Wisconsin People and Ideas Summer 1994, Vol. 40, Number 3

The Artist and the Environment: Expanding Upon Fragile Ecologies

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From December 4, 1993, to January 30, 1994, the Madison Art Center hosted a traveling exhibit titled Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions." Although the exhibit itself has now closed and moved on, the detailed catalog by Barbara C. Matilsky, published by Rizzoli for The Queens Museum of Art, New York, is still available. Since the exhibit was made up largely of photographs, plans, drawings, and labels, the catalog more closely resembles the exhibit than is usually the case when art objects appear in photographic reproduction. For all those concerned with contemporary art or with environmental/ecological matters, it is a useful and interesting publication. It is also heartening to see contemporary artists joining in the fight for an improved and diverse environment.

Nazca Bird with its head and beak to the right and tail to the left. It is made of one continuous line or path. Straight lines run diagonally across the top right and left. The irregular parallel lines are the jeep tracks of tourists who are damaging the lines in the course of visiting them.

As the title implies, the exhibit explores the ways in which contemporary artists are involving themselves in the environmental and ecological problems we face today—and, by way of introduction, have faced in the past. My purpose here is not to summarize the exhibit—I recommend the catalog for that—but rather to use the exhibit as a starting point to enlarge upon the ancient, worldwide roots of this movement and to cite some local examples of this art, since most of the presentations in the exhibit and catalog are far removed from Wisconsin.

Before continuing, I should clarify the distinction between environmental and ecological art as I see it. Environmental art is placed in the landscape and made of introduced materials or created out of the landscape itself and may be temporary or permanent. Thus Christo's *Umbrellas* or *Running Fence* are examples of the former; Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or Jim Reinders's *Carhenge*, to cite a piece of "Outsider" art, are examples of the latter. Ecological art points out and/or offers solutions to ecological problems such as toxic waste, disappearing ecological systems, etc. In one way or another, both interact with their surroundings and change our perception of the landscape and our attitude toward it. We will consider examples of both, though one must remember that art does not always fall neatly into categories we define.

Effigy mound built by earth artist Michael Heizer. The ridges in the center are the whiskers of the catfish; the mound its eye. Grass is beginning to grow on the site. The Illinois River is visible in the background.

The introduction to the exhibit and the catalog includes a brief discussion of the history of environmental and ecological art. Speaking as an archaeologist, I am especially taken with the time depth and variety of such art. The oldest examples include, of course, the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic of Europe. We will probably never know the exact meaning of these, and there is really no reason to suppose they had the same meaning in different areas and/or at different times—or that they had only one meaning at any one time. What is clear is that most of them were not decorative; many were located deep in unoccupied parts of caves, and superimposition of paintings on top of one another occurs. This suggests that the act of painting was more important than the decorative effect. "Action Painting" may not be all that new after all.

Interpretations of the meaning and purpose of this cave art have ranged from hunting magic to social ceremonies (such as rites of passage) to magical restorations of what has been taken from nature. The womb-like analogy of the cave is especially appropriate for this restoration magic or for symbolic rebirth in a new social position in the community. Any one or combination of these interpretations implies an intimate relationship to the natural world and a desire to maintain and perhaps manipulate that relationship.

From these spectacular beginnings, other examples of environmental and perhaps ecological art can be found in the archaeological record. As an Andean specialist, I would like to draw attention to the great desert markings or geo-glyphs in the southern Peruvian coastal desert near Nazca. This vast complex of long straight lines, rectangles, trapezoids, and linear outlines of various biomorphs occupies desert tableland above the coastal river basins. Most of the features appear to date from the Early Intermediate Period (100 B.C.-A.D. 600). The lines were made by removing the dark-colored small rocks and pebbles from the surface to reveal the lighter-colored surface beneath, a kind of negative approach analogous to various resist techniques used on pottery and textiles. The removed rocks were often piled at the edges of the lines, increasing the sharpness of the outline.

