

Flanagan, Regina, and Deborah Karasov. "That Beauty Problem-Why?" Public



PROJECTS IN NATURE

JONATHAN CRARY

At left:
Sofal Löw, Project, 1975.
Soal County Merriewood West.
At right:
Alice Aycock, A Simple Network
of Underground Walls and Tunnels,
1975, Courney Merriewood West.



Claude Lévi-Strauss extolled the centuries-old Alpine farmlands of Europe as a prototype of the ideal human environment. In the cultivated hillsides and valleys he saw the outcome of a compromise that had been reached between nature and culture, a midpoint between untamed vegetation and industrial devastation. He realized that the "sublime harmony" of these landscapes, other than a spontaneous expression of nature, was the result of agreements achieved through collaboration between man and a natural site. The environmental works, organized as "Projects in Nature," at the Merriewood West farm in Far Hills, N.J. (September 22-October 31) are, in varying forms, based on this principle of compromise and collaboration between man and site. The artists here stress horizontality in their work, identifying with the given order of the land rather than imposing vertiginous objects onto it, and they accord an essential primacy to natural systems and surroundings as factors in artistic decisions.

A familiar looking work by Carl Andre is seen in a refreshing new context. A rectangular aluminum plate (B-Void, 1972) has been placed on the bottom of a narrow stream and lies about a foot below the surface. It is now titled *Water Void*. Andre's enduring concern with the ground plane takes on added

significance here when one recalls his often cited remark that he wanted his sculpture to be as level as water. Beautiful patterns of caked mud, moss, and bright colored leaves have formed on the surface of the plate and we see it through the rippling surface of the water. It has become a lyrical, naturalized *André*. While the aluminum surface has been transfigured, the plate retains its identity as shape. We see both its susceptibility and resistance to the transforming effects of the stream.

The sculptor George Trakas selected a wooded site for his project and has constructed two foot bridges, or elevated tracks, each about fifty yards long and about two feet off the ground. The bridges extend in straight lines among the crowded trees toward a point where they would intersect at a 45-degree angle. At this spot Trakas detonated a small charge of dynamite which ruined the ends of the two bridges and left a ten-foot-deep crater now filled with water. The work, entitled *Union Station*, is structured on a system of oppositions which the viewer is made to experience both physically and conceptually. Each of the two bridges, one of wood and one of steel, has its own unique rhythm of supports and walking surface. The steel bridge is one unbroken length of metal which allows us complete freedom of stride, but the wooden bridge has cross planks only every two feet, forcing us to keep a strict regular stride. While walking on one bridge the other is always visible, making us aware of the steel-wood contrast and their con- structural differences. In a sense, the work becomes a description of the form of dialectical thought. With an immediacy that language could never achieve, we experience the structure of a fundamental conceptual process. Each bridge might seem to be independent and self-contained, but Trakas forces us to appraise the interrelationships of these two

systems and to feel the necessity of their eventual convergence and synthesis. The explosion at their meeting point is a laying bare of their materiality as well as of the nature of the soil upon which they are built, a vivid exposition of base and super-structure.

Roald Löw's landscape-sculpture is probably the most eloquent work in the show. In a large gently sloping meadow that extends up into wooded hills, Löw has installed three steel plates vertically into the ground. Each rectangular plate is nine feet long, one is seven feet high, and the other two, which are located higher up in the meadow, are considerably smaller in height; they were cut down in situ after placement in order to relate them more closely to the slope of the land, and the cut pieces have been left on the ground where they fell. The plates are set in intervals of 250 and 200 yards along one side of the meadow which is bordered by tall oaks. The vast scale involved and the presence of the distant plates is quietly enticing and we are drawn up the long slope to the topmost plate where a new perspective reorganizes our perception of the whole site. Löw has used the rise of the land in such a way that a physical rhythm of ascension and descent becomes part of our experience of his work. He makes implicit in his use of the meadow a criticism of "individual, private, and invariable" sculptural space as well as an attack on sculptors who use landscapes merely as decorative back-grounds. Here he has established a genuine dialogue between site and sculpture, and there is an elegant balance between his own decisions and the way in which the contours of the landscape have generated the locations and final shaping of his plates.

