

2084

“Ecological Art: Perspectives from the Northwest”

By Susan Platt

While the Northwest is endowed with spectacular natural beauty, the interference of humans in the balance of nature is equally spectacular. In the just over 150 years since settlers took control of indigenous lands, they have extracted resources for profit, dammed rivers, clear cut forests, dumped toxins, and encouraged sprawl.

Artists who address ecological issues in the Northwest are acutely aware of this history of destruction as well as contemporary efforts to reverse that damage. The artists I discuss here commit themselves to preserving history, exposing problems, mitigating damage, and suggesting solutions. They work with everyone from school children to public utilities. Many of these artists adopt the Native American perspective that humans are part of a web of interdependent relationships.

Continuities and Discontinuities

On the tall tower that marks the entrance to the Seahawks football stadium in Seattle, Bob Hazaous placed *Earth Dialogue* (2002) four steel discs, each twenty five feet in diameter. At the bottom is a black and white silhouette of a city, next a green disc represents nature and the dispersal of our connection to nature, an orange disc refers to the sun and the laws of nature, and at the top, clouds in white take our eyes up to the real sky.

According to the artist “Equality with the earth is based on common sense, but modern man has made the earth an opportunity of self glorification and of environmental

misuse”¹ *Earth Dialogue* ironically situated on an enormous structure that alters the scale and fabric of the surrounding urban community, is one approach to creating awareness. The throngs of people entering the Seahawks Stadium cannot avoid seeing these huge discs.

In contrast to the huge scale of Haozous’s sculpture, Gail Tremblay’s installation *Empty Fish Trap* intimately confronts us with the condition of Northwest salmon.² A waterless river bed supports only dead tree stumps; poles support the skins, backbone and tails of dead salmon that seem swim in midair. A traditional salmon trap hangs from the ceiling. On the audio component, a tribal elder describes salmon ceremonies and a scientist speaks about the effects of logging, clear cutting, road building, and chemical spills. *Empty Fish Trap* is an installation about the death of salmon, the death of a culture, the death of an ecosystem, and the death of humans as part of that system.

Another installation by Tremblay *Iókste: Akwerià:ne/ It is Heavy on My Heart* addresses nuclear contamination. Red felt shapes with white flecks lie on the ground, two crescent shapes stand upright. They can be mistaken for late minimalist abstractions. They actually represent livers and thyroid glands invaded by cancer. On a DVD, many tribes give their perspective on the nuclear industry’s campaign to deposit its waste on Indian lands. The elders also speak of the birth defects, growth delays, leukemia, skin diseases, asthma, heart disease, and cancer of breast, lung, colon, and prostate caused by radioactivity. They declare that a clear alternative to the stealing of the insides of the earth is to live with the land, not to extract gain from it.

¹ Bob Haozaos, “Earth Dialogue” artist statement, typescript undated.

²For other discussion of salmon based NW art see my “Changing Models for Public Art: Seattle’s ‘Salmon in the City’ “ *Sculpture Magazine* June 2002

Making Waste and Consumption Visible

Many artists funded by “percent for art” from construction of public utility projects, make visible the disposal systems for solid waste and wastewater that we take for granted.³ At the entrance to the King County Solid Waste Transfer Station, Carol de Pelecyn’s *ReTire*, (2007) confronts us with eleven enormous tires from the trucks that actually roll over the garbage and crush it down at its next stop, the Cedar Hills Landfill. The tires with aluminum rims in day glo safety colors of orange, green, and pink, literally speak to us as we enter the waste facility. Speakers installed in their centers by sound artist Dale Stammen broadcast computer-enhanced recordings of salmon swimming, hundreds of individual frogs, and waves on Puget Sound as well as the sounds of cars driving over a metal grate on a bridge: “The resonances always come back to harmony as the planet absorbs our pollution, but how long can it continue to do so in its weakened state.”⁴

Inside the Transfer station is Steve McGehee’s billboard-sized *Terra Firma* (2007) photographed at the Cedar Hills Landfill.⁵ In the background is the iconic Mt Rainier, in the foreground piles of garbage. In front of that is the real pile of rubbish in the Transfer Station. The billboard is mounted directly over the chute where trucks shove the garbage to be compacted, dumped into semi trucks and driven to Cedar Hills. The piece asks the question “Transfer Where?”

