The background of the entire page is a detailed pencil sketch of a dense thicket of various plants and trees. In the foreground, a recycling cart is sketched on wheels. The cart has two compartments. The left compartment contains several potted plants. The right compartment is empty. The words "RELIABLE RECYCLING" are written on the side of the cart. To the right of the cart, there is a stack of several rectangular objects, possibly books or papers, also sketched in pencil.

T h e

( U n ) M a k i n g

o f

N a t u r e

The Whitney Museum of American Art,  
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza,  
is funded by a partnership of Park Tower  
Realty and IBM, the developers of  
Federal Reserve Plaza.

This exhibition was organized by the following  
Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the 1989–90  
Whitney Museum Independent Study Program:  
Julia Einspruch, Elizabeth Finch, James  
Marcovitz, Helen Maleswarth, and Lydia Yee.

*The (Un)Making of Nature*  
is a two-part exhibition.

Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Marris  
New York, New York  
May 16–July 11, 1990

Whitney Museum of American Art  
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza  
New York, New York  
May 31–July 27, 1990

The exhibition at the Whitney Museum Downtown  
will travel to the Whitney Museum of American Art,  
Fairfield County, Stamford, Connecticut.  
October 12, 1990–January 5, 1991

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945 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10021

Opposite: Mark Dion and William Schefferine,  
drawing for *Under the Verdant Carpet:*  
*The Dreams of Mount Koch*, 1990

Cover: detail



## The (Un)Making of Nature

Julia Einspruch

Helen Molesworth

The reinvestigation of nature in contemporary art signals a larger cultural shift in our attitude toward nature at the close of the twentieth century. Indeed, we are constantly reminded of the environmental crisis by staggering statistics which indicate that without drastic modifications in the way we live, we may very well see the end of nature. With the rapid depletion of the earth's resources and the almost unbridled advancement of technology, it is logical to conclude that

nature will soon be eclipsed by the vague yet omnipotent force we have created.

As nature's physical presence continues to erode—as Brazilian rain forests are defoliated and the Hudson River is polluted with industrial waste—nature has understandably become this year's *cause célèbre*. Nonetheless, this environmental concern goes beyond mere fashion; it indicates a desire to recover nature not only in our physical world but also in ourselves.

This exhibition attempts to answer two fundamental questions: what is nature and what is our relationship to it? The artists' responses are as complex as the problems at hand, presenting a multiplicity of positions and approaches to imaging and imagining nature in the 1990s.

Many of the artists featured in this exhibition are too young to have participated in the environmental movement of the 1960s or the Earthworks projects of the 1970s. Yet their works reveal an acute awareness of the natural world, accompanied by a new set of relationships to the landscape and nature. Unlike the sense of grandeur and scale that accompanied the Earthworks movement, much of this new art attempts to trap or confine nature in hermetic containers, treating parts of the earth in a precious or archival manner symptomatic of the fear that we are losing or have already lost our tactile and sensory relationship to the land. Other works investigate how our contemporary understanding of nature is a product of images, many of which are generated by the media. These works deconstruct such images while simultaneously trying to create a "new" image that incorporates both our desires and our given reality. Finally, several artists directly engage the environmental crisis in their works. However, they differ from their predecessors in nat

formulating comprehensive solutions to the problems. These artists instead try to use art as a mobilizing force by bringing the political realities of the global eco-crisis into a museum setting.

In assembling this group of works, the curators have formulated diverse responses to the questions the artists raise. The tradition of landscape painting and its recent reemergence are addressed, for example, through an effort to clarify technology's role in our perception of the sublime in nature. It becomes clear, however, that many artists have bypassed technology, approaching nature in a more personal way, primarily through fantasy and fetishism. The idea of a personal relationship with nature also leads to a related issue: the desire to control nature. Finally, artists whose works explicitly engage the environmental crisis are discussed in an essay which advocates activism, reinforcing the hope that direct involvement will engender a new, more respectful association with nature.

The strategies of both the artwork and the catalogue essays effect what we have called "The (Un)Making of Nature"—a deconstruction of the traditional conceptions of nature and a simultaneous construction of a more viable relationship to it. In this manner, we hope to create an arena in which these pressing issues can be investigated.

# The Sublime Today:

## Reconfigurations of the Landscape

Julia Einspruch  
James Marcovitz

The emergence of American landscape painting in the early nineteenth century marked American art's coming of age: artists no longer sought to emulate European precedents, but instead found what they considered to be a unique American aesthetic based on the New World's boundless vistas. American landscape painting, particularly the Hudson River School, nevertheless remained under the influence of the European notion of the sublime, as developed by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

According to Kant, beauty creates harmony by putting our faculties at ease, while the sublime produces a state of agitation, at once exalting and threatening to our very being through the presentation of awesome forms and infinite spaces. In its development by American painters, the sublime was transformed into what Barbara Navak has termed a "para-religion" of nature, God, and man: the landscape became a vehicle of transcendental experience.

Contemporary American artists interested in landscape reject such experience as myth. For certain artists in this exhibition, landscape is never unmediated but always enmeshed in codes of meaning. Indeed, several artists, rather than deal directly with nature, use the imaging strategies and technologies of mass media to investigate landscape as a cultural category. In so doing, they suggest a contemporary reconfiguration of the sublime, one created, as it were, through special effects.

