauna. Land Art manifests itself in many forms, for it serves a different purpose in each situation. Nature art, environmental art, earthwork, ecological art, ecovention⁸ and ecological activism are some of the names for this environmental discipline. Sue Spaid states that

⁷ Mel Gooding and William Furlong. Song Of The Earth. 2002. (p. 8-9)

⁸ Coined in 1999, the term ecovention (ecology + invention) describes an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology. Spaid, Sue. Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies. 2002. (pg. 1)

*'such categories should enable newcomers to draw distinctions between artists' intentions and practices.'*⁹

This paper will look at how many of these art forms achieve a synergy with the multiple living systems of their environment. Such living systems are extensions of the ecological model structured by relationships among living entities. The relevance of these connections will be addressed, inquiring into art practices that are centred around human relationship to outdoor landscape, and to the socio-political, ecological and physical environments that compose the human experience.

2. The Need for a New Discipline: Artists Emerge from the Gallery

We need a new discipline that sees the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum and that can help us reconnect with the truth that lies in our communion with the rest of creation. Theodore Roszak¹⁰

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the phrase 'deep ecology' in his 1973 article "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary," to express a vision of the world in which we protect the environment as if it were a part of ourselves. Deep Ecology is a holistic approach to facing world problems that considers humankind as integral to its environment. It involves moving beyond the individualism of Western culture towards also seeing ourselves as part of the earth. This leads to a deeper connection with life, where ecology is not just seen as something beyond us, but something we are part of and have a role to play in, beginning in a very specific location, like a community or a bioregion. Gary Snyder offers insight into what sense of place entails when he articulates that,

Bioregional awareness teaches us in specific ways. It is not enough to just love nature or to want to be in harmony with Gaia. Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience...To restore the land one must live and work in a place. The place will welcome whomever approaches it with respect and attention. To work in a place is to bond to a place: people who work together in a place become a community, and in time, grows a culture. To restore the wild is to restore culture. **Gary Snyder.**¹¹

The Land Art movement owes its success to the pioneers responsible for their environments, interventions and actions that are intelligent and respectful collaborations with the natural land-

⁹Sue Spaid. Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies. 2002. (pg. 10)

¹⁰ <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC34/Roszak.htm>

¹¹ <http://home.clara.net/heureka/art/snyder.htm>

scape: Chris Drury, Ana Mendieta, Ocean Earth, Agnes Denes, Mel Chin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist, David Nash, Patricia Johanson, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, and The Green Guerillas. Their works creatively and practically address ecological observations and concerns such as sense of place or culture, pollution, radioactive waste, water quality and conservation, biodiversity, desertification, habitat loss, food, and sometimes act as homages to the vanishing and endangered species. One important distinction to make in their work however, is that theirs maintains a thoughtful balance between action and poetics, and ranges from metaphor, ecological intervention, activism, and communion with nature. The distinction that holds in their works are that they are universally inclined; being less dictated by an individualized self expression and more influenced by grander concerns that consider the synthesis of smaller gestures fitting into a whole.

Animals, vegetables and minerals take part in the world of art. The artist feels attracted by their physical, chemical, and biological possibilities, and begins again to feel the need to make things of the world, not only as animated beings, but as a producer of magic and marvellous deeds...Among living things he discovers also himself, his body, his memory, his gestures- all that which directly lives and thus begins again to carry the sense of life and of nature...Thus he discovers the magic (of chemical composition and reaction), the inexorableness (of vegetable growth), the precariousness (of material), the falseness (of senses), the realness (of a natural desert, a forgotten lake, the sea, the snow, the forest)..[the artist is] thus discovered as an instrument of consciousness in relation to a larger comprehensive acquisition of nature...He abandons linguistic intervention in order to live hazardously, in an uncertain space...He abolishes his role of being an artist, intellectual, painter or writer and learns again to perceive, to feel, to breathe, to walk, to understand, to make himself a (hu)man.
Germano Celant. ¹²

Richard Long, Alan Sonfist, and Agnes Denes were some of the first to break away from the gallery scene of Manhattan in the 1950's to creatively address the uses of wide open spaces and who were involved in transformative and process-oriented dialogues into the nature of large-scale art installations. Richard Long's durational walks emphasized experience over object, oriented from the process of communing with nature over long periods of time while on outdoor expeditions. He worked as a minimalist, with a strong interest in nature. His process oriented work engaged with the external environment as a part of his creative process, and was less about the final object. Long's philosophy parallels ideas emerging from the deep ecology movement, as revived by Gary Snyder. Snyder points out the physiological grid of life that man is found embedded within:

12 Mel Gooding and William Furlong. Song Of The Earth. 2002. (p. 18)

*The world is watching, one cannot walk through a meadow or forest without a ripple of report spreading out from one's passage. The thrush darts back, the jay squalls, a beetle scuttles under the grasses, and the signal is passed along. Every creature knows when a hawk is cruising or a human strolling. The information passed through the system is intelligence. Gary Snyder.*¹³

Human intelligence is just as much intuitive, emotional and sensual as it is mechanistic and reason-based. By participating within the spatial and material composition of the landscape, a new dialogue opens up. Richard Long's walks emphasized the relationship to environment and how distance between things is measured through his active physical presence.

*...it's like an ongoing dialogue with the territory that I have chosen to work with, which is the landscape. So, for example, in the last couple of years, I've made a few walks which are a kind of metaphor for the world of particle physics. If you think that the fundamental nature of reality comprises matter, time, space, things appearing, disappearing, reappearing, positions in space, density, I can use all of those elements in my walks. A walk can measure time and space, I can make stones move around, leave them in different places, exchange them, scatter them, bring them together. A walk can easily articulate all those fundamental aspects of time and matter. Richard Long*¹⁴

Long uses his body as experiential tool for his works found outside of the gallery. His process of attention to place and motion from one location to the next is a living art, which is fleeting.

So too, are many of the works of Agnes Denes, in which she incorporates the use of growing grain. Denes planted and harvested two acres of wheat on a landfill on Manhattan's financial district in the summer of 1982. The ideas that govern this body of work bring attention to the commodification of land and the lack of connection we have to our food.

*At the start of the project, the field was a junk heap. With two assistants and varying numbers of volunteers, Denes spent a year preparing it: clearing the trash and rocks, weeding out the diseased plants, installing an irrigation system, fertilizing and spraying. Winter waned. The wheat sprouted. The field grew from green to golden and waved in the breezes from the harbour and the sea beyond...The photograph of Denes walking amid her mature golden grain crop with the Twin Towers and other urban archetypes in the background says it all. After the harvesting of 1000 pounds of healthy golden wheat, the erection of the glass and steel structures of Battery Park City covered the site over. Thomas McEvilly*¹⁵

13 Mel Gooding and William Furlong. Song Of The Earth. 2002. (p. 30)

14 Mel Gooding and William Furlong. Song Of The Earth. 2002. (p. 128)

15 Thomas McEvilly. Philosophy in the Land. Art in America. November 2004. From the course pack edited by Prof. Danica Jojich. Sculpture and Material Practice (SCUL 210). 2007. (pg. 43, 45)

Alan Sonfist situates most of his work within the city itself to draw critical attention to the importance of nature to New York urban dwellers.

Sonfist's success in persuading city planners and bureaucrats to approve the construction of 'time landscapes' is based on arguments that derive, not from conventional justifications for public art, but from the discussion that surrounds issues of architectural preservation. Sonfist's stance has been that it is as important to preserve historical landscapes as to preserve historical buildings. Eleanor Heartney¹⁶

He draws on his determination to see his public projects come to fruition, and is extremely knowledgeable about plant life, specifically native plants.