³ *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture*, Seattle Art Museum, 1979. Waterworks Garden 1997 is a pioneering example of this approach.

⁴ Email from the artist 2/25/09. This is a simplified description of an immensely complex piece of sound art. To hear some of the sounds go to http://www.4culture.org/publicart/project_profile.asp?locID=45

⁵ King County 4 Culture held a billboard campaign with Steve McGehee’s photograph. Carol de Pelecyn described dozens of trips to the landfill in order to get this photograph. She invited McGehee and Stammen to contribute to her project. The project required three years of community meetings as well.

Brightwater Treatment System in Northern King Count, Washington State is a massive sewage treatment plant with mechanical, biological and electrical systems for cleaning water, a system of pipes running through deep-bored tunnels to Puget Sound, an Educational Center, and forty acres of reclaimed land on a salmon spawning creek. The pipes not only carry wastewater to the plant and treated wastewater to the Sound, but they also distribute thousands of gallons of treated water for reuse.

In 2003 Buster Simpson, Jann Rosen-Queralt and Ellen Sollod, in collaboration with Cath Brunner, Director of Public Art for King County, developed An “Art Concept Workbook” for Brightwater.⁶ The final art master plan called for artists to create a “vision of sustainability.” The artists are asked to make visible both active treatment and the use of natural processes, such as detention pools and constructed wetlands to clean the water. The Brightwater Art Master Plan stands as an inspiring document of what artists could do in a world in which the full potential of imagination is wedded to re-creating a green world. The art projects that they are making also document they ways in which they have had to adjust their ideas to engineering regulations, economics, and other forces and mind sets..

Building on his long career making quirky public sculptures that address wastewater, as in his *Beckoning Cistern*, 2004, downspouts shaped into a beckoning hand, Buster Simpson addresses reclaimed stormwater in a monumental sculpture at the main entrance to the Brightwater Treatment plant. *Bio Boulevard Digester and Water Molecule* suggests an heroic enterprise with a semi-Pop art aesthetic. At one end, an

⁶ One precedent for the artists was Lorna Jordan’s *Waterworks Garden*, at the South Water Treatment Plant in Renton, completed in 1997, see interview with Jordan. In 2001, as a precursor to the master plan, Ellen Sollod wrote *Searching for Brightwater*, a poetic exploration with the community of where the plant would be sited.

enlarged red (hydrogen) and white (oxygen) “water molecule” that stands as an icon of the treatment plant itself, passes treated water through a “bubble tea straw” into a pipe underground that emerges in the arms of “heroic plumbers,” evoked by concrete tetrapods. They are “carrying” the treated water through a purple pipe, plumbing code for treated water that is pierced with holes that allow the water to off gas and expose it to sun. At the end of the pipe the water pours into a six foot high coil. Simpson is consciously evoking the muscled laborers of WPA public art. The “plumbers” suggest communal collaboration as they collectively support the long purple pipe. The entire 170 foot piece is a metaphor for the function of the plant, in which thirteen miles of purple (meaning carrying reclaimed water) pipes distribute water to various re-uses or to discharge, purging the chlorine disinfectant during transport. The piece is both witty and functional, Simpson’s trademark.

Near the main entry point for sewage coming into the treatment plant, and for treated water leaving the building, Jann Rosen-Queralt’s sculpture *Confluence* represents the speed and quantity of water moving through the plant. Water loudly rushes across a constructed pool in an open pipe reminding us of the enormous amount of water that we expend in sewage disposal. At the center of the pool is a cone shaped sculpture that the artist refers to as a breathing lung or “gill.” Made of flexible strands of coiled wire, it rises, falls, and twists on its side evoking the movement of a tide pool, in and out. A third element in the pool comments on wasting water with slow drips coming from holes on the sides. When the water accumulates to 12 inches, it automatically flushes out - all the water in the sculpture is already processed and it uses no energy to function. The well is set in a plaza that includes a concentric tile pattern evoking rings of water. A grove of

willow trees will represent, when ten feet tall, one percent of the volume of water that moves through the plant. Rosen-Queralt's contribution to the Brightwater project reflects her own philosophy of water as part of a system of exchanges and intersections:

“Understanding the connectivity between nature and technology . . . is a reminder of the symbiotic relationships inherent in ecosystem .”⁷

