
INNOVATIONS IN ART AND DESIGN

NEW PRACTICES NEW PEDAGOGIES

a reader

EDITED BY MALCOLM MILES

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8 Eco-art Practices

Reiko Goto with Tim Collins

Introduction

Over the last seven years we have worked on projects in post-industrial public spaces, dealing with a landscape devastated by the steel industry and mining, trying to recover the rivers and forests of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania for both bio-diversity and public access. Our work most often focuses on plants and natural creatures. We believe that all life has value and deserves our respect and attention. Alongside our practical work, we have begun a series of conversations and more formal discussions about how artists contribute to change.

We begin this chapter by providing a historical overview of environmental and ecological arts, then introduce a mapping strategy that we have been working on together through which we see art practices as complex multi-dimensional networks. We have struggled with this idea for years, but after spending time looking at a vast insect collection at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, we began to sense the effect of what natural scientists call systematics. That is: the process of identifying, naming and categorizing the relationships between wildly diverse (and wild) organisms is a fascinating if not tedious human endeavor. Wanting initially to know about moths that occur in Asia, we found that by using the taxonomic system we were able to understand the similarities and appreciate the differences of thousands of unique species. It occurred to us that the reason to map and classify common typologies can be found in the fact that by understanding the similarities, the most wondrous differences amongst these creatures emerge. If we are going to understand the methods and means that artists bring to processes of change, we need a flexible mapping system for this as well – or, at least, that is how it seems to us at present. The system outlined below is an initial attempt in this direction. During the process we have had discussions and disagreements about its application. No doubt they will go on.

The main focus of this chapter, however, is work presented at two recent group exhibitions of ecological art: *Natural Reality* at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen,

Germany in 1999, curated by art historian Heike Strelow, which looked at changing relationships between humans and the natural world; and *Ecovention* at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), Cincinnati, Ohio in the summer of 2002, co-curated by Amy Lipton and Sue Spaid, which focused on inventive strategies to transform local ecologies. Both exhibitions presented over thirty artworks that included documentation, re-creation, and new work created for the exhibition. We participated in these exhibitions and examine some of the works included in them below using the mapping structure noted above.

From Earth Art and Environmental Art to Eco-Systems Approaches

Sculpture has a different historical relationship to landscape from painting – it is only with the advent of the minimalist era of modernist sculpture in the 1960s that landscape began to play a sustained and primary role in it, while the European tradition of painting includes, from Poussin and Claude onwards, a specific framing of nature as the ground of human lyrical play or epic endeavor.

John Beardsley, Thomas Hobbs and Lucy Lippard are the primary authors on the subject of earth-art. Beardsley's *Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects* (1977) and *Earthworks and Beyond* (1984) provide an overview on the originators of earth-art. Hobbs' *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (1981) is the best reference on that artist's work, while Lucy Lippard, in *Overlay* (1983), willfully transcends the hierarchy of the artworld as well as the ranks of the earth-artists, providing a comprehensive overview of diverse archeological, historical and contemporary practices. Beardsley and Lippard describe a post-studio inquiry that integrates place, form and materials. The earth-artists engaged in landscape directly: earth was the material, the form oriented the viewer to the place of the work. Earth-art challenged the purpose of art as a collectable object. In some ways it was one of the first artworks to go public.

Herbert Bayer, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, Isamu Noguchi and Dennis Oppenheimer were just some of the original practitioners that began working as earth-artists, or environmental sculptors. They experimented with simple geometric forms that integrated place, space, time and materials. The work ranged from pristine natural environments to post-industrial environments. Theorists-practitioners Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Robert Morris expressed a more integrated relationship to nature as system. Smithson was acutely aware of nature's entropic and eutrophic cycles, embraced mining areas and quarries as the content and context for his work. Smithson's partner and colleague Nancy Holt was particularly interested in earth/sky relationships creating works that updated ancient techniques with a modern sculptural vocabulary. Morris addressed post-industrial landscapes, in both form and theory. Writing about his own work in Kent, Washington, his articles address the ethical responsibility of artists working in post-industrial landscapes. (Morris, 1979: 11-16; Morris, 1993: 211-232) Discussing the potential for aesthetic action to enable further

natural destruction on the part of industrial interests, he telegraphs issues that would emerge in restoration ecology, a decade later.

At the same time another group of artists emerged with a focused interest in systems theory and ecology. Hans Haacke, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist, and Agnes Denes were the original (and continuing) practitioners. They differed from the land-artists by their interest in dynamic living systems. Where the land-artists expressed themselves in the landscape, these ecological artists were interested in collaborating with nature and ecology to develop integrated concepts, images and metaphors. While earth art was amongst the first to go public, these ecological artists were the first to act in the greater interest of nature and the commons. Jack Burnham, for instance, wrote an important book - *Great Western Salt Works* (1974) that developed an initial approach to systems aesthetics.