A founding father of the native plant revolution, Alan Sonfist first publicly articulated the need for urban forests in 1969, but it took another nine years for Time Landscape, a 45 feet x 200 feet patch of pre-Colonial wilderness (oaks, hickories, junipers, maples, and sassafras) planted in Manhattan, to get off the ground. Time Landscape has evolved into an ecovention, but it began as a monument to celebrate a less familiar, non-human history...Sonfist believes that it is not enough to repair the landscape: one must also "repair the hole in the psyche which is left when all traces of our biological and ecological roots are obliterated." Since Sonfist's Time Landscape remains a visible but locked park, Time Landscape fails to offer a "social site filled with human content," though it does satisfy Jeff Kelley's condition that "places are where time takes root." Paradoxically, nay-sayers thought the plants Sonfist selected would never grow, let alone survive a contemporary metropolis, yet now his pre-Colonial list has joined the city's approved plant list. Time Landscape has transformed the local environment in ways that Sonfist could never have anticipated. Sue Spaid¹⁷

Place is indeed where time takes root. Over the years, through the fluctuations of season and population shift, the place is where one may return to witness change. Place is a marker of human history and cultural activity. The effect of one or two determined creative gestures can have enormous impact, even years later.

Creative collaboration among varying specialized domains can also serve to strengthen artistic projects. For example, when art and science/botany are combined, their expressiveness expands to draw a more vast audience in to observe and relate to the work. This can help for the work to be understood in another light, different in scope from any one exclusive discipline.

In April 2000, the Musee d'Art Contemporain de Montreal organized the conference Art et Jardins (Art and Gardens), opening up a constructive avenue for the increasingly numerous and complex connections established between art and nature,

¹⁶ Eleanor Heartney. *The Garden in the Machine: The Time Landscapes of Alan Sonfist*, Alan Sonfist: History and the Landscapes. (p. 14-15).

¹⁷ Sue Spaid. *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*. 2002. (PG ?)

not only in contemporary art but in landscape architecture as well...At the Montreal conference, horticulturalists presented their work along with art critics, art historians, visual artists, architects, designers and botanists...architecture continues to be redefined and transformed, and art persists in analyzing the reality and relevance of its effects, questioning its nature and its symbolic and cultural legitimacy... It is well known that creation, like aesthetics, is not exclusive to Fine Arts; mathematicians and scientists proceed in their research like artists and vice versa- although their productions do not necessarily have formal affinities, they are all creators. **Rose Marie Arbour**¹⁸

Many such conferences and festivals are currently taking place in the world at an increased rate.¹⁹The knowledge they generate and the awareness that these hybrid disciplines contribute serves to inform and shape the concerns of contemporary man. They stimulate new dialogues and expand the language of what art can be. When combined artfully with nature, the disciplines have a heightened expressiveness, many times more visceral and multi-sensory in their communication than art forms that fall back on the tradition of style or category, found in museums and galleries.

3. Physical Immersion into Landscape: The Ephemeral

*'Art increases our sense of what it is to be alive, to be in vital relation to the world we inhabit. Such relation comprehends what art reveals: the inescapable transience of things. We are aware, as never before, that we are a part of the world, not privileged observers of it.'*²⁰

Nature's presence has influenced most artists working in the Western world, though in the past the creative relationship to it was centred around the reproduction of nature and a romantic, indirect, and passive relationship was kept:

Until the end of the 19th century, paintings were made of forests, seascapes, urban views, and déjeuners sur l'herbe, as nature offered a scenario that may not have been simple, but was nevertheless always accessible, an immediately comprehensible reality. In the twentieth century avant-garde art came to terms with the rise of the civilization of machines and nature was replaced, with great rhetorical efficiency, by artifice. **Alessandro Rocca**.²¹

18 Rose Marie Arbour, 'Festival International de jardins a Metis' from Espace Sculpture. Winter 2000-2001. (First page of article. Page numbers unidentifiable, from a photocopy).

19 Le Festival International des Jardins à Métis is one found in Quebec, on the Gaspé peninsula.

20 Mel Gooding and William Furlong. Song Of The Earth. 2002. (p.16)

21 Alessandro Rocca. Natural Architecture. 2007. (p. 008)

Despite many of these artists' (and groups of artists) physical immersion in the outdoors, (the group of Seven, the Impressionists) they continued to reproduce and observe the land upon which they stood, and were not directly engaged in a common experience. Chris Drury observes:

...if you're a painter of nature, in order to paint it you have to subtract yourself from it. You have to stand back and view it, or view the angle. And you take yourself out of it, really, in order to view it. The difference is that I guess since the 1960s artists have been putting themselves into it. And that's part of the equation. Chris Drury

This creative communion bridges the work and the audience together and the meeting place between natural and artistic forces is found throughout the creative process. Art critic John K. Grande observes that: "*native culture generally viewed the process of making and working with objects as an ephemeral one.*"²²

Marc Walter was interviewed for this paper to gain insight into the purpose of the ephemeral in art and nature within a broader range of artists working worldwide on this subject. His works are usually installed in rural outdoor areas that attract him, from where he works intuitively. Interested in Andy Goldsworthy and Hamish Fulton, his outdoor nature work is similarly themed around the importance of time.

Nature teaches us about time, about the fragile balance of all things. I thrive towards living the creative process to its' fullest, by submerging myself into Nature's own process to extract emotions and substances, sharing some of that with visitors and workshop participants. Just like I do throughout my creative process, I try to get them to read and listen to their own senses and emotions when they are exposed to nature's fabulous array of lines, surfaces and viewpoints. Whether it is a very small detail of a pine needle or the vast composition of a clearing, my work aims ultimately at getting visitors to engage in the wholeness of the living path. Marc Walter²³

Walter is a nature artist in the Outaouais region of Québec, also offering workshops with children in primary and secondary high schools and universities. He can't help but question the constantly increasing distance between how students live and act and what they know and experience of nature. In an interview I conducted with him via email he stated:

Basically, people touch less, smell less, know very little about how nature provides for humans, and are completely drugged by electronic devices without realizing their impact on real relationships: Relationships among humans, relationships between humans and nature. I hope to get eyes to open a bit more, way beyond the artworks created themselves. Marc Walter²⁴

22 John Grande. *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*. 2004. (p. 214).

23 From an interview I conducted with Marc via email on March 7th, 2008.

24 From an interview I conducted with Marc via email on March 7th, 2008

By creatively guiding people and students along the pathways of environmental art, he raises awareness about nature and its elements through a living process that is ephemeral and grounded in physiological experience. His relationships remain holistic, alive and become a process of communication, flexible to concerns as they arise. His workshops provide sensual and creative experience which lead to what he calls site-specific and moment-specific results, such as indoor or outdoor exhibits or discussions. He regards his relationship with the ephemeral as an invitation to think about who we are, where we are and what are our values, and validates the creative process as more important than the final product. He believes that the process of living allows us to gather experience, and that the time spent immersed in creation allows us to grow wiser and realize the important values that should guide our actions.

Chris Drury's involvement with the earth is through his endurance-based labour and time-based object collecting expeditions. He has a physical compulsion to be a part of the environment in which he works. The physical engagement within his practice is part of the work. 'Lifting stones for three weeks in all kinds of weather makes you feel very firmly planted on the ground'²⁵ he says. The work he makes is visceral, as it emerges from the pit of his stomach. Drury's medium varies from site-specific stone and log cairns, to mushroom spore drawings, but his content deals with 'the inside of human nature and the outside...and how one talks to the other' as well as place of history.²⁶ He maintains that nature is really culture. When asked if he consciously makes works that have a resonance in a particular place, otherwise impossible to reproduce in a gallery he replied:

*I can and do make installations in galleries. But I quite like things that actually have to deal with weather and that have a time span too. For example, things of stones will last, but things made of sticks and mud won't: they have a year's life, perhaps.*²⁷

Even in his ephemeral works, the cycles of growth and decay in a natural setting are quite different from when they are in the context of the art gallery. His works are centred on the relationship he has to his surroundings. They challenge many forms of static visual art works and acknowledge the transformative potential between art and art-maker.