With an avid interest in spectacular events in nature, Jack Goldstein evokes the more theatrical aspects of nineteenth-century landscape painting. *Untitled* (1985), a hyperrealistic image of cloud-covered volcanic mountains erupting into a deep blue sky, is in one sense not far removed from the dramatic subjects of Frederic Edwin Church. However, Goldstein's paintings are composed from photographs and airbrushed to effect the rather lurid, deeply saturated hues of the cinematographic technical image. Goldstein in fact refers to these paintings as "movie-sets that showcase special effects as edited from a world narrative." No primary experience of nature is possible, for Goldstein presents a nature already constructed technologically as an image. The sublime here is evoked not through an experience of triumphant unity with nature but through an ambivalent encounter with the deadly seductions of technology.

If Goldstein "technologizes" the sublime, Laura Emrick's and John Pfahl's treatments of the landscape conventionalize it. In *Stolen Horizon* (1990), Emrick frames a photographic image of a snow-covered mountain in a pair of car windows. The very emblem of the sublime, an awesome chain of jagged mountain peaks, is here contained and conventionalized, since it is viewed through the car windows. John Pfahl's photographs, shot from television programs such as *Fantasy Island* and the PBS series *Masterpiece Theater*, present yet another mediated relationship to nature. The



Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1985



April Gornik, *One*, 1986

images look as if they belong to the tradition of fine art landscape photography, printed as they are in black and white on delicate platinum-palladium paper. However, these "video landscapes," as Pfahl calls them, cause the viewer to confront natural forms through the intermediary of a television screen. The sublime is thus reduced to the mundane experience of a television show.

With its endless expanse of seascape, April Gornik's painting *One* (1986) is a nostalgic evocation of the nineteenth-century landscape tradition. As in the works of Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, *One*

simultaneously intimidates the viewer with its vast proportion and moody atmosphere and invites a closer examination of curious details. The water, with its gently undulating surface, remains mysteriously undisturbed by the foreboding sky above. Most striking, however, are the enigmatic patches of light which emanate from the horizon and are reflected on the water's surface through the cracks in the billowing clouds. This mystical light, which cannot be attributed to a single source, along with the title of the painting, allude to a kind of transcendence. But the melodramatic tension between calm and storm, light and dark, so

typical of the sublime landscape, is exaggerated to the point of sentimentality—as if to compensate for the modern incapacity to experience a transcendental union with nature.

Michael Cuddington is resigned to the disappearance of the pristine landscape untouched by technology. *Central Valley* (1989) is a diminutive rural view, meticulously painted along the bottom of a huge, arched piece of scrap plywood. This picturesque image of the American farm is overwhelmed by its support—the chief material of housing construction. The pastoral has been destroyed for the creation of tract housing, built out of the very material on which the miniature landscape is painted. Moreover, the rough, unfinished scrap of plywood also negates any sense of nature's force or magnitude, so that it is impossible to register the sublime.

*Untitled #11* (1987), Clegg and Guttman's large format, unmanipulated Cibachrome print, presents a

dramatic landscape that is partially abstracted by the silhouettes of a hydroelectric pylon and electrical wires. The work suggests that nature and technology are inextricably intertwined and that it is senseless to set up a binary opposition between them. The sky, electric blue and scattered with clouds, and the pylon, its wires surging with energy, work in tandem to suggest an awesome combination of forces. Within this operatic integration of the landscape and technology, Clegg and Guttman invent a new sublime.

Underlying all these artists' works is the realization that it is no longer possible to procure a pure or essential vision of the landscape. Although the artists articulate their positions in terms of the sublime, they rehearse this eighteenth-century concept from the experience of the late twentieth century.

# Fantasy and Fetishism in Contemporary Representations of Nature

Elizabeth Finch

Nature and culture, traditionally understood as opposites, have never been clearly distinct. Indeed, it is through culture that we experience nature: the city park, the natural history museum, the wildlife preserve. For the environmentalist Bill McKibben, nature has become so culturally mediated that it is no longer self-contained: "We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us." McKibben's statement is indicative of one aspect of contemporary opinion that has accepted, if not celebrated, the loss of nature to culture. As a result, many contemporary artists have dismissed the use of nature both as reference and as material in their work.

Yet there are others who regard this dismissal as a loss. For them, merely rejecting nature as an aspect of the cultural overlooks its central role in human imagination and memory. These artists seek to recover the idea of a nature—as separate from culture—through a process of private identification. Fantasy and fetishism are two of the visual manifestations of this new approach. Fantasy, derived from the imagination, is the surfacing of conscious and unconscious desires, often after a period of repression. Fetishism is a highly personal act that establishes a substitute for an object or experience considered lost.

Once "lost," nature cannot return in any simple form; paradoxically, it may reappear in "unnatural,"

hybrid, even grotesque ways. In Alexis Rackman's painting *The Dynamics of Power* (1989), nature returns in horrific guise: a butterfly being consumed by a swarming army of ants. Greatly magnified, these two insects common to our experience of the natural world became perversely sensual, even surreal, in their violent confrontation. Rackman presents nature as a fantasy of inundation where the death of the butterfly becomes the cause for the teeming life of the ants. This event, rendered in detail, indicates a certain delight in the horror and disgust experienced in viewing one form of life overcoming another.

Both Petah Coyne and David Nyzia combine natural and synthetic materials to construct fantasies of nature as a site of mysterious or obscure forms and effects. In Coyne's untitled sculpture of 1989, organic shapes embrace an unspecified or unknown nature that dominates and dwarfs the viewer. Using a variety of materials, such as clay, wire, and black sand, Coyne creates banded and twisted shapes that slip in and out of established natural forms—tree roots, cocoons, packets of debris. Suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, the precarious sculpture suggests organic forms about to be unleashed. This tension is then maintained as a permanent fantasy of an ominous natural threat. Coyne worked and reworked these composite shapes, demonstrating her personal investment in a fantastic nature capable of expanding beyond cultural boundaries.