The function of the lines long has been debated, and, indeed there may be a number of functions. The most likely explanations would include ritual

Interior of mound in Mary Miss's Field Rotation *at Governors State University. Posts leading to the mound are visible in the background and remind one of the alignments of Western Europe.*

paths, probably connected in the case of the straight lines with fertility/water/mountain rituals. In the desert, fertility is related to water and the lines appear to be oriented toward water features. The biomorphs, which are the most frequently illustrated, are created with one continuous line, so that it becomes possible to walk the figure, which, from a purely visual point of view, would best be seen hovering above. The exact same figures are also found in other media such as ceramics, textiles, and goldwork, so we may assume they were important in Nazca myth and probably ritual. Certainly, then, the Nazca lines were environmental art, and perhaps they were ecological art as well. We do not have to turn to space ships or hot-air balloons to account for them; as ritual paths, they need not be viewed from above, and the Nazca people, as master weavers, were perfectly capable of enlarging a design to any size they wished.

Far to the north and east of Peru, in southern England, a similar technique of removing the surface—in this case sod and soil—was employed to reveal the chalk beneath to depict white horses high on the green hillsides. Although some of these are relatively recent—the Cherhill White Horse, for example, dates to 1780 and others are nineteenth centure—the famous Uffington horse has been known for 900 years and may be much older. Of course there may have been others like it which have since been lost, the preservation on the downs not having been as good as that on the Peruvian desert. These horses are certainly environmental art, but, unlike the Nazca lines, there is no reason to suppose they had ecological implications.

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Much closer to home, Wisconsin's own effigy mounds dating to roughly A.D. 700-1100, certainly qualify as environmental art, but aside from serving in part as places of burial, their function is unknown; and although some of them take the shapes of biomorphs, any suggested ecological function would be highly speculative. They differ from the lines and horses, however in being additive rather than subtractive in their construction. They have been preserved and have attracted interest in many city, county, state, and federal parks.

Prairie Ship *by Naj Wikoff near Mount Horeb. The piece turns the landscape into a sea and recalls the historic prairie schooners.*

We now shift from this brief enlargement upon some of the ancient predecessors of environmental and ecological art to a discussion of some modern examples that are or have been more accessible to residents of the Upper Midwest than those cited in this exhibit and its catalog. In doing so, however, we first can remain with the familiar form of our local prehistoric example, effigy mounds.

On the bluffs above the north bank of the Illinois River between LaSalle and Ottawa, earth artist Michael Heizer has constructed five remarkable modern effigy mounds. The site, an area decimated by strip mining, was so torn up and acidic that virtually nothing could grow or live there. In 1984-85, using heavy earth-moving equipment, construction workers leveled and sloped the area for drainage and built the huge effigy mounds under Heizer's direction. The highly acidic soil was then neutralized with limestone, and hardy grasses were planted in biodegradable excelsior to inhibit erosion. Today the area serves as a unique park as is well worth a visit.

The *Effigy Tumuli Sculpture*, as Heizer calls the complex, recalls but in no way duplicates the ancient effigy mounds of the Upper Midwest. The design and the huge scale alone (one piece is 685 by 80 feet) eliminate any confusion, but the subject

matter—a water strider, catfish, frog, snake, and turtle—are also different. The animals are aquatic and relate to the river, which is visible below, and they do recall the ancient tradition. But the site also makes a monumental piece of art in its own right. This restoration project is ecological art, completely in keeping with those described in the exhibit, but ironically Heizer is quoted in a Smithsonian magazine article as being uninterested in reclamation sculpture per se; it is the art, not the healing of the land, that interests him. Today vegetation—mainly grass—is returning to the area, and animals are again being sighted. The result, if not the intent, is a healing of the damaged landscape.

Just south of Chicago at Governors State University, University Park, lies one of the best-kept art secrets of the Upper Midwest: The Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park. Surrounding the central university building are about twenty-five pieces of outdoor sculpture, at least two of which qualify as environmental—perhaps ecological—art, depending on how one interprets them. I suppose a case could be made that all sculpture gardens, indeed all outdoor sculptures, are environmental art in the sense that they interact with their environment and change our perception of it. I will not get into a discussion of this question here, however.

Field Rotation (1981) by Mary Miss consists of eight lines of posts radiating from a central earth mound, which turns out, when ascended, to be hollow with interior wood and metal construction. The overall effect reminds me of the stone alignments and passage graves or tumuli of western Europe, but at the same time it suggests high-tech construction. As far as I know, it is not oriented to astronomical events, but to me it recalls ancient concern with seasons, and in this sense parallels Nancy Holt's pieces in the exhibition and reminds us of our often-forgotten astronomical and seasonal place in the universe.