25 From interview of Chris Drury by William Furlong. Song of the Earth. 2002. (p.76)

26 From interview of Chris Drury by William Furlong. Song of the Earth. 2002. (p.76)

27 Excerpt from an interview of Chris Drury by William Furlong. Song of the Earth. 2002. (p.81)

The performative rituals of Ana Mendieta address a range of social concerns, which also invariably and intuitively tie her feminine body to the earth upon which she works. Her 'Siluetas' series executed during her summer forays to the back country in Mexico in the early 70s involved merging her body with nature,

Either literally, by lying naked in various landscapes, or figuratively, by creating silhouettes of her body out of such materials as flowers, rocks, blood, twigs or earth. For the first Silueta, Imagen de Yagul (Image from Yagul), Mendieta lay in a recently excavated pre-Columbian tomb and had herself covered in sprays of white flowers. Lying on the ground within a craggy rock cavity, Mendieta's body seems to be dissolving into a mist of white and green. Eleanor Heartney²⁸

Ana Mendieta worked as well on the Rupestrian sculptures in the early 80s. They often had a pre-historic aura about them and referenced ancient fertility figures. During this time, Mendieta became increasingly interested in durable works, creating figure-related sculptures out of materials like carved tree trunks, ficus roots, earth and sand.

The shallow openings and earth mounds that formed the basis for these works were wombs as well as graves. Her animist leanings reinforced her sense of the cyclical nature of life, in which death is a beginning rather than an end...She often referenced pre-Hispanic goddesses venerated by indigenous Cuban peoples like the Taino and Ciboney. Related works involved sand sculptures dug out of beaches or formed of wet sand. Over the years, those that survived were often accepted as authentic ritual objects to which locals added flowers, food and other offerings. Eleanor Heartney²⁹

In this process, relationship and response to herself and to her environment is paramount. No particular outcome manifests as a permanent artwork, beyond the marks she makes upon the earth. The importance lies in the process of creation and the relevance is in the insight or knowledge that she may gain (or her audience may gain through photographic documentation). Plasticity of medium contributes to the value found in her ephemeral art. The works would rarely travel back with her and usually live on as photographs. Her process was boundary-less and impermanent, deepening the way her work was transmitted and received.

What really nourishes art, more than ideas, is the physical world, and it is the main sustaining feature of any kind of aesthetic, even so-called immaterial ones. John Grande.³⁰

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29 Eleanor Heartney. Rediscovering Ana Mendieta. Art in America. November 2004. From the course pack edited by Prof. Danica Jojich. *Sculpture and Material Practice (SCUL 210)*. 2007. (pg.55-56)

30 John Grande. *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*. (p. 218)

The creative process outdoors is territory that is rich in active relationships with the world: with society, the environment, plants, natural objects, rivers, mountains, wind and weather patterns. The most meaningful part of the artistic process is often in the physiological relationship that develops between the work and the artist and the communication that reaches the audience. By relating to and connecting to the seasons, materials, people, landscape and various environments and experiences, a human approach with direct and living relationships means art can become an activity that feeds the process of life and challenges the conventional and more widely accepted norms of intellectually driven, sensually disconnected artistic processes.

4. Navigating Socio-Political And Ecological Territories: Process and Relationship Centered Artworks and Approaches to Site-Specific Response to the Environment

Site-specific work has to do with time and place and the way a piece sits in a landscape and what it does. It's made there, it's made of the material that's there and it's made by people who live there. All those elements come into it and it has to find its place within the landscape but also within the culture relative to what those people are. **Chris Drury**³¹

Site-specific installation is the most popular medium through which ecologically based works are approached, but the forms of expression are infinite. Lesley Johnstone sites installation as 'the most complex and also most complete form of art, as it engages the spectator, the site and its own form in a single interrelated dialogue'.³²

What occurred at the International Garden Festival was an intersection of disciplines, a mix of techniques and practices...The garden installations were conceived and produced with openness, sensitivity and humour, and their impact can only be beneficial to visual arts, considering an environment that makes specific functional and utilitarian demands on a large majority of the designers participating in the festival...Installation means a work can be an active aesthetic experience, encompassing sensual perceptions that exceed a spectator's vision: it enables multidisciplinary. **Rose Marie Arbour**³³

Interdisciplinary art guided and inspired by the medium and phenomena of nature allows for the role of an artist to be one of many. Works of this nature are multi-faceted and can become hybridized with more traditional art forms like sculpture and installation, also being informed by shades of science, landscape architecture, horticulture, design, chemistry, spirituality or religion,

31 Excerpt from an interview of Chris Drury by William Furlong. Song of the Earth. 2002. (p.73).

32 Lesley Johnstone. Installation: Theory and History. 1987. (p.1)

33 Rose Marie Arbour. Festival International de jardins a Metis. Winter 2000-2001. (From the 3rd page of the article. Page numbers are unidentifiable, from the photocopy).

botany, mythology, math, engineering, medicine, mysticism, fibre arts, community activism, and education. Distinctions and disciplines efface themselves as individuals creatively address and express their concerns, ideas and observations by joining these many aspects into their work for it to best suit their lifestyle and art practice.

Response to a place involves a larger understanding of the global picture, filtered through the direct experience and physical engagement of the body. The sense of place occurs in a physical dimension and in broad terms, is focalized on listening. Listening to the forces at play, whether elemental or artistic, listening to internal consciousness, to environmental need or concern, to the observer, and to the history of the artist or the place upon which the work is situated. The experience of self, guided by the container of creative process becomes living process, and the work can bring one to a feeling or place of communion that is grounded in physiological experience, being in the physical world and a part of every day practice,

Dawn Dale has lived and worked in a small wooded sector of Aylmer, Québec for much of her adult³⁴ life. Her creative approach is about the social engagement she has both with the natural environment and with people. She says people often get confused when they see her works, because the organic materials she uses consider the olfactory senses they will stimulate in the viewer before any conceptual intent becomes fully conscious. Her process and ethic has an anti-consumer focus in that her primary goal is to share an experiential sensibility rather than to make objects that become part of the consumer chain. Her desire is for people to realize that the work will only exist for a brief period of time, which, hopefully, increases the poignancy of the moment, as well as an awareness of the vulnerability of Nature. Dale's vision of time is cyclic, and she referred to her “succession” garden that surrounds her home. Like succession gardening, where each variety of indigenous perennial plant comes up at the moment it is meant to, there is a time for each and everything, that there is an ephemeral nature to life. It feels impermanent but it is a part of the larger cycle and will return back to where it comes from. For her it is a part of a long meditative process. The accumulation of materials may take seasons: however, it is a wonderful experience (and excuse for her) to work outdoors.

³⁴ She was born and raised in a small town in Alberta where she had vegetable gardens until she was a teen when her life suddenly became very urbane. She and her partner, Yves, bought their acreage when she became pregnant almost 23 years ago.

The way an artist listens to their environment informs the way they work creatively. The way in which an artist incorporates their living relationships is a testament to their artistry, whether or not they are considered an artist by the traditional authorities of the art world or not. The art that is being addressed is often critically engaged in the ethics of art making, whether or not it is intended to be so. The ethics I am referring to relate to the critical dialogue the artist has been engaged with in their work, pertaining to their social and physical environment as a whole. The situation of art in one's life and how they are involved in their immediate community and specific geography allows for their role as an artist to expand beyond the art object or installation and branch out into social gestures that are conscious of the broader impact they may have upon the others around them; upon the ecology, that is the living systems and relationships that make up a physical place. Other examples follow of international figures working within the domain of physical place.