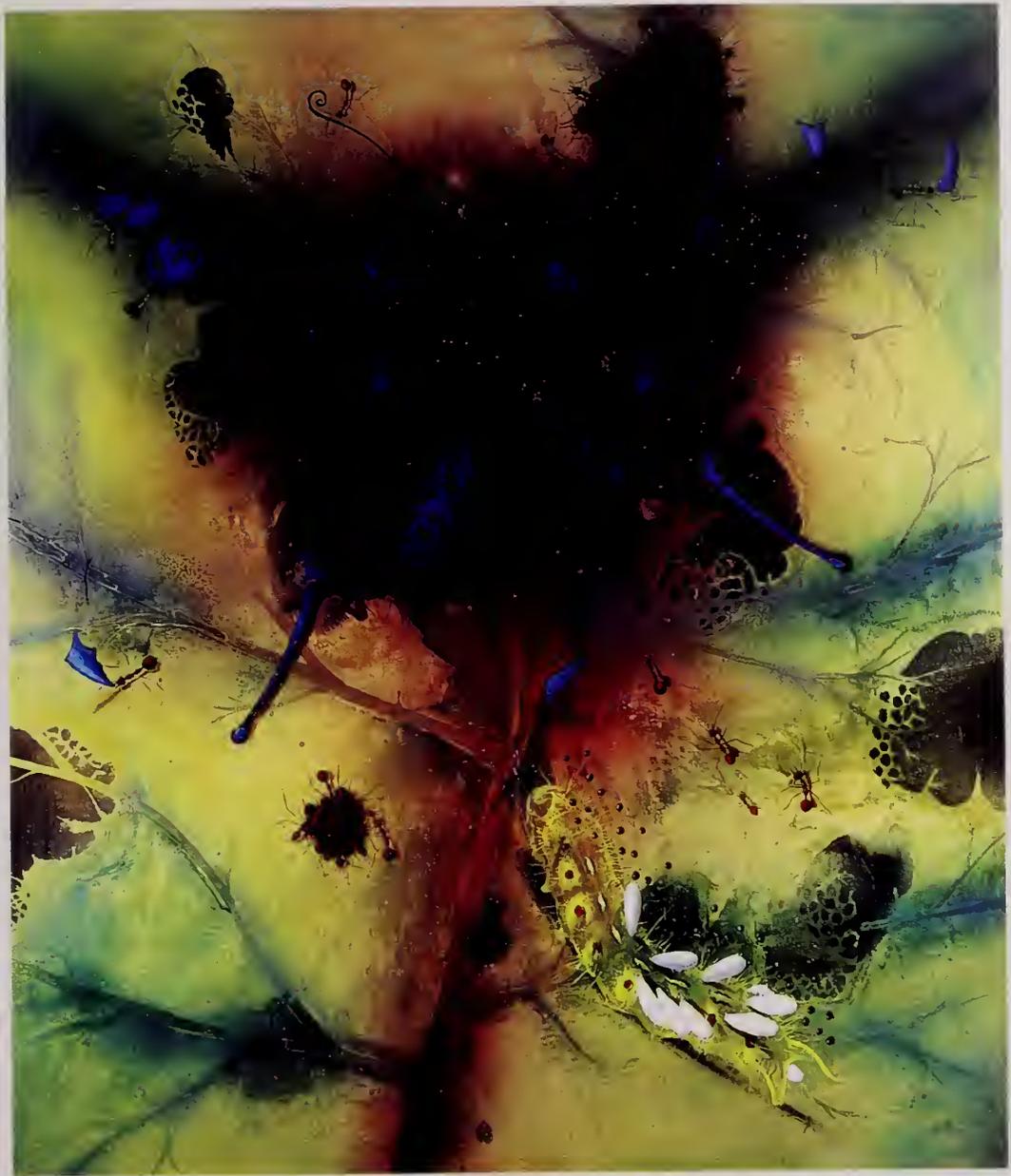


Michelle Stuart, *Brookings Herbarium #41*, 1988–89

David Nyzio also uses natural materials to construct a fantasy of a spectacular materialization of nature. In *Farm* (1989), iridescent butterfly wings, meticulously cut into squares, are pinned to a framed panel, creating a plane of color reminiscent of Color Field painting. Unlike the autonomous paintings it refers to, *Farm* shifts colors with the viewer's movement due to the iridescence of the butterfly wings. Normally considered benign, the butterflies take on an aspect of terror when used as a replacement for paint. The

artist's act of cutting and placing the butterfly wings implicates him in the violence of the fantasy. And the viewer participates by walking around the work to cause the color shifts.

Other artists return to nature by creating forms which function as fetishes for that part of nature considered lost. Michelle Stuart's *Brookings Herbarium* series (1988–89) reflects a highly personal incorporation of natural materials. Dried plants are pressed into squares of encaustic, creating an effect which varies



Alexis Rockman, *The Dynamics of Power*, 1989

from the decaying to the fossilized. Unlike Coyne's organic and inorganic materials, Stuart's do not dominate through their size. Instead, they emanate tremendous presence through their singularity. There is a tension here between the transience traditionally associated with the use of natural materials and the artist's personal effort to fix and make permanent a relation to nature. By repeating the process of selecting and transforming organic elements within a series, Stuart continually re-creates the fetish in a new but related form. The personal meaning of the fetish is maintained, while the specific object changes. Though Stuart accepts the existence of a culturally mediated nature, she does not suggest that it lessens or devalues our experience.