Martin Puryear's *Bodark Arc* (1982) is a much more gentle and less intrusive. It consists of a semi-circular path, which near its center becomes a curving wooden bridge over a bit of water. The ends of the path meet a straight diameter consisting of a line of Osage orange trees, producing an overall D or bow shape. Since Osage orange wood is said to be a favored material for Indian bows, the image is appropriate. Another path, beginning at the center of the straight Osage orange tree line, bisects the semi-circle, meeting the arc at its center—in effect, simulating the arrow of the bow. A bronze chair sits at the wooded end of the arrow; a simple Japanese-looking wooden gateway at the other open-arc end near the water. The effect is to draw attention to the Indian past, but to be very unobtrusive and to let the landscape dominate. The piece changes character greatly with the seasons, unlike *Field Rotation*, which imposes itself much more strongly on the landscape.

Christo may never have constructed a running fence or erected umbellas on the Wisconsin landscape, but in 1982 Naj Wikoff built *Prairie Ship* in the rolling countryside north of Mount Horeb. Consisting of eight 90—foot-tall telephone poles with attached multicolored sails of nylon, the ship sailed on a rolling sea of grass and corn, or "amber waves of grain." Constantly moving, flapping, and changing shape in the wind, the sculpture transformed the surrounding landscape, and, at the same time, evoked the verbal image of prairie schooner or covered wagon. Most import, this was a community project involving the assistance of many volunteers, not the least of whom was the farmer, Richard Losenegger, who allowed it to occupy his land for the six weeks of its existence. The ecological component may be small, but Prairie Ship was environmental art at its best.

Sometimes artists draw attention to the troubled environment by bringing it indoors. In 1987 the University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Union gallery exhibited *A Memory of Clean Water*, a project of Betsy Damon, Robyn Stein, and a team of other artists. The work centered on a 250—foot cast in 8 x 12—foot sections of a Utah dry stream bed which was exhibited as a convex negative, or mold. The casting material consisted of a kind of paper made in part from a pulp of local plant materials with locally derived plant and mineral pigments. A video presentation, photographs, and newspaper clippings augmented the colorful convoluted surface of the cast itself. The title tells the story, and, again, it was a cooperative project, though not a community one.

My final examples of upper Midwestern ecological art are drawn from some of the work of Mount Horeb artist **Barbara Westfall**. She also has brought the outside in, so to speak, in Resource Extraction (1990) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison art department gallery, where earth and tree stumps marked with orange paint recall clear-cut logging and a caged live chicken, the resulting displacement of life. More recently *Nature and Culture* (1992) at the Memorial Union gallery in Madison emphasized the destructive effects of human intervention on the environment with hanging thistles and a complex of box elder trees paired with sharp edges of farm machinery attached like leaves to the limbs and a vine-like interweaving of barbed wire.

More closely related to "Fragile Ecologies," however, has been **Westfall's** outdoor work. I recall a cold winter solstice in 1990 at her environmental installation, a 20—foot basin painted in descending spirals of red and yellow colored sands with outside stakes designed to cast a long shadow through the center of the piece. Visitors were expected to participate—burn incense, bring a log for the nearby fire, etc.—and thus return to a time when the movements of the sun had real meaning. In this sense she was promoting some of the same ideas that Nancy Holt expresses in the exhibit.

Daylighting the Woods (1992) in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum gave dignity to over 100 trees that were being killed by girdling to allow prairie to re-establish itself in overgrown areas. The death of some of the flora was necessary for the life of other threatened flora. Humans had stopped the fires that kept the prairie ecology intact and had ploughed up most of it for cropland. Human intervention with fire and knife was now necessary to save what prairie remained or could be restored. This concept was delicately expressed in staining, smoothing, and drawing attention to the girdled aspen trees and by adding music and the calls of increasingly rare birds in an audio track that played during the opening reception throughout the half acre stand of trees. This work is obviously more ephemeral than the solstice basin and was oriented toward restoration of an ecosystem rather than the astronomy of the seasons.