Alan Sonfist's *Art in the Land* (1983) is a selection of texts which address the scope and range of artists working in relationship to environments then. Barbara Matilsky's *Fragile Ecologies* - a book accompanying a 1982 exhibition of that name - provides an overview of the historic precedents for this work, as well as some of the most important work of the first and second generation of ecological artists. Bylai Oakes (1995) *Sculpting with the Environment* is a valuable reference in that he asked each artist to write about their own work. Kastner's *Land and Environmental Art* (1998) is an international survey of both types of artists' projects, with a survey of writing on the subject by Brian Wallis. The text goes into the first, second and third generations of earth and ecological artists, providing an overview of works and accompanying articles. Heike Strelow's extensive catalogue for the *Natural Reality* show in Aachen (1999) expands the concept of ecological-art and its range of effort to include the human body as a site of natural inquiry. The catalogue provides arguments for the three areas of the exhibition, the unity of humans and nature, artists as natural and cultural scientists, and nature in a social context. The next exhibit to address ecological-art occurred at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in 2002: *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*¹. The accompanying catalog explores the artist's role in publicizing issues, re-valuing brownfields, acting upon biodiversity and dealing with urban infrastructure, reclamation and environmental justice. Recently, a new online Green Museum² has opened, loosely curated by Sam Bower. This site presents a range of eco-artists' works and texts as well as providing an area for dialogue about art and the environment.

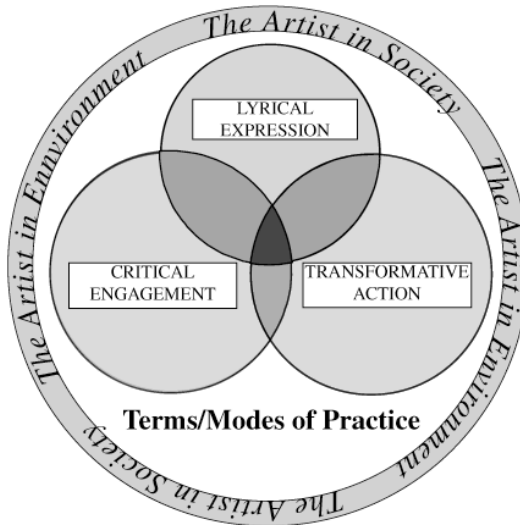
A Mapping Strategy

In the simplest terms the map we use is a circular continuum, a taxonomic system, that mutually locates the different methods and means by which artists create change. No point in the circle is more or less valuable than another, they are simply different. We seek to understand commonalities and differences through this process, in the hopes of creating a dialogue that will lead to more effective practices and pedagogies. The components are as follows: Lyrical expression is a

productive internal response to existing social, political or environmental systems. It is a poetic response to an experience which can provide insight and new perception. It emerges from a desire to be involved (complicity) and express oneself with lyrical method and intention.

Critical engagement is primarily external from its social, political or environmental subject. It is a rational response to a particular concept or experience, that reframes perception and understanding. It tends to be an analytical monologue that seldom has any capacity or framework to receive or process response. It emerges from a moral or ethical idealism. Often rational and potentially didactic the critical practice is about the application of oppositional knowledge.

Transformative action requires critical (external) distance and a discursive (internal) relationship that is based in rational instrumental approaches to perception, understanding and value. It emerges from a moral and ethical position but embraces the creative potential of discourse and compromise.



A graphic representation of modes of practice within a social-environmental setting. (Image by Goto and Collins)

Most artists have elements of two or three of these modes of practice embodied in their conceptual intent and in the range of their works. Following the goals of systematics this is merely a process of identifying, naming and relating common typologies. No single modality is more important or less important than any other. The diagram is actually a circular continuum, with the overlapping modalities of a Venn diagram, rather than a linear hierarchy.

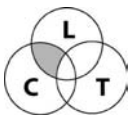
TYPOLOGY	FOCUS	METHOD	PROCESS	RELATIONSHIP
Lyrical	Internal	Poetic	Expression	Complicity
Critical	External	Rational	Analysis	Oppositional
Transformative	Internal External	Compromise	Interaction	Transformative

Using some well known works as examples we demonstrate the use of this diagram. Each of these works effect change in important ways.



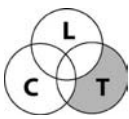
If we were to consider Christo and Jean Claude's memorable *Running Fence*, the temporary project that ran across Sonoma County, California, and into the sea in 1976, it would fall into the space between lyrical expression and transformative action.