Ichi Ikeda, is a Japanese artist that has worked on different long-term projects that come to terms with multi-cultural reality. On one project he worked with the people of the valley for two months to construct "*an appreciable combination of what is called sense of community, and the sense of belonging to a shared place.*"³⁵ Committee members of the Manosegawa River Art Project had hopes that the artworks would ³⁶ "*encourage people to look with greater interest at the problems of water and to make a more active commitment in volunteer work and community exchanges.*"

Marcel Kalberer and Sanfte Strukturen worked with a group of builders to create 'Auerworld' a palace-like structure composed of a live willow system. It has been attracting tourists to its region near Weimar and Naumburg, and the full moon events have attracted over 80,000 people.

*The construction was an event of social value and the palace then functioned as a catalyst for community celebrations...The way in which it was planted illustrates the energy potential that can be developed in a process of natural growth conducted within a community project. Alessandro Rocca.*³⁷

Living arts are an example of unconventional works that do not always serve as a final object. Like the 'Auerworld', they can be extended into daily life through happenings, events, and community involvement. Nils Udo, whose primary concentration is plantings,

35 Alessandro Rocca. Natural Architecture. 2007. (p.077)

36Manosegawa River Art Project members. Alessandro Rocca. Natural Architecture. 2007. (p. 077)

37 Alessandro Rocca. Natural Architecture. 2007. (p. 065)

started out by leasing land from the farmers in (his) region, the Chiemgau, in upper Bavaria'. (Nils Udo, Art Nature, pp. 96). He continued upon these terrains by planting trees, flowers, lawns, bushes, as well as earth modelings. Submitting his work to the rhythms and cycles of nature gave him 'a deep inner peace' filling him with 'seemingly inexhaustible new possibilities and fields of action...and an almost euphoric state of readiness for new departures.' He proclaims: 'As a part of nature, I lived and worked day after day in its rhythms, by its conditions. Life and work became a unity...The decade-long abstract struggle in front of the canvas with the subject of my life-nature- was now past...I acquired new knowledge with every new piece of work I performed...The aspect of art now completely faded into the background. What I wanted was to live, act, and work in symbiosis with nature in the closest possible way. The living nature itself, all the phenomena that are characteristic of it, were all of a sudden potential issues. The sphere of art simultaneously became the sphere of art, in which I inscribed myself... My pictures were no longer painted, but planted, watered, mowed or fenced. Through my plantations, I associated my existence with the cycles of nature, with the circulation of life. Henceforth my life and work proceeded under the guidance and in keeping with the rhythms of nature. Nils Udo.³⁸

Understanding the impermanence of time plays into his artistic process. Udo's, Ikeda's and Strukturen's works are inevitably challenging the traditional expectations of what materials need to be, and what site-specificity can encompass. In the case of some of Ikeda's workshops, the materials end up being the living people involved, or with Udo's pieces, it is the organic matter found on site. It is through their work and living presence that they are in direct relationship with community, place, history, bioregion, and non-human beings. When involved in site-specific installations, workshops or moments in nature they find themselves essentially practicing from a position of communion with the natural world, in environments both rural and urban. Having a committed relationship with and understanding of the natural world and the role of human culture within it comes intuitively to some art practitioners. The richness of experience and concern creatively and practically inform the continued development of an inquiry into process and relationship centered art.

I visited Storm King sculpture park in Orange County this past fall as a part of my ongoing research for this paper on the artistic relationship to land.³⁹ It is reputed for its expansive collection of many seminal post-war sculptural works on 500 acres of outdoor property in rural New York state. Many maestros in sculpture are found there: Moore, Calder, Smith, Noguchi, Di Suvero, Nevelson, Paik, Goldsworthy, Bourgeois and Serra. Storm King is defined as 'a museum that celebrates the relationship between sculpture and nature' and are as much about landscape as they

³⁸Alessandro Rocca. *Natural Architecture*. 2007. (p. 096-097)

³⁹ www.stormking.org

are about sculpture. Over 40 years have been devoted to planting trees, creating meadows, and constructing hills for the sculptures on their property. Although the sculptures are outdoors and affected by the seasonal changes of light and weather, I found there was no meaningful relationship to the audience, which is just as much a part of the environment as are the sculptures. The sculptures themselves were monumental. The materials were foreign to the site. Most were made with steel as well as stone and were transported from very far away. Some pieces were the size of navy ships, their presence seemed to mirror the expansiveness of the property on which they were found. Besides the experience of feeling their power over me, I could not identify them as works that challenged my awareness of my place within the environment. There was no feeling of empowerment within these works. They were simply impressive. They stood on pedestals that seemed to reference their own importance.

The museum and centre itself I could see had much importance, in the historical and educational sense. Many families and people continent-wide would visit, but it remained no more of an historical survey than something that was truly bringing an understanding of art into nature. I interviewed the curator after my visit, inquiring into his process of art acquisition as well as time-based works that interacted with the outdoors. I sensed that the objectives for the centre by the curator, the chairmen of the board and the trustees were closely coordinated when they commissioned and bought works. The art was bought to be there for the long term and did not include ephemeral or time-based installation. The works needed to fit within the Storm King landscape and many of the works were made specifically for the centre. Their role as creative directors seemed limited by bureaucratic process and the reputation the centre had. It seemed clear to me that the centre would remain this way and would always gravitate towards permanent three-dimensional works. I asked the curator what he would like to see develop on the land, to which he replied nothing personal. It is true that the effect the works had on me were different than the smaller works that might be found in a gallery. Physiologically I was already in a different state by being immersed outdoors in the natural light and fresh air. The landscape was breathtaking in its size over me, and many of the sculptures were so big that they instilled a visceral reaction in me.

The focus on object, segregated from a living world is where we can begin to see some stagnancy found in many common practices within the art world. The stagnancy reveals a disconnec-

tion from the spiritual dimension of creative process. Even within the Land Art movement, many American artists were 'often fairly indifferent to the vitality inherent in nature' (Nils Udo, *Art Nature*, p. 96). Sustenance and inspiration from other avenues and approaches need to be cultivated in order to have a deeper and more open-minded understanding to art if it is to continue expanding and informing our ways of being human. By breaching disciplines, crossing pathways and practices, new approaches towards making artwork emerges in strong and innovative ways. These art forms are being addressed with exceptional sensitivity by many artists. Depending on the nature of their work, the artist often intrinsically undermines conventional ideas of what an art practice entails by the very reason that their practice is oriented towards the conviction of a reality they know as true.

5. Conclusion

*It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look. To affect the quality of the day- that is the highest of the arts. **Henry David Thoreau**⁴⁰*

Artists and groups of artists are increasingly working in a public context, through their educational work in schools, and small communities of varied age, group and specialization. So too are they incorporating living and sensual process into their work and every day life. It is through their understanding of the value of connection to nature and its' laws and living experience that they expand conventional notions of how art can be displayed and received. Outmoded views concerning art and nature have changed over the past century to contain critically engaged, creatively fulfilling, holistic models of what role humanity has within the natural world. There are fewer monumental impositions upon the landscape and more critical dialogue is opening up in regards to the effect art is having upon the ecology (being the social and environmental culture). Our relationship to the natural world is rapidly changing and although we might ignore the effect our collective actions have, the fact that we are currently relating to a world undergoing social and ecological collapse is unshakable.