In the work of Brian D'Amata, the integration of preserved natural materials into an elaborate display represents another effort to recover nature through both fantasy and fetishism. In D'Amata's *Tomb for Female and Male Butterfly* (1989), two preserved butterflies are placed in a glass-fronted display case directly under lenses that distort their image. Within the case, the butterflies rest on a layer of powdered

pigment that corresponds to the colors of their wings, establishing a temporal link between their status as natural artifacts and the awareness that they will eventually decompose. D'Amata's work evokes a fantasy of nature as a scene of death and preservation. Rather than represent nature as a site of emerging forms, he is concerned with nature's gradual dissolution. Further, the selection and display of the butterflies as natural artifacts suggests that they function as fetishistic replacements for a nature feared to be lost. By recontextualizing techniques used to display precious objects, D'Amata establishes the possibility of a private relation to nature through fetishism.

Although all the artists discussed address an aspect of death in nature, their work does not represent a memorial for the natural world. Rather, it reasserts the vital place that nature continues to hold in our culture. With the present threat of environmental crisis, fantasy becomes a way to play out renewed fears, while fetishism reconciles a personal loss with the realization that nature can no longer be considered a boundless resource.

# The Illusion of Control

Lydia Yee

In recent years there has been a heightened awareness of the environmental crisis that has permeated all levels of society, as demonstrated by such trends as the new fashionability of cloth diapers, the unfashionability of fur coats made from the pelts of endangered species, or the marketing of organically grown produce. Environmental concerns have entered popular culture and altered consumption patterns. People are learning to restrain individual desires in the greater interest of the environment. Control has become a way to protect and preserve nature and to deal with personal and industrial excesses. This new consciousness runs counter to the old understanding of nature as a savage force from which we first sought protection and then sought to conquer. Earlier attitudes toward nature thus betrayed a fear of its power and, subsequently, a fear of losing control.

Much of the work done by contemporary artists addressing the environment and our relationship to nature takes up the issue of control and a simultaneous loss of control—an approach that links up the old and persistent idea of nature as a potentially dangerous force with the new concerns for the endangered environment. In some of the works an extreme degree of control is present in the form of the containment of nature for archival purposes, which simultaneously preserves nature and neutralizes the potential threat it poses. There is a simultaneous loss of control, however, which results from the subordination to an extremely rigid containment or replacement of organic materials. The transformation of these materials into commodi-

ties or simulacra denies the heterogeneous character of the natural world. In the end, control becomes the absolute arbiter, infusing these sterile representations (or re-representations) of natural objects with a disquieting ambience of death. Other works that display less rigorous degrees of control allow the restrained objects to become involved in a dynamic that transcends containment, thus relinquishing a measure of control. Such works recognize that control is often just an invention to help order and make sense of things and to mask our loss of control. Ultimately, attempts to control nature are often illusory, situated in the realm of the imaginary rather than in reality.

Vincent Shine's hyperreal plastic simulations of plant life function as discreet reminders of the homogenizing effect of contemporary culture. Shine fabricates reproductions of several plants, including papyrus and mulberry, in excruciating detail, from such synthetic compounds as neoprene and vinyl acetate. To the unsuspecting viewer these fragile plant forms seem to be specimens preserved for archival purposes. But as the viewer discovers their synthetic constitution, contradictory feelings arise in response to this encroaching plastic technology. Technology has enabled us to extend our control over nature and colonize its regions. Remaking the natural out of the synthetic is a means of maintaining invariability and of ensuring against deviation. Nature is, therefore, both contained and replaced. This overregulation, however, leads to a loss of control: plastic technologies eradicate the genetic diversity of distinct species,



Vincent Shine, *Untitled (Blue Stamen)*, 1989

a process that echoes the technological leveling effect of a seamless plastic existence within culture. Natural artifacts are now composed of the same synthetic materials that are repeatedly found throughout the realm of culture. Nature and culture are both similarly subdued and transformed by the pervasive presence of technology.

Ashley Bickerton's *Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Manaculture's Totalitarian Aesthetic #2* (1990) displays rice, coffee, and peanuts representing the monocultures of Asia, South America, and Africa, along with tapsoil samples from each continent. The materials are encased in six pristine pillars of black anodized steel and glass and restrained by cables to a wall mount, which serve as high-tech bondage gear that both subjugates and entombs natural assets. Bickerton here acts out a wish to fulfill an obsessive fantasy of control and domination of nature through containment and repetition. Within the sterile confinement of the receptacles, differences between natural materials become superfluous, as each natural element is rendered utterly impatient by its isolation in identical steel-and-glass units. Sealed in these slick, airtight "packages," the elements lose their value as usable goods, serving only as signs for commodities that demonstrate power and control through ownership. The visual sterility of the packaged monocultures suggests their incapacity to function as foodstuffs and emphasizes how "third world" resources are transformed into "first world" commodities.