The work is primarily poetic and expressive in its reception, the production of the work (the process) is fundamentally internal. Working with decision makers and land owners requires compromise, and interaction. For a brief moment the work was transformative, it changed the audience for, and the perception of, this particular landscape.



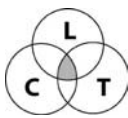
Robert Smithson's *Site/Non-site* artworks from 1968 (which referred to the dump sites and industrial wastelands of his later work in a gallery setting), they would fall into the space between lyrical expression and critical engagement. The work has a sense of the poetic, yet at the same time it is primarily external and analytical.

It can be viewed as either complicit or oppositional. The production of the work is a mix of external critical analysis and poetic expression.



Maya Lin's *Viet Nam Veterans Memorial*, would fall in the area of transformative action. The work retained an external critical relationship to the war, memorializing military loss rather than accomplishment. The process was somewhat interactive as veterans groups sought a figural work to celebrate the warrior spirit

in the same area, ultimately this work remains a clearly unique and transformative element amongst the ever increasing collection of war memorials that embrace more traditional element of power and warrior spirit in Washington D.C. today.



Joseph Beuys' final project *7000 Oaks for Kassel*, occurs in the interstitial space at the center of the diagram, The work was initiated by the artist, yet it required interaction (planting of trees) to reach completion . The work will ultimately transform the City of Kassel by the sheer number of elements added to this

landscape. It is interesting to consider that if we were to examine the diverse body of work created by this artist, it would be distributed throughout the diagram.³

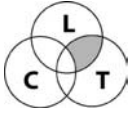
Returning to the *Ecovention* and *Natural Realities* exhibitions, we want to examine specific works that have been done by friends and colleagues. As we are primarily artists ourselves, we think it is important to be clear that this text is not intended to be a monologic work of art criticism. We have spent time with these artists, we have experienced the work and read their statements as well as having reflected upon our own experiences. The goal of this investigation is to introduce a method that might help us as practitioners find some common ground and a point of discourse about the similarities, differences, intentions and impacts of engaged social and ecological art.

The *Ecovention* exhibition, at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio focused upon “getting it built”. A pragmatic and instrumental relationship between artists, landscapes, ecologies and cultures. A key to the curators process is a “standard of inventiveness” based upon Plato’s “Symposium”. “...the subversive Diotima argues with Socrates about the significance of divine beauty, which entails imagination and brings forth not beautiful images, but new realities, which are presumably original or inventive.” (Spaid 2002: 3) The curators created a framework of

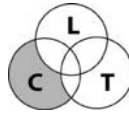
1. activism, issues and monitoring
2. new values in brownfield (post industrial) landscapes
3. biodiversity and species depletion
4. urban infrastructure and environmental justice
5. reclamation and restoration aesthetics.

The exhibition included forty artists, presenting work both within the museum as well as commissioned works outside the museum. We examine two of the commissioned works and one gallery presentation.

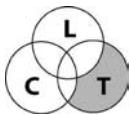
We want to start by comparing the artwork of Lynne Hull and Susan Leibovitz Steinman in the *Ecovention* exhibition. Both projects were constructed outdoors in Cincinnati. Hull created islands with tree branches and installed them on two different ponds located in two different places. Steinman created a temporary compost garden right next to the museum with found objects, plants and PVC pipes. Both Hull and Steinman’s installations dealt with changing an existing space. Were their works transformative, critical or lyrical actions? What were the differences between them? Hull used mostly natural materials. “My sculpture and installations provide shelter, food, water or space for wildlife,” Hull said, “An eco-atonement for its loss of habitat to human encroachment. (Spaid 2002: 140) Steinman used both natural and man-made materials. She said, “My commitment is to employ my art skills in the service of community health and empowerment.” (Spaid 2002: 143)



Susan L. Steinman used PVC pipes found objects such as old windows to make an expressive sculpture to celebrate a compost garden in the middle of a public-private city plaza. The materials provided a structure that supported plants, which attracted a mix of people, birds, and insects. Steinman's work altered a structured formal garden space that while including plants, subsumed their features in an architectonic structure. Her installation shifted experience towards a funky mix of materials that made explicit the human relationship between sunshine, soil and water, plants and birds, composition and decomposition, creating an atypical landscape for human consideration at the heart of the city. The work in our minds is a mix of lyrical and transformative intent and process. While primarily poetic and expressive, it retains a critical edge and demands compromise and interaction in its development.