Postmodernism has buried the sacred role of art: its iconic, spiritual significance as beacon of beingness has been hidden beneath a barrage of materialist metaphors, didactic statements, and affirmative narcissisms. The fragmentary idiom of postmodern art parallels the dissembling of personal and social identity in our society. This is a direct result of our identification with consumerism- the materialist values that leave

40 Keri Smith. *The Guerilla Art Kit*. 2007. (p.5)

us feeling somewhat empty, looking for something else. As we approach the new millennium, we are thinking twice about the role of art in society. Its place has become so intertwined with economics and the market itself, that it is now seen more as a vehicle for storing investment capital. Meanwhile, its intuitive meaning vanishes...If art is to really help in leading us to restructure our global economic order in an ecologically responsible way, it can only happen if we sacrifice our traditional approach to what artistic expression is, or will be. John K. Grande⁴¹

The common task of the artists that have been presented in this research is in the awareness they bring and the cultivation of the basic values of and place of humans in nature. True are they to their instincts, they cultivate an interdisciplinary sense of holism, and reject the stagnant and common practices that do not serve their vision. Intuitively and consciously aware of the natural interrelation of organisms (human, plant and mineral), their critically guided actions and sense of ethics are geared to stimulate reflection.

Ours is a culture that is becoming increasingly distanced from nature. Our relationship with the earth has become more abstract than grounded in true experience. Because of this, we are no longer as physically engaged in our environments and we know little about the cycles of the land that surrounds us. The scientific structure that governs our western culture blinds us from seeing the intrinsic connection to something larger than us. The awareness of life's interconnection, however, is always present. Though difficult to consciously maintain, many such artistic practices are rooted in this awareness, through their basic physiological connection to their surroundings. A listening must simply take place. Common practices occurring up to the last part of the 20th century involved an art-maker who was the supplier of commodifiable art objects, rather than experiences that generated knowledge or awareness. Experiences as generators for awareness are usually found outside the gallery and museum walls, left out of art reviews, magazines and art historical texts. These art-makers mentioned are not being strictly referred to as scientists, engineers, naturalists, activists, botanists, or otherwise because they maintain an integral relationship to the creative process. On comparing the process of ecological art to science, Lynne Hull states that:

Ecological art will often differ from ecological restoration science in its process rather than its intent...the scientist has to go through this scientific method, which can narrow perspective, and therefore he or she can lose track of the larger picture. The artist, on the other hand, is encouraged to be wider-ranging and open to all possibilities. Lynne Hull.⁴²

41 John K. Grande. Balance: Art and Nature. 1994. (p. 117)

42Sue Spaid. Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies. 2002. (pg. 4)

Though not all artists mentioned in this research are specifically addressing ecological issues, they are all however, maintaining a position of openness. Involved in the various mental, emotional, social, physical, synthetic or natural environments, their work is at its best when listening and responding to each situation as it arrives. They reach beyond the tradition of any one discipline, and make art that serves or fits in some way. Their works are emotionally felt and processed before taking on larger socio-political relevance. Their emergent communication via art seems to hover between an awareness of the influence of their creative actions coupled with a natural expression of their physical experience in the world. Here is where we find the beginning of an exercise in listening. For the concerns of contemporary culture to be addressed, and as political powers gain more influence, the direction of creative culture will need to emerge in as many forms and strategies as possible. Perhaps artists could begin to more authentically understand their creative role in the grander schema of life by addressing the needs of their immediate community and environment to allow their work to take on greater beauty and relevance in the context of place. Here, it would be directed more by natural law than any singular goals of self-expression. Perhaps a commitment to a deeper understanding emerges when a relationship with a place, a region, a population or a community is focused upon and listened to. A space for understanding is carved out to make room for the presence of a work that can begin to carry a catalytic, engaged and influential effect onto the work of others. Art is not separate from us, we are a part of the creative cycle.

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6.5 INTERVIEWS:

Marc Walter (Artist, Outaouais, QC) phone and email

David Collins (curator of Storm King Sculpture Park, Orange County, NY) phone

Valerie Walker (Artist, Montréal, QC) email

Dawn Dale (Artist, Outaouais, QC) phone and email

Leslie Johnstone (curator of MAC, Montréal, QC) phone

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7. Interviews

Marc Walter. Nature Artist, workshop facilitator. Outaouais region, QC.

Interview conducted via email by Emily Michaud on March 7th, 2008.

1- When you first began making your art outdoors, how did you make the move to arrive working within the landscape? What was the initial feeling that brought you out? Was it a relationship that was already there or were you trying to shift your role as an artist to approach an essence of holism? (ie what brought you from painting to nature art?)

My usual explanations to explain my move from mixed media to environmental art is 2-folded:

1) as an artist, you always struggle to make time and space for your work without falling back on “regular” jobs or house-hold activities. I was able to make it happen with the mixed media, but I realized one day that my choice of making art my career made me work inside a studio, while so many things (light, smell, textures,...) were pulling me outside. So the frustration of being between 4 walls instead of enjoying the outdoors brought me to think about ways to combine both my creative thrive and my passion for nature.

2) as an artist doing many workshops with children in schools, highschools and universities, you can't help but question the constantly increasing distance BETWEEN how students live and act, AND what they know and experience of nature. Basically, people touch less, smell less, know very little about how nature provides for humans, and are completely drugged by electronic devices without realizing their impact on REAL relationships. Relationships among humans, relationships between humans and nature. So, guiding people/students through environmental art creative paths allow me to raise a certain awareness about nature and its elements; I hope to get eyes to open a bit more, way beyond the artworks created themselves.

Nature teaches us about time, about the fragile balance of all things. Since I thrive towards living the creative process to its fullest, submerging myself into Nature's own process to extract emotions and substances, I hope to share some of that with visitors and workshop participants. Just like I do it myself throughout my creative process, I try to get them to read and listen to their own senses and emotions when they are exposed to nature's fabulous array of lines, surfaces and view points. Whether it is a very small detail on a pine needle or the vast composition of a clearing, my work aims ultimately at getting visitors to engage in the wholeness of the living path.

My works may cause a physical or sensual change of rhythm, but discretion, respect and balance are key values that I try to apply at all time. I want to attract the eye without obliterating the surroundings. I hope to reveal topographic elements and instigate thought processes. I also try to incorporate the poetry that Nature exhales. If visitors are emotionally touched and discover not only the work itself but also get a chance to notice things beyond, start creating themselves or simply discover a new location, I feel gratified. A debate has then started.

My workshops provide sensual and creative experiences. As such they are suited for children and adults, young and old, challenged or not. They lead to site-specific and moment-specific results such as indoor or outdoor exhibitions, and to discussions.

2- I'd like to know more about the relationship you have with the ephemeral. As a visual artist, how does your creative approach and communication with the earth, its cycles and archetypes, develop a meaningful dialogue that can enrich or inform more traditional, uni-dimensional forms of art? Do you have a particular agenda or is your approach primarily intuitive?

Aaaah the ephemeral... Our whole society is geared (?) towards making us believe that lasting is what counts, while the international companies sell us products that are more and more expandable. We “have” to live old and remain young looking. We “have” to save money for later. We “have” to create artworks that are archivable. Students “have” to bring objects of their creation back home. Etc etc etc

But life is expandable. Life is only valid if lived to its fullest in the present because nobody knows what the future will bring. It is the process of living that allows us to gather experience, that allows us hopefully to grow wiser and realize the important values that should guide our actions. So when creating, it is the time spent on the creative process that is important, not its final product. Children know it instinctively at the beginning: when their drawing is done, it is forgotten behind, whether on a counter top or between other games on the floor. But the parents want to see the evolution; school wants to be able to document what is happening – and there starts the gathering/collecting process. There starts the process of having always more, even if it is not important to the original creator. And then, consumerism steps in: having more makes us feel better, renewing and having the latest gadget makes us important...

So, accepting the ephemeral is a wonderful way to think about where we are, who we are and what are our values. When exhibiting and leading workshops, one of the main intent is to get people to think and feel about these things.

I'll stop there because I could probably write pages and pages.