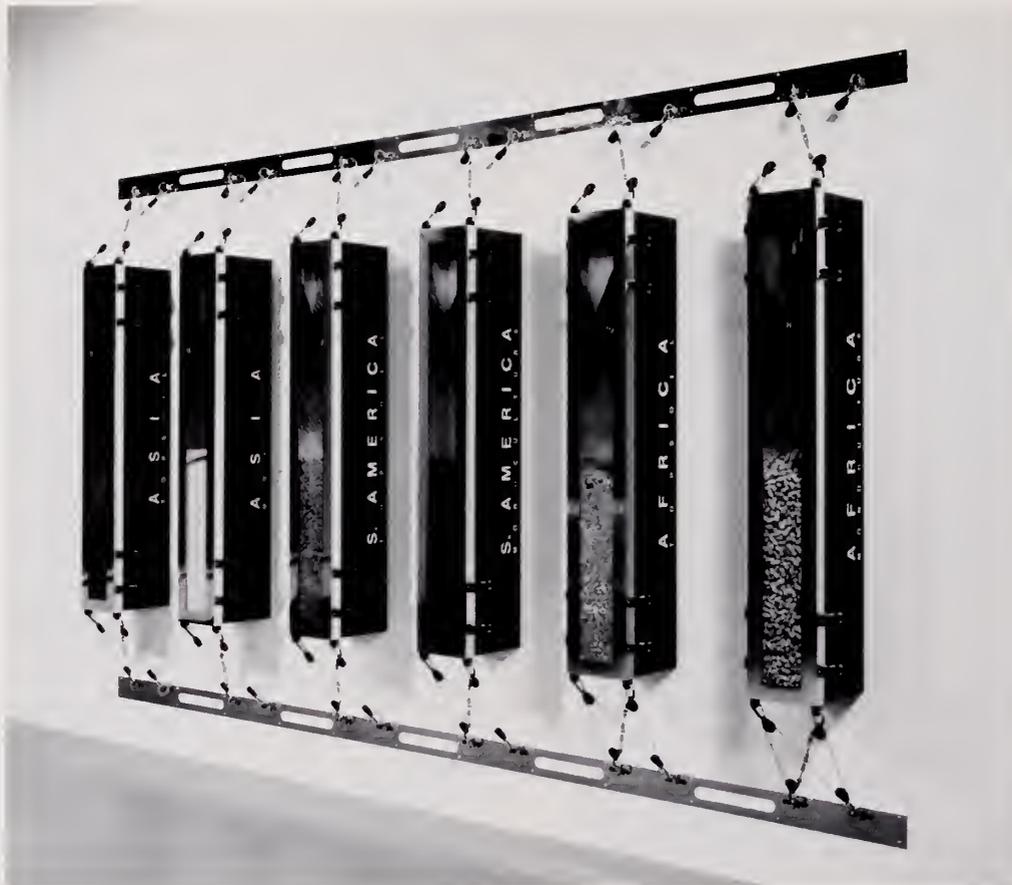
The works of Peter Hopkins deal with waste, the other side of consumption. In *Eight Steps on a Thirty Foot Section* (1989), Hopkins photographically documents the collection of garbage from eight spots along a thirty-foot stretch of freeway. The garbage is raked up in a canvas and stored in a bin (*Boxed Thirty Foot Pour*, 1989), displayed alongside the photographs of



Vincent Shine, *Untitled (Long-stem Seedling)*, 1989

the sites from which the garbage was taken. Hopkins makes reference to Robert Smithson's work of the late 1960s by using Smithson's "site/nan-site" strategy of documenting and displacing materials from a specific natural site into a gallery environment. The allusion to Smithson functions as a historical point of reference that accentuates the urgency of current environmental problems: in both the "nan-site" of the gallery and the real "site" in the external world, garbage now occupies the position that natural objects once held. Hopkins uses canvas, a sign denoting cultural development, to contain garbage samples that we in fact cannot contain. The refuse itself is not visible, but its contours can be made out underneath the rolled canvas. Hopkins plays off the same type of control that other works use vis-à-vis natural materials, but his reference is to the present state of disposable culture. The artist's canvas becomes just another scrap that fills our homogenized vista or our landfills. The unadulterated uniformity of our waste attests to the consistency of our experience of consumption.

Claire Pentecost's *Museum of Natural History* (1989–90) represents an oppositional relationship of humans to animals. Pentecost works with square panels mounted several inches away from the wall in a highly structured grid format of eight vertical rows of eight panels each. The front side of each square is coated with a glue derived from animal hide and stained with black and white pigment. Mounted to the back side of each square is a photograph of an animal, taken from the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Repeated in each vertical row is the image of a different animal. The animal images are reflected in mirrors mounted on the wall behind each row of panels, and in order to see them the viewer must negotiate the correct angle. This transmutation of the natural into a dead image as a



Ashley Bickerton, *Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Monoculture's Totolitorion Aesthetic #2*, 1990

product discloses the nature of our relationship to animals, our treatment of them as exploitable resources. The hierarchy becomes apparent through the dynamics of power inherent in the act of looking: the active human gaze structures a position of dominance over the object of the gaze. But this implicit control is made problematic by the need to negotiate the proper angle and by the fact that viewers' attempts at looking are also reflected back in the mirrors.

The works here, which oscillate between control and loss of control, signal the crisis in our ability to understand and experience nature. In the work of

Shine and Bickerton such an exacting control is exercised that nature is preserved as an artifact. The control of nature through this process of preservation is symptomatic of the homogenization and consequent anesthetizing effect of a technological culture.

Hopkins and Pentecost undo the unyielding structure of control by introducing elements of dynamic contradiction. The disruption of control mirrors our overuse and abuse of natural resources, a situation that cannot be contained and that has global ecological ramifications.