Ellen Sollod, the third lead artist on Brightwater, also gives much thought in her work to the crucial importance of water in our lives. *Precious Water*, made in collaboration with Carolyn Law, was a ten day site specific art installation on a Seattle pier. The artists created a 1000 square foot drop of water, from large sheets of paper printed blue, that gradually disappeared over a space of ten days as the rainwater poured down. It provoked both real and virtual conversations online about the urgent need to take action to prevent the disappearance of water itself. (footnote)

Ellen Sollod 's window display in the proposed Environmental Education and Community Center *Collection and Transformation* has seventeen large glass sculptures that evoke microorganisms found in water. The pieces were made in a residency at the Tacoma Museum of Glass Hot Shop, based on sketches and sand clay models. The glass microorganisms will be set into a stainless steel honeycomb structure and lighted with fiber optics to create a suggestion of movement.⁸ An adjacent window is filled with recycled laboratory glass, an increasingly obsolete form as computers replace hands on testing in laboratories.

⁷ Jann Rosen-Queralt, “Vision Statement, “ Proposal for public artwork on a watershed of the Baltimore Water Resources Department, September 2010. She was proposing to educate the public about a particular watershed which is entirely urbanized.

⁸ Email from the artist, February 17, 2009.

These three artists, and many others,⁹ are all making visible a process of water treatment or honoring the importance of water as part of the largest water treatment plant ever built. It is intended to be a destination for recreation and education, as well as a model for returning wastewater to nature. Water as a fixed resource is here returned to the cycle of nature.

Gathering of Water

In contrast to the artists of the Brightwater project, who had to grapple with the demanding parameters of engineering requirements, Basia Irland affiliates with the academic, scientific and art communities, as well as environmental groups, and the general public. Irland has steeped herself in all aspects of water throughout her life. She is informed on scientific information about our human relationship to water, and she brings together art and science in her art. Her sculpture comes directly from natural materials that are part of her projects, a backpack containing scientific instruments, log books, samples from the shores of a river; a book made of dead barnacles (water quality indicators) harvested by a river's mouth, a seed vest for dispersing seeds in a river, instead of catching fish. Since 1995 Irland has encouraged connections between communities and river through what she calls "Gathering of Water" projects: "My aim . . . was to generate understanding, enthusiasm, a sense of continuity, and a mutual understanding among riverside communities."

⁹ Eduardo Calderon has been documenting the construction since 2005, Andrea Wilbur-Sigo, Native American artist has created "house post and paddles" in a detention pool, and Christian Moeller created a glass bottle tower for a pump station. Other artists include Jane Tsong, Jim Blashfield, Chris Bruch, and Claude Zervos. As of this writing all of their work is in progress. There are also plans for temporary projects in the restored wetlands known as the "North 40" *Public Art at Brightwater*, 4 Culture, 2010.

A Gathering of Waters: Nisqually River, Source to Sound (2008 – 2009), on the Nisqually River in Washington State, explored the effect of human actions on the river as well as efforts to restore it. Using the same strategy as in her other “Gathering” projects, Irland invited people to physically connect to the river: individuals and communities on the river put a small amount of water in a single container that was passed from one person to another along the eighty-one mile length of the Nisqually. As participants gathered the water, they recorded their thoughts or feelings or made drawings in a logbook. The canteen and logbook were carried down the river in a Backpack/Repository, which also held scientific information, photographs, videos and maps. It is a sculpture in itself, as well as a document of the project. At the end of the project, the water was returned to the river with a ceremony.

Irland invites as many different communities as possible to participate in her projects. In this case, participants included Nisqually tribal members and children at the Wa He Lut School; students and professors at The Evergreen State College; non profit ecological groups associated with the river; local residents; members of the military at Fort Lewis; the rangers of Mount Rainier and the National Wildlife Refuge; a botanist, a stream ecologist and a salmon river biologist. A record of these events is recorded in video documentaries.

As a parallel project, Irland makes ephemeral sculptures in the form of hand-carved ice books embedded with native riparian seeds, which are placed into rivers. As the ice melts, the seeds are dispersed and when the plants grow they store carbon, hold the banks in place, and provide shade and shelter. The metaphor of nature as a book to be re-experienced is part of the physicality and the poetry of the object itself.

All of these artists care deeply about the environment. They frame their concerns in radically different formats and contexts, but in each case, their art makes us more aware our actions and the need to preserve our planet's vanishing resources.