3- How important is it, or would it be for you to have a home on land that is your own? What is your perspective in terms of an everyday connection to your daily practice of living. How is your connection to community tied to your art practice?

As much as I believe in what I write above, I am not living by it on a daily basis. I think that one person has to be very very strong to live by the ephemeral because it means reducing expectations and accepting a simpler living comfort. I am not there yet. Truly, I have a house and am even in the process of building a second one on a piece of land I/we own. I live way way beyond my needs, and that means that my impact on the planet is too big. And yet, I also believe that being aware of it, if it does not exempt me of guilt and fault, makes me at least able to make a few better punctual choices. I always say that about 90% of a human society is made up of followers: people who don't think why they live like they do, why their lives are what they are – that is a succession of decisions that result of very few decision-makers in the economical and political sphere. By exhibiting and leading workshops that aim at getting a few of these followers to open their eyes a bit more, I hope to have my little drop in increasing the consciousness of where values should be.

These thoughts are directly linked to the way I think about community. Several people think that their own actions can't change the way the world evolves because it is microscopic. So did I when I was a teenager and would not go to vote!! Thankfully, I have evolved a bit and believe that it is by acting around you in connections with your values that allow the world to change. One drop at a time, and by educating one gesture at a time. Two examples, but they are thousands: tomorrow is the day of the women nad today on Radio-Canada, most journalists and callers talk about politics. Laws and politics are very important, but unless both partys of each

couple (involving a woman in this case) does not act so that the responsibilities and duties are truly shared, how can they talk about gender equality? I see so many “free-thinking” couples who believe in organic food, build homes with environmental features, and talk about feminism, and yet, when you go to their homes, the guy sits and the woman does the house-related activities. And they are both at fault: the man who does not realize how important it is for him to take part and the woman who let him do nothing. The other case is very sensitive here since it is the language issue: I hear many people talking about how keeping or learning French is important. But when it comes to their daily habits, too many French-speaking people do not correct themselves or their children to maintain a proper French and too many English-speaking people don’t make the effort to learn and speak a minimum of French. These two examples illustrate how very local habits and behaviours can have a huge impact on a community. Simply put, I believe that my art practice increases the chance of people thinking more about the environment.

4- If you were to live in an urban milieu, how do you imagine your art and process would change? Would it change at all?

I’ve lived 27 years in Paris and only realized once I was living in Canada in the country how well it fitted my values. Now, if I were to go back, there is no question my art and process would change: I create in a site-specific and moment-specific way, with the means I find on site. Probably I would be enticed to create again more often with found objects and recycled materials. But at this point, I can also imagine creating imaginary spaces and worlds that would question the urban context. Difficult to imagine what the future would bring. The context could be so different from one neighborhood to the other, from one city to the other.

*Dawn Dale, Artist, teacher, mother. Aylmer, QC. Interview conducted via telephone by Emily Michaud on March 9th 2008.*⁴³

1- When you first began making your art outdoors, how did you make the move to arrive working within the landscape? What was the initial feeling that brought you out? Was it a relationship that was already there or were you trying to shift your role as an artist to approach an essence of holism?

The 1st shift was when I was working with drawing and boxes. I had leftovers after I did an installation using eggshells. She was using the floor and ground plane, so for her taking it outside became the next step. When she first lived in the home she now owns, she and her partner had disagreements as to what to do with the front yard. He wanted to mow the lawn whereas she was interested in succession gardening, using the natural cycle of plants as they come in a seasonal displays. For her lawn the first series of plants to emerge were violets, forget me nots. A whole series of plants came up where they were given the space to develop. A succession of weeds came: Shasta daisies, nettle, goldenrod, Tibetan impatiens. It was about letting the plants emerge in. The only thing they planted was hostice, which do well in shade gardens. She did a piece in 1991 in Ottawa using aesthetic compost composed of onion peels and things she had dried. It was a drawing of a snake upon the ground. The following summer, she did a residency in Banff

⁴³ Dawn Dale preferred to speak in a telephone interview rather than to write, because of a slight dyslexia. I wrote what I could remember from our conversation in a word format, then emailed her my final text, which she helped me to edit, removing inaccuracies.

around environment and land use, doing interventions on the grounds with eggshells.

2- I'd like to know more about the relationship you have with the ephemeral, with community and how it is tied into your art?

"I think of time as cyclic, like the succession gardening, there is a time for everything. There is an ephemeral nature to life. It feels impermanent but it is a part of the larger cycle. For me it is a part of a long meditative process. The accumulation of materials may take seasons and seasons. It is a wonderful experience to get outside. I felt a great affinity with the Tibetan sand paintings, and identified with the ephemerality of their work doing sand mandalas. Wolfgang Liab collects pollen, his simplicity is part of the notion of the ephemeral. The eggshells don't degrade, they are like bones. The tulips I use break down. The eggshells were at first personal, then I went to the cafeteria. Community comes and goes. The night square was a project I did years ago. Life can distract you, working with Cj Fleury I was doing the arterre projects, working on land we spent a lot of time with from an activist community on campus to a small rural community. Growing up organic, trying to put gardens in schools, as well as MASC. Schools are now choosing performative related artists over visual artists. One of my first workshops was an eco art workshop.

3- As a visual artist, how does your creative approach and communication with the earth, its cycles and archetypes, develop a meaningful dialogue that can enrich the traditional modes of creating? Do you have a particular agenda or is your approach primarily intuitive?

For Dawn, her creative approach is about the social engagement with the environment and with the people. People get confused when they see her work, with the materials she uses.

I was involved in a show, where one of the things that was shown was only what you can experience, my piece involved smell. I did one piece that was a table. A pattern of squares, that could be touched. Only once I had to tidy up, it was a wonderful thing to have people be curious about what the objects were. The original impulse is intuitive, I do strategize, I see how people respond and I get heartened by that. There is a certain amount of elitism and agism within the arts community. There aren't a lot of new spaces opening up for the young people. When you're doing things as a collective the survival rate is low, there is a high burnout rate.

4- If you were to live in an urban milieu, how do you imagine your art and process would change? Would it change at all?

When I was a kid, I moved every year, when I moved here, I was pregnant and we have been here ever since. In the snow storm 1998 we lost a lot of trees, we got four huge oak trees, these trees are meant to be here this is for them. In churches in England, the green man can be found, a woodland spirit. my partner is my green man. My daughter and I did an art piece about him.

Paul Hawkins wrote a book about our lack of relationship to nature, where we can't name the neighboring trees in our environment anymore.

5- How does your role as a mother enrich your role as an artist?

I had an epiphany when I got pregnant, that I would continue as an artist and mother. I made a work using my daughter as a commemorative piece every year, on her birthday. Being a parent has made me more and more aware of the future, I am super conscious of the future so I have to remain hopeful- students and young people I encounter- aware of my responsibility as an adult I am a part of this mess, dans la lune... I've been like that since I was a kid.

*Valerie D. Walker, Indigo Artist, Design teacher. Computer scientist. Montréal, QC.
Interview conducted by Emily Michaud via email in March 2008.*

1- When you first began making your art outdoors, (in relationship to your climate) how did you make the move to arrive working that way? (or was it normal for you) Was it an initial feeling that brought you out? Was it a relationship that was already there or were you trying to shift your role as an artist to approach an essence of holism? (ie what brought you from computer science to the natural dye process?)

i would first of all say I was not brought from CS into dye-art, instead, Digital Technology is something I was lucky enough to get into early when it was very interesting, and in an amazingly non-sexist environment where i was given complete freedom to explore and develop my own interests, CS is also a way for me to make money to support my family and self, in a way that is usually more fulfilling than other things I could do, and it has provided a point of access and entry into many other things. I started out in dance/movement but injuries forced me to reconsider before i was able to develop professionally, I worked in clay and photography and still love coil-work in clay, but unfortunately the heavy chemicals used carelessly (by others I shared studio space with) caused lots of allergies in me that do not allow me to work in those areas as I once did, i had to leave lab-Chemistry for the same reasons... I still take photos (digitally) and with a pinhole camera which constantly enchants and amazes me... and produce giclées of my VR textile-worlds.

i also always did textile arts of some kind throughout my life beginning with embroidery, sewing, felting, weaving, resist dyeing... it took a long while before the textile dyer was willing to be so actively in control! ;-) my computer art and media culturalist is always present even when dipping in the indigo vat.