## Information Value:

### The Art of Environmental Activism

Helen Molesworth

Against the backdrop of an environmental crisis, contemporary culture in general is experiencing a resurgence of attentiveness to nature, which is increasingly evident in the media and in political attention to environmental issues. A new branch of philosophy, "land ethics," proposes that we are morally responsible for our treatment of the Earth. As the philosopher Aldo Leopold has said, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundary of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." Similarly, "Gaia," a scientific theory which developed the concept of "planet management," insists that all earth processes are inextricably linked in a cycle of cause and effect. In the words of Richard Lavelack, the founder of Gaia, "the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, can be regarded as a single entity. . . ."

Several of the artists in this exhibition—Mark Dion and William Schefferine, Patricia Thornley, and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds—situate their work in this matrix of social concern and responsibility. Their work breaks the hermeticism of art, and they resist the nihilism of the postmodern concept that reality is now only a media image. Instead, these artists didactically implicate the viewer in a larger cultural system, demanding active engagement both in the artwork and in the environmental crisis in general.

This position of activism is achieved largely through the use of texts. A text requires a reader

far completion; as the French literary theorist Roland Barthes has written, "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." Here the viewer/reader must assume an active position, one equivalent to that of the artist. The incorporation of text consequently creates a dialogue between artist and viewer. Informative or poetic, text can communicate alternative forms of information.

In Christy Rupp's 99.44% *Forgotten* (1990), two life-size elephant tusks fabricated entirely out of plastic bottles are displayed as if in a natural history museum. A whitewash of paint over the tusks obscures most of the text, leaving only the Ivory Soap logo prominently visible. The sign "Ivory" emerges and recedes, familiar and unfamiliar, as if mirroring our semiconsciousness about the environmental crisis. Rupp implies that our desire for purity and cleanliness has been partly caused by the proliferation of toxic cleaning substances in nonbiodegradable containers. She also links the hoarding of precious objects to the endangerment of a species, in this case, elephants slaughtered for their ivory tusks.

The destructive role of the West in the global ecosystem is further explored in the work of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds. Like Rupp, Heap of Birds actively negates the rarified art object through his choice of materials. In *In Honor of Rain Forest* (1989), three black-and-white photostats with three fragmentary texts are pinned to the wall. Their urgent messages

# BURNING DEBT BURNING BURGERS

IN HONOR OF RAIN FOREST  
© HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS 1989

# FOOD FOR THE BRICK PRICK

IN HONOR OF RAIN FOREST  
© HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS 1989

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, *In Honor of Rain Forest*, 1989

proclaim the imperiled state of the tropical rain forest in sparse and stringent language that requires deciphering. This deciphering ultimately touches on the cause-and-effect relationship between our daily activities and the demise of the rain forest. For example, "Burning Debt Burning Burgers" and "Food for the Brick Prick" relate our budget deficit and our appetite for red meat to a pattern of overconsumption that has accelerated deforestation. In order to compete in "first world" markets, less industrialized countries like Brazil are forced to strip the forest to make export products and to convert the deforested land into more "profitable" ventures such as cattle ranching. "The Lizard Feeds

U.S." alludes to the loss of species diversity as a by-product of this destruction. Both Rupp and Heap of Birds use a certain ambiguity to question one-sided or merely statistical types of information as well as to initiate an active dialogue with the viewer.

The photographs of Richard Misrach function differently. Firmly rooted in the tradition of documentary photography, his series *The Pit* (1987–89) records the governmental cover-up of the nuclear radiation responsible for the deaths of domestic farm animals near an atomic test site in Nevada (the "pit" is the site where government officials instructed farmers to dump the carcasses). Very little interpretation is required here.

# THE LIZARD FEEDS U.S.

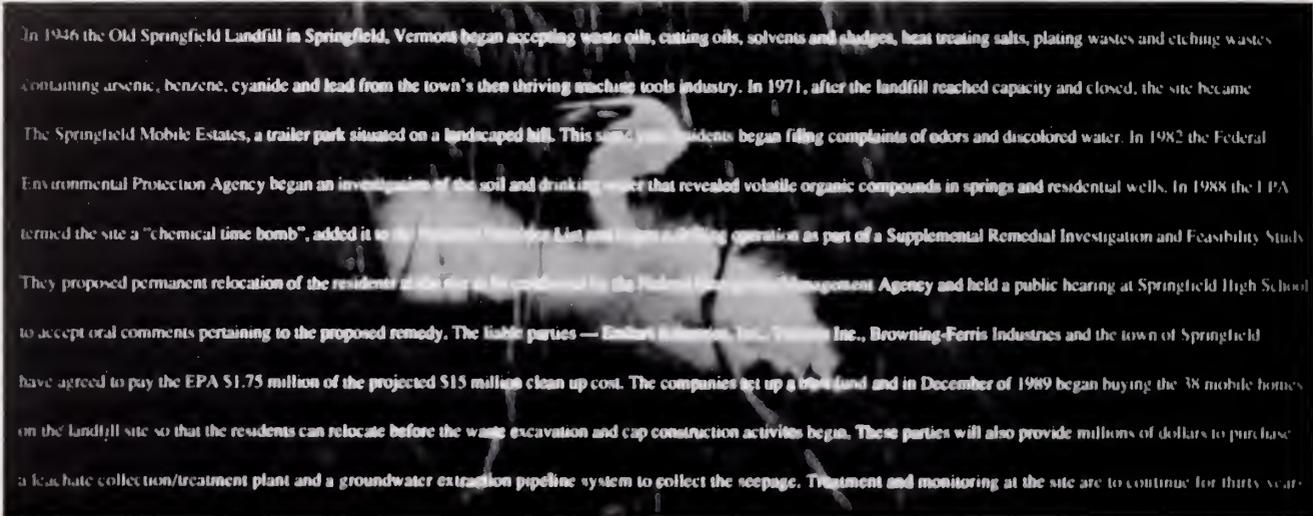
IN HONOR OF RAIN FOREST  
© HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS 1989

The monumental photographs of the dead cattle and the straightforward text about the cover-up, although informative, anesthetize the viewer. The event is already complete so that we are not given any room for action; overwhelmed by the horror of the event, we turn away from the work.