Richard Fleischner has also sought to merge landscape and sculpture. In his *Soil Drawing* he associates the space of his work with the ground plane of a large lawn and orchard area. He has built up several low mounds of

d on both sides of a long trench about half a foot deep and a few inches wide which has been lined with sheet metal. They are subtle but decisive modifications of the terrain. Fleischner composes related elements on a flat surface, but at the same time he insists on the absence of any limiting boundary around these elements.

John Goodyear's piece is part of his work of the last few years on problems of the earth's curvature. Here he has shaped a small square plot of ground at a 23-degree angle and planted a tree perpendicular to it. According to Goodyear, the tilted plot with tree represents an area of ground in Haiti which is twenty-three degrees south of Far Hills.

Alan Sondheim's project consisted both of an investigation of microscopic life forms found on the site and a subsequent reflective analysis of his own initial investigation. One of the other artists in the show suggested to me that Sondheim's interest in microscopic life probably had to do with the inherent resistance of such minute forms to any kind of aesthetic interference. Sondheim's writing seems to draw its vitality from a continual shifting between an analytical language appropriate to particular philosophical and scientific problems and a literary language which implies the futility of any analysis. He presents an engaging combination of epistemological confidence and skepticism.

There is a problematic relationship between nature and Alice Aycock's *Project for a Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels*. The inflexibility and inertness of this cement construction oppose the organicity of the nearby woods and cornfield, but visually the work has been fused with the land in which it is set. For this ambitious and impressive venture Aycock has built a system of square wells which lead down to interconnected tunnels. It covers a 20-by-40-foot area and is almost flush with the surface of the ground. The simplicity and banality of the cement

blocks, as well as the unobtrusive underground siting, belie the profoundly disturbing effect of the work as a whole. As in some of her past art, Aycock is concerned with the capacity of a given structure to disorient and unsettle the viewer and to trigger primary unconscious reactions. The wells are seven feet deep and the tunnels are not high enough to stand in so it is immediately claustrophobic and alien to human scale, converting its rigorous organization and logical scale into a sardonic criticism of dehumanized modern architecture. In her accompanying statement she cites anthropological and historical instances of cave and pit dwellers, allusions to tombs, cellars, war bunkers, bank vaults, and quotes ominous passages from Borges, Poe, and Bachelard. This constellation of referents sets up the work as a kind of architectural correlative for a collective human fear of dark subterranean spaces and all that these can signify.

Norman Brosterman's *Five Cuts* involved clearing five seven-foot square patches of ground of all vegetation and declaring that the work will be completed when the return of plant life has made the patches indistinguishable from the surrounding area. Brosterman makes the finished art work synonymous with the eradication of any visible traces of its existence and lets nature slowly and irrevocably reestablish control over his out-of-shapes.

In her work, *Rainbow Environment*, Susan Eder has embedded prisms at various heights and angles in the trunks of some pine trees grouped in a wooded area. The forest floor and nearby trees, depending on the sun, become speckled with patches of rainbow light that imperceptibly change position as the earth moves. Eder calculated the placement of her prisms by an intricate method relating to the position of the sun at different hours of the day. The whole work is magical, like a primeval chromatic clock that discloses

secrets about time in the passage of color around the pines. The prisms looked like glass knives thrust into the trees and large amounts of sap had dripped out, as though from wounds, and dried into white rivulets on the dark trunks, evoking images of ritual sacrifice. In a matter of years, however, the prisms will be absorbed into the trees with growth, another instance of a natural process obliterating traces of an art work.

Other works in the show included a sound and water environment by Marvin Torfield and a piece by Clayton Lee involving infra-red photographs taken at the geographical center of the farm property.

Incorporating natural pro-

cesses into an art work clearly gives importance to the notion of elapsed or elapsing time, as in the pieces by Andre, Eder, and Brosterman. Another and probably more significant category of temporal structuring, which is evident in most of these works, is a concern with the time that is actually experienced by the viewer. This is not time spent in contemplation but rather time sensed while moving through space, in and around the individual sites. Aycock, Louw, and Trakas are particularly insistent on this dimension of their works. Our response is both physical and psychological, and the distance between the art and ourselves is fundamentally diminished.