My relationships are all based in a grounding of our deep-similar intimate inter-relationship with this planet, the air, the wind, water, sky, stars, oceans, all of it which is us.. I have a sort of primal relationship with the Earth and am constantly aware of perhaps from being born at Hawai'i. where Earth is being born daily. ;-)

In computers, I always worked near natural light or tried to drag my desktop outside (early laptop hack?) and often worked at night so that I could maximize my daylight outside time. As an indigo dyer and textile artist i was lucky enough to be in a climate and cultures which did those things outdoors as much as possible (Japan and Northern California). so my natural instincts of wanting to work and be outdoors as much as possible were immediately satisfied.

My studio in Montreal faces into an open garden space full of tall trees and sunlight and the wall is 80% glass so i continue to try to live outside while i work even in such a frigid climate.

2- I'd like to know more about the relationship you have with the ephemeral (or if you even have one specifically). As a visual artist, how does your creative approach and communication with the earth, its cycles and archetypes, develop a meaningful dialogue that can enrich or inform more traditional, uni-dimensional forms of art? Do you have a particular agenda or is your approach primarily intuitive?

i am constantly exploring our human relationship with the ephemeral, which is time, or our relationship to it, which is often marked by the growth and change of people and things around us.. my agenda is intuitive, i want to generate a growing visceral feeling-thought experience in others, as happens to me making the work and writing about it..

i don't see myself as solely a visual artist, i find tactile-sensations are always present in my work even the screen-based web work..

my work itself incorporates the passage of time, it takes 4 -5 seasons to make the dyed pieces and they often hang around much longer than anything else..

there is a constant seasonal awareness to my work as the weather determines what I can do when and how and when I plan to do things.. which is based in the ephemeral, the weather..

3- How important is it, or would it be for you to have a home on land that is your own? What is your perspective in terms of an everyday connection to your daily practice of living. How is your connection to community tied to your art practice? It's all rooted in where I am living, I do own land and a home on it, here in town, it was very long in coming, i've been trying to find land to buy since i first moved to California, and still want to have land in the redwoods out west.. (i visit often in my dreams in the winter!). It's strange and special to own land, we all do but unfortunately that's not clear the powers that be! I have big trees on my land which are key to it's connection to me, it's also a weird compromise in the city, it's close to downtown, yet sort of naturally located (along the lachine canal, gardens yards, trees old homes and building.. i do a lot of art-feeding rituals that are based on being here physically (walking, meditation, XC'ing, playing with my child in the yard is a key one!, etc.) and i tend this place with my work, and meet my neighbors, volunteer at school, make donations to organizations, write letters etc.. I have supported the artists in the sud-ouest area in our attempts to get govt. supported artist spaces in the area, by volunteering for community-govt exchanges and continue to work and hope for a network community based artist centers with studios and learning areas for the community, in an affordable sustainable way. I think it's really important for artists to be actively involved in establishing recognized "areas for art" in their areas, especially as most artists do not have money and are often un-aware of how they are used as a catalyst for change in urban development by others who will then exclude them and profit from other's work. Individuals who've developed a "stable" link is what keeps the neighborhood connected now that economic interests can destabilize an area so totally.

4- If you were to live in a rural milieu, how do you imagine your art and process would change? Would it change at all?

I've been thinking about that lately, as if I go rural it will be very very rural and close to mostly off-the-grid. Yes my work would change a lot and I imagine

i will have to do a lot more teaching and part-time work outside of computers and perhaps even art in order to support my art in that sort of a place. Perhaps I would

run a country sauna experience that supports artistic residencies...some-where near the water, & big trees for sure!

David Collens. Curator of Storm King Sculpture Park, Orange County, NY.

Interview conducted by Emily Michaud via phone on November 21st, 2007.

E.M

How did you come to be curator at Storm King and what's your vision for where the centre is going in terms of land and environmental artists. I noticed you had some Maya Lin and Andy Goldsworthy.

D.C

We did a sculpture by Andy Goldsworthy 10 years ago actually, it called the Storm King wall. We're just completing commissioned work by Maya Lin which is not going to be ready for at least another year, so that has not been announced yet.

E.M

How did you come to be curator at Storm King?

D.C

I started working at the Art Centre as a summer job and then I left to to do a fellowship and returned in 1974. My predecessor, who was the director at that time left and went on to work with the chairman of the board. He did an exhibition of David Smith, a retrospective in 1976.

E.M

I was wondering if you make a differentiation between sculpture and land art. I have more of an interest now in land art and I noticed Storm King is beginning to be divided into 3D (sculptural) pieces and land pieces. Are you consciously choosing those from Art Historical references, or do take them for their beauty or for their appropriateness to site? I'm curious about your process of selection.

D.C

The sculptures that we've commissioned over the years are really not many.

More recently it been sculptors like Maya Lin, who's done the first earth work at Storm King. We've always wanted to have an earth work here, there's along tradition of that and she's just accomplishing that at this point in time. Andy Goldsworthy has used stones from fallen down walls on our property, which was a farm property. Richard Serra enjoyed the farm fields and wanted to maintain those, so put in the four steel plates, so they're markers in an undulating landscape, a 10 acre landscape. Noguchi's masterpiece was created 30 years ago next year for Storm King.

E.M

I visited the space myself, I visited the park a couple weeks back and I was really impressed. I think just the relationship of art to the outside and being next to the pieces on a physical level,

the effect is very different than when you would be in a gallery.

D.C

Yes, indeed.

E.M

If there is anything the centre is missing artistically or community-wise, what would you say it would be? If you had an ideal situation... I'm wondering where your vision as curator comes in, either what's come in to effect and what you've managed to accomplish there, or what you would like to see come to be?

D.C

The chairman of the board and the trustees have a very similar view when it comes to commissioning various sculptors on occasion, or adding a sculpture to the landscape, to the permanent collection. With most of the pieces, the landscape has been constructed over 47 years, so its like an earth work in many respects. Shaped with soil and gravel and walking paths, planting trees, sculpture platforms, so its a sculpture in itself in many respects.

E.M

So its still in development. What will be coming in the future, after Maya Lin, for example?

D.C

I don't know we have to catch our breath, this has been a very long term project. We have a lot to do with an earth sculpture. We move more into seeing what happens next year and maintaining it, getting the grasses to grow and so forth. We're trying to preserve landscape and preserve sculpture here because many of the sculptures are twenty to thirty years old and there are major issues of painting and other types of repair.

E.M

I guess it would depend on how the work was initially installed. I guess some of the artists chose not to put paint on their works, chose to let them decompose with time.

D.C

Some did. Others once painted it, but you have to repair foundations. Its quite a process, sculpture conservation.

E.M

I'm curious about the earth works. I know that a lot of the sculptures there are made and brought to the site and installed and they have their life but in terms of the life of a piece that has a relationship to the land and has a relationship to time, that's changing.. Andy Goldsworthy's is permanent, once its been created out of stone it stays there, In Maya Lin's there is a certain life to it in the sense of creating the hills, and then the grass, Do you have any pieces that will focus around time?