The effect of media sensationalism and dramatic photojournalism on the information we receive about the environment is critically examined in Patricia Tharnley's installation. Her work sits in a darkened area of the gallery, dormant until activated by the push of a button, at which point it is transformed into a media spectacle. A slide show of text and images

accompanied by music is projected onto the surface of a white fiberglass lawn swan sitting in front of a wall constructed of split metal pipes. The text tells of a trailer park built on top of a landfill; the projected images are of flying geese. While the lawn swan speaks of the dream of home ownership, the flying geese allude to those who inhabit more transitional housing such as trailer parks. This element of class, perpetually overlooked by the media, is foregrounded in Tharnley's work as a way to further complicate the issue of waste, for industrial and nuclear by-products are dumped every day into poor communities in the United States or exported to third world countries. After sixty seconds, this "media moment" ceases and the work returns to a state of "hibernation." By using devices of duration and distraction, Tharnley raises the question of access to information and the terms under which it is given and received. One cannot absorb all of the text in one reading. The experience is thus timed, which places us in a position of power, since we can control the amount of information received; yet the arrangement also exposes how our access to information is actually highly controlled.

The need for alternative types of information and informed dialogue underlies the site-specific installation *Under the Verdant Carpet: The Dreams of Maunt Kach* (1990) by Mark Dian and William Schefferine. Contained within the familiar urban landscape of dumpsters, car tires, and garbage drums is a miniature tropical rain forest. The latter has come to signify ecological crisis, and its inclusion among elements of our own familiar landscape reveals the way we tend to displace environmental problems onto foreign sites. This displacement distracts us from creating strategies to solve our own waste problems or understand how the two problems are intertwined.



In 1946 the Old Springfield Landfill in Springfield, Vermont began accepting waste oils, cutting oils, solvents and sludges, heat treating salts, plating wastes and etching wastes containing arsenic, benzene, cyanide and lead from the town's then thriving machine tools industry. In 1971, after the landfill reached capacity and closed, the site became The Springfield Mobile Estates, a trailer park situated on a landscaped hill. This same year residents began filing complaints of odors and discolored water. In 1982 the Federal Environmental Protection Agency began an investigation of the soil and drinking water that revealed volatile organic compounds in springs and residential wells. In 1988 the EPA termed the site a "chemical time bomb", added it to the Superfund List and began cleanup operation as part of a Supplemental Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study. They proposed permanent relocation of the residents to be paid for by the Federal Environmental Management Agency and held a public hearing at Springfield High School to accept oral comments pertaining to the proposed remedy. The liable parties — Easton Industries, Inc., Truitt, Inc., Browning-Ferris Industries and the town of Springfield have agreed to pay the EPA \$1.75 million of the projected \$15 million clean up cost. The companies set up a trust fund and in December of 1989 began buying the 38 mobile homes on the landfill site so that the residents can relocate before the waste excavation and cap construction activities begin. These parties will also provide millions of dollars to purchase a leachate collection/treatment plant and a groundwater extraction pipeline system to collect the seepage. Treatment and monitoring at the site are to continue for thirty years.

Patricia Thornley, *Untitled*, 1990

Maunt Kach is the primary dumping site for New York City's waste, and it is projected that in the near future it will be the highest peak on the northeastern coast. The dream of Mount Koch covered by lush greenery is undoubtedly a utopian one, yet it has a realistic and even pragmatic side. The garbage containers are covered with quotations, graphs, photographs, and diagrams which provide information, sometimes contradictory, that indicates the complexity of the local, national, and global eco-crisis. Included in this barrage of information are suggestions for both personal and governmental regenerative recycling

strategies. These multifarious sources and types of knowledge are meant to empower the viewer, providing both a plethora of information and a context for debate.

All these works lay the groundwork for environmental activism. But the dissemination of information is only a beginning. The works also give us an opportunity to question our relationship to, and the importance of, nature in our lives and in our perceptions of ourselves. The answers will enable us to restructure a society in accordance with environmental realities.

## Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions are in inches;  
height precedes width precedes depth.

### Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959)

*Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy*  
*Manoculture's Totalitarian*  
*Aesthetic #2*, 1990  
Steel, concrete, glass, rubber, plastic,  
soil, rice, coffee, and peanuts,  
96 × 156 × 12¼  
Sannabend Gallery, New York

### Clegg (b. 1957) and Guttmonn (b. 1957)

*Untitled #11*, 1987  
Cibachrome print, 45 × 66  
Collection of Samuel and  
Rannie Heyman

### Petoh Coyne (b. 1953)

*Untitled*, 1989  
Mixed media, 111 × 60 × 63  
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

### Michael Cuddington (b. 1953)

*Central Valley*, 1989  
Oil on plywood, 38 × 152  
Collection of the artist

### Brian D'Amoto (b. 1962)

*Tamb far Female and Male Butterfly*,  
1989  
Ultramarine powdered pigment, gold  
powder, butterfly specimens, and  
aluminum display case, 34 × 22 × 3  
Collection of the artist

### Mork Dion (b. 1961) and William Schefferine (b. 1959)

*Under the Verdant Carpet: The Dreams*  
*of Maunt Kach*, 1990  
Mixed-media, site-specific installation,  
dimensions variable  
American Fine Arts, Ca., New York

### Laura Emrick (b. 1960)

*Stalen Harizan*, 1990  
Car windshield and side window  
with sun reflective screen,  
17½ × 72 × 2 overall  
Collection of the artist

### Jock Goldstein (b. 1945)

*Untitled*, 1985  
Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 84  
Collection of B.Z. and  
Michael Schwartz

### April Gornik (b. 1953)

*One*, 1986  
Oil on linen, 72 × 98  
Collection of the artist; courtesy  
Edward Tharp Gallery, New York

### Hochivi Edgor Heap of Birds (b. 1954)

*In Hanar of Rain Forest*, 1989  
Three photostats, 42 × 56 each  
Collection of the artist

### Peter Hopkins (b. 1955)

*Boxed Thirty Faat Paur*, from the  
*CAPITAL PROJECT*, 1989  
Bleached, rolled, and glued canvas  
with objects, 9 × 98 × 7  
American Fine Arts, Ca., New York

*Eight Staps an a Thirty Faat Section*,  
from the *CAPITAL PROJECT*, 1989  
Eight Cibachrome prints,  
20 × 17¼ each  
American Fine Arts, Ca., New York

### Richard Misroch (b. 1949)

*Dead Animals #1*, from the series  
*The Pit*, 1987–89  
Ektacalar plus print, 20 × 24  
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco,  
and fataman, inc.

*Dead Animals #279*, from the series  
*The Pit*, 1987–89  
Ektacalar plus print, 20 × 24  
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco,  
and fataman, inc.

### Dovid Nyzio (b. 1958)

*Farm*, 1989  
Butterfly wings, honeycomb board,  
and glass, 86 × 50  
Collection of Edward R. Dawne, Jr.;  
courtesy Pastmasters Gallery, New York

### Cloire Pentecost (b. 1958)

*Museum of Natural History*, 1989–90  
Eight panels of waad, hide glue with  
pigment, photographs, plexiglass,  
and mirrors, 72 × 8 × 4 each  
Collection of the artist

### John Pfohl (b. 1939)

*PFV-2-A/Fantasy Island/ABC-TV*, 1981  
Platinum-palladium print and text,  
14 × 11  
Janet Barden, Inc., New York

*PFV-3-A/Masterpiece Theater:  
Sunset Song/PBS-TV, 1981*  
Platinum-palladium print and text,  
14 × 11  
Janet Borden, Inc., New York

*PFV-7-A/Masterpiece Theater:  
Therese Raquin/PBS-TV, 1981*  
Platinum-palladium print and text,  
14 × 11  
Janet Borden, Inc., New York

**Alexis Rockman (b. 1962)**

*The Dynamics of Power, 1989*  
Oil on canvas, 80 × 68  
Collection of Arthur and  
Carol Goldberg

**Christy Rupp (b. 1949)**

*99.44% Forgotten, 1990*  
Two pieces of welded steel and  
plastic bottles, 95 × 38 × 14 each  
P.P.O.W., New York

**Vincent Shine (b. 1962)**

*Untitled (Blue Stomen), 1989*  
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate,  
acetate, steel, epoxy, plexigloss, acrylic  
point, acrylic pigment, and cyanacrylate  
ester, 7 × 4 × 3  
Private collection; courtesy Thea  
Westreich Associates, New York

*Untitled (Long-stem Seedling), 1989*  
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate,  
acetate, steel, acrylic point, plexi-  
gloss, and cyanacrylate ester,  
12 × 3¼ × 3½  
Collection of Eileen and  
Michael Cohen

*Untitled (Mulberry Branch), 1989*  
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate,  
steel, acrylic point, plexigloss, and  
cyanacrylate ester, 2 × 4 × 3  
Wolff Gallery, New York

*Untitled (Papyrus #2), 1989*  
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate,  
acetate, steel, acrylic paint, plexigloss,  
and cyanacrylate ester, 14½ × 5 × 4  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward W.  
Rose, III

*Untitled (Small Seedling), 1989*  
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate,  
steel, acrylic point, plexiglass, poly-  
olefin, and synthetic acrylic polymer,  
8 × 4 × 5¼  
Collection of Knight Landesman;  
courtesy Robbin Lockett Gallery,  
Chicago

**Michelle Stuart (b. 1940)**

*Brookings Herbarium #18, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #33, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium, #37, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #41, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #45, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #75, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #89, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #94, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

*Brookings Herbarium #99, 1988–89*  
Encaustic, pigment, and plants,  
12 × 12  
Fawbush Gallery, New York

**Patricia Thornley (b. 1961)**

*Untitled, 1990*  
Multimedia installation,  
70 × 168 × 48  
Audio by the artist and A. Leroy  
Collection of the artist

Photograph Credits  
Ken Schles (Goldstein, Rockmon)  
Michael Tropeo (Bickerton)

**Whitney Museum of American Art**  
**Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza**  
33 Maiden Lane at Nassau Street  
New York, New York 10038  
(212) 943-5657

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