In connection with the *"Fragile Ecologies"* exhibit itself, **Westfall** and her colleague Renee Miller

Barbara Westfall *emphasizes the passing seasons with her winter solstice installation near Mount Horeb.*

worked with children from neighborhood community centers on the installation *Ourselves, Our Land, Our Community,* under the Urban Arts Outreach program. At the UW-Madison Arboretum the children explored ecological restoration; at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art they built a cooperative art installation of materials gathered at the arboretum, the unifying theme being the relationship between people and nature. This project carries the concepts of ecology and art to the coming generation, an essential undertaking if the message of ecological art is to have a lasting effect.

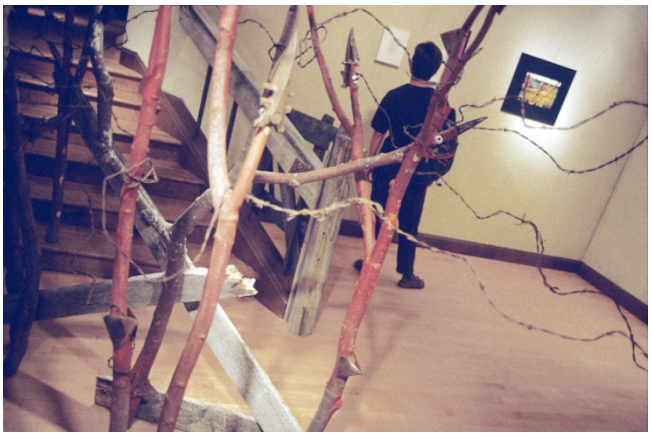
In this discussion I have tried to enlarge upon the historic and prehistoric background of environmental and ecological art and to provide some contemporary examples that are closer to the Upper Midwest than most of the works cited in the *"Fragile Ecologies"* exhibit and catalog. It is clear that this art is not completely new, but rather is a

Daylighting the Woods *in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum. Artist Barbara Westfall emphasizes the cycle of life and death in the destruction of flora by burning and girdling in order to restore and preserve the prairie ecological system, which has been disrupted by human intervention.*

Ourselves, Our Land, Our Community *completed in 1994 is an installation at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art by artists Barbara Westfall and Renee Miller, in conjunction with "Fragile Ecologies" exhibit.*

revitalization of very old and widespread ideas for dealing with relatively new and immediate problems. The art represents a continuing trend away from art as movable commodity toward either the permanent unmovable or the ephemeral. It also places emphasis on cooperation, either as a group or community undertaking or as a participatory, sometimes ceremonial, experience for the viewer. But these are also old and widespread ways in different cultural contexts.

This recent ecological art is more widespread than one might think. The February 1994 issue of *Audubon* magazine describes the work of the Polish-Brazilian artist Frans Krajcberg, who uses the burned trunks and roots of Amazonian trees to protest the destruction of the rain forest. But *Audubon*, like *Sierra*, *Wilderness*, and *National Parks* publications, is preaching to the converted. One can hope that the special skills of artist will help convert a new audience.



Nature and Culture, *ecological installation at Memorial Union Gallery, Madison, WI by artist Barbara Westfall.*

In the Art Institute of Chicago's centennial exhibit titled *"Chicago's Dream: A World Treasure*," which closed in early 1994, one of the labels commented that in the coming twenty-first century the institute should become a forum for dialog rather than serve only as a temple of culture. *"Fragile Ecologies"* is the kind of exhibit that provides material for just such a dialog.

Daylighting the Woods *in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum. Artist Barbara Westfall scrapes, sands and oils 100 aspen trees over the course of one year.*

Selected Sources

In addition to the catalog cited in the text, which has an extensive bibliography, Lucy Lippard's *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon, 1983) provides excellent background. *Carhenge* is described by Jerry Moore in *Archaeology* (Vol. 45, No. 4, August, 1992).

For the Nazca lines, the most recent comprehensive discussion is found in *The Lines of Nazca* edited by Anthony Aveni (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1990), but Johan Reinhard's pamphlet "The Nazca Lines: A New Perspective on the Origin and Meaning" (Lima: Editorial Los Pinos, 1985) should not be overlooked.

Michael Heizer's Illinois effigy mounds are discussed by David Bourdon in *Smithsonian* (Vol. 17, No. 1, April 1986) and the artworks at Governors State University, in *The Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park* (University Park, Illinois: Governor's State UniversityFoundation, no date).Information on other contemporary environmental art pieces is derived largely from notices, handouts, and contemporary newspaper articles. Barbara Westfall kindly discussed her art with me recently, including work I had seen several years ago.