In the sense that their life is ephemeral, do you ever have any exhibitions, or do you have any intentions to exhibit something that would be more like lets say Andy Goldsworthy's melting ice pieces? Do you ever do anything like that or is it more about just anchoring it into a kind of permanency?

D.C

I think if we know we're going to buy or commission a piece then we want to have it here for the long term, so everything needs maintenance. The word permanent resists when it comes to sculptures, buildings that were torn down after 30- 40 years, by major architects, and mid modern twentieth century houses, are disappearing very rapidly.

E.M

So there is no permanence, really.

D.C

So permanence is a hard word to use. We try to preserve sculptures outdoors, in the environment and that is very difficult.

E.M

Do you have a favourite on the site?

D.C

I see the sculptures year long- the multitudes of them are wonderful and I like to see them in different weather conditions and so forth and that's what really appeals to me. It's not just one, its many of them and having an idea of what the sculpture is trying to do in terms of scale, material and form and how it reacts with the outdoors. So it would be very hard to have a favourite sculpture out of the 225 that are on exhibit.

E.M

Right. I really enjoyed the Louise Bourgeois spiders. I took a couple of great shots of people moving through them. So there was one shot when one person was at the beginning and then underneath it and the movement through it was great. I liked the scale of it and the size of it. It was perfect. So that's packed up now, her exhibit?

D.C

It departed yesterday, the exhibition concluded on the 15th and we were dismantling the exhibition last weekend, last Friday and yesterday.

E.M

Ok.

D.C

They were all on loan, except for the one Bourgeois we own upstairs.

E.M

So the earth works, are there more to come?

D.C

Very hard to say, It doesn't happen very often. Goldsworthy's was commissioned 10 years ago so its always very difficult to identify sculpture, and then commission a work or buy a work and fit it into the landscape. Sculpture is very expensive.

So its not something that happens every We're looking for sculptors that when we commission a

work can understand the Storm King landscape.

E.M

Yeah, that would be a factor.

D.C

Its just not something that happens like urban museums collecting hundreds of objects a year for their collections and everything. Its a very different scale, and so on and so forth.

E.M

Yes, very different scale. I went to Dia after my visit, in Beacon. I saw the Richard Serra which was the most impressive one to me and it was amazing. I had never been in the presence of a Richard Serra ever before and walking through it was just phenomenal. That would be quite a work to get out to the site, I'm sure.

D.C

Well, that's our specialty, is the large scale works that other people can't exhibit. Storm King really excels at that . There are other sculpture gardens that are very beautiful, but we're trying to do something different. Each sculpture park has a different philosophy of collecting and developing a landscape.

E.M

Developing a landscape.

D.C

This is a landscape we've developed for possibly 47 years.

E.M

Wow, Ok. Well I'm going to be co-ordinating a land art piece next Friday. I sent you the email, I know you're not going to be there, but I thought you might be curious about the project.

D.C

Oh, absolutely. You should keep me posted on that.

E.M

Its a community work. I've been collecting about 5 tons of earth and compost, the same volume of leaves, cardboard and hay. Its in an abandoned field in my neighborhood, that's going to be destined for demolition next spring apparently, for a monster parking lot that the city's going to be creating.

D.C

Oh, man.

E.M

Yeah. So its a beautiful abandoned space by the train tracks that many people take dogs for walks through, and there's a fire pit where a lot of people go and have fires sometimes in the summer. There's a small cluster of trees. But its a wonderful abandoned, wild field garden in its own sense. And so I'm going to be making a symbol upon the earth that's really really large, its going

to be in the shape of the Roerich symbol, I'm not sure if you're familiar with that symbol. Its like a symbol of cultural preservation. It was used in WWII to protect museums, churches and universities, and basically, literally it means 'don't bomb here'. It was developed by this guy called Nicholas Roerich. So I'm going to be making that symbol upon the earth with mulch which is basically going to be fertilizing the soil for planting next season, so

I'm going to be getting everyone out and do a little working bee on Friday and Saturday and have everyone help me assemble the materials in the symbol on the ground, I have it all staked out. That's why I think I brought questions up around community. Within the neighborhood, Storm King is a bit more far removed from any of the towns, so its not a site that people walk through every day.

D.C

Right.

E.M

Its a designated site that people come to specifically to see the art.

D.C

Like Dia, yes.

E.M

But this field for example is something that's very much a pass through. A lot of people from all walks of life come through and appreciate, and I wanted to bring attention to the fact that the city is going to be bulldozing it next spring.

D.C

And how many people do you expect?

E.M

I sent it out far and wide, all my teachers and their classes, a facebook invite, all of my contact list of acquaintances and friends. So the response that I'll get back may be 30.

But if I have 10 people on it at once, I think it will go very smoothly.

D.C

Well, I hope that you have good weather!

E.M

It just started snowing this morning!

D.C

Oh no, we had a little bit yesterday.

E.M

Yeah, I think it will melt in the meantime, but I told people to wear warm clothes and work gloves. I'll provide some food for them and hopefully it will go smoothly.

D.C

And you're going to document it?

E.M

Oh yeah. Very well. I have a woman who's coming to do slide photographs.

D.C

Great!

E.M

There's an overlooking building, overlooking the field, its the rag trade around there, so there's all these old textile, industrial buildings that go up to the 12th and 13th floors. There's a design firm located on the 12th floor, and i asked their permission to take photo documentation from above. So we'll take a couple good shots from above, and I think I'm going to get the photographer to do some on site shots as people are working.

D.C

Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun.

E.M

Yeah so my interest is in time based pieces, that are ephemeral where no one stage lasts any real specific length of time. They're all a part of each other. Just as much as the part of my call out to the community, the part of my organizing the materials, and doing leaf pick ups every night at 11pm, collecting the leaves that are on the sides of the street etc. That whole process is just as important as the final piece which might end up getting destroyed by the city in the spring. Its more just the process of being with people, and being with others, in a sense. And bringing that sense of art back to the every day, and common to or accessible to everyone. I think I have a few friends who will be bringing their kids out. I think that's what I appreciated about Storm King, is the reception. Everybody recognizes it a basic human level, there's a basic understanding and level of recognition. The physical scale alone is something that really brings out emotion in people. Also being out of doors brings up a sense of freedom or this relationship to the elements, and that's really special.

Do you know of any other places? I know Storm King is the biggest one in North America, but internationally, are there any places that exist like it?

D.C

No I think each one has its own philosophy of collections and landscape. There are various private and public places. There's Yorkshire sculpture park in England, which is near Leeds, with Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. They just had a show of Andy Goldsworthy which ended this year. There are a variety of places, but each one is quite different. I think there is one in Holland, outside of Amsterdam.

E.M

Hmm. Great. Well, I'll let you go for the day.

D.C

If you can think of anything else just give me a call. are you going to have any newspapers and so forth there also?

E.M

I haven't been able to make any media leads yet, but if anything it might be through the Concordia University journalism students. So we have some papers there that could work.

D.C

Sounds good!

E.M

Well, thank you very much.

D.C

I hope I've been helpful to you, Emily.

E.M

So its ok if anything comes up, if I have a question that I forgot to ask, its ok that I call?

D.C

Oh sure, just give me a call. I just wanted to ask you if you are using any photographs of sculptures from Storm King for any reason?

E.M

I did a little presentation to my class, I didn't do anything big with them, the quality is not that great. We have a sculpture class and I just wanted to share it with them right after my trip. These are all artists that we had been watching documentaries about since September. It was really nice to be able to show them, that they are all on one site!

D.C

I bet.

E.M

It was pretty special.

D.C

Well that sounds good, good luck over the weekend and do give me a call if you think of something else.

E.M

Well, thank you very much.

D.C

You're very welcome.

E.M

Have a nice day.

D.C

Thank you.

end of conversation.

(Tuesday November 21st, 2007. 11:00 am)