

Barbara Westfall & Renee Miller

*Our Selves, Our Land, Our Community*, 1994

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMOCA), Madison, WI

Chalk and pastel drawings and text on drywall, prairie plants

40 lineal feet

*“Our Selves, Our Land, Our Community”*, is an ecological art installation created by Barbara Westfall and Renee Miller, organized in connection with the art exhibition *“Fragile Ecologies: Artists Interpretations and Solutions”*, Dec. 1993 held at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA) (curator, Dr. Barbara Matilsky, Queens Museum of Art, New York). Westfall and Miller were invited by MMoCA to partner with area neighborhood youth centers in efforts to introduce middle school students to ecological art under the Urban Arts Outreach program. Westfall and Miller made three field trips with students to the University of Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum through the Arboretum’s Earthkeeping Program, where children explored ecological restoration. Students gathered plant fibers for use in an art installation that they built collaboratively with the artists at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. The unifying theme of the installation was the relationship between people and nature.

Using charcoal and pastels, Westfall and Miller traced outlines of the student’s figures onto the gallery walls. The artists helped students transcribe notes taken from their nature journals written during their trips to the Arboretum, onto the walls of the gallery. For many students, this was their first visit to an art museum and to the Arboretum. Some wrote about difficulty growing up in neighborhoods with violence, feelings about being separated from nature, and their challenges in school. The project provided opportunities for discussions about living with conflict, reconnecting with nature and urban ecology. Westfall and Miller collaborated with youth counselors from Centro Hispano, Allied Drive Neighborhood Center, and Dane County Shelter Home for this project. Westfall and Miller invited Jim Thunder, former chair of Forest County Potowami, to participate. Thunder shared Native American perspectives on ecological restoration with students and his knowledge of traditional plants.

*“Our Selves, Our Land, Our Community”* succeeded in bringing the concepts of ecology and art to a young population who may not of had this experience without the assistance from Urban Arts Outreach. This project carries the concepts of art and ecology to the coming generation, an essential undertaking if the message of ecological art is to have a lasting effect. As part of the traveling exhibit titled *“Fragile Ecologies: Artists’ Interpretations and Solutions”*, Westfall and Miller successfully explored ways to involve youth from the Madison community in addressing the environmental and ecological problems facing us all today. Although the exhibit itself has now closed, the detailed catalog by Dr. Barbara C. Matilsky, published by Rizzoli for The Queens Museum of Art, New York, is still available. For all those concerned with contemporary art or with environmental/ecological matters, it is a useful and interesting publication.