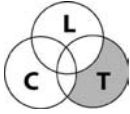


Lynne Hull wanted to attract wildlife, therefore her artwork had to blend into its living environment. Tim and I went to see her tree branch islands during the *Ecovention* exhibition. One was located in Swain Park, a small public park with lawn as its dominant feature. It was a hot day, and there was not much shade. We stood next to the pond to watch her artwork. The water looked still and troubled, with pollution marring the surface. We drove to the next piece. It was located in Rowe Wood Cincinnati Nature Center. There were many trees and the sounds of insects. We walked for a while on a wooden trail to get to the pond. When we reached the pond we sat on the trail to watch her tree branch island. We were totally relaxed but we did not see any wildlife at first. A few minutes later we saw some turtles. They were swimming and sticking their heads out of the water. Then we realized a very large snapping turtle was swimming toward us. We enjoyed imagining turtles climbing on Hull's tree branch island. If we were good observers and sensitive to the environment, perhaps we could notice more, like aquatic insects, small fish and birds. Hull integrated her artwork with the environment. Swain Park was a harsh environment for living things. Her branch island never quite integrated, instead it reflected the harshness. Rowe Wood Cincinnati Nature Center was a rich environment. Living things interacted with her tree branch island more visibly than they did in Swain Park. Hull's work is about an internal poetic relationship to nature, rather than culture. It relies on a thoughtful mix of expression and complicity with existing natural systems to achieve its product and its process. She is, in our minds, an exemplary lyrical practitioner who changes the way we think about the context and reason to make art.



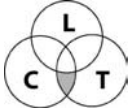
Kathryn Miller and Michael Horn presented an artwork called *Desert Lawn Action*. A plot of lawn is splayed out on a gurney attached to an intravenous drip and being rushed across the desert by medical personnel. The plot of lawn on a gurney was humorous but also incredibly poignant. Despite the desert environment in the south west United States, enormous effort and money is spent to artificially

create and sustain the green-laws of Arcadian development. Given the demands and conditions of the environment it is not out of the question to think of these natural plant communities as requiring life-support to sustain themselves under desert environmental conditions. This work is primarily critical, external from the social political decision-making processes that support such action, it is a rational oppositional analysis, with admittedly hilarious consequences. A powerful critical work that clearly illustrates the old axiom that a picture is worth a thousand words.



Acid Mine Drainage & Art (AMD & Art) presented four frames of earth materials and man-made materials from their project site. Allan Comp, a historian, has directed the project since 1994 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The region is and was a site of considerable coal mining and steel production. The streams and rivers of the area are amongst the most heavily impacted by acid mine drainage in the country. Old coal mines collect water and leach out chemicals that change sweet water into a poisonous mix of acid and iron. The challenge of the *AMD & Art* project was not only to deal with enormous environmental problems but also to build an art project in a community that did not have any contemporary art practice. For ten years *AMD & Art* kept experimenting with cleaning the acidic water and introducing the project to large numbers of audiences outside of Johnstown. For the last three years the project has been working on a 35 acre site in Vintondale, PA, to transform it into a wetland treatment system and a park. Artist Stacy Levy, landscape designer Julie Bargman, and hydrogist Bob Deason worked on this biological water treatment system and landscaping plan. This work is transformative. It raises important questions about the nature-culture/industry relationship. The project has been a ten-year interaction and dialogue amongst artists and scientists, decision makers, community members and funders. The work has become an important example for Appalachia and for similar regions in north-east England. The artists, designer and project directors have worked closely with teams of young Americorps volunteers assuring that the expertise and commitment to change in the face of overwhelming problems becomes part of the culture of that region.

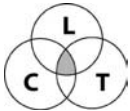
The *Natural Reality* exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in Aachen Germany in 1999 focused upon the future meaning of nature. The curator takes a critical position on the separation of nature and culture and argues for integration based on three artistic positions: 1. relationship between humans and nature; 2. critical analytical positions between nature and culture; and 3. artists as visionaries and creators of utopian ideals and realities. The exhibition was intended as a discursive platform. The curator integrated presentations and texts by scientists as well as artists and theorists in the project. The work was integrated into the culture of Aachen through onsite programs and funding from the policy-oriented Aachener Stiftung assured the connection between the products of museum culture and the decision makers of the region. The exhibition included workinside the museum as well as in the community. We examine works from both contexts.



Romano Bertuzzi's work in the *Natural Reality* exhibition consisted of photographs of cheese making at his family farm and a regular performance where he produced cheese at the museum.

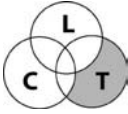
Photographs included pictures of his mother making cheese and cleaning up the cattle pen. Bertuzzi's presentation is tuned for critical impact. He wants us to understand that cheese is not just a commercial product. Each day he uses 15 litres of fresh cow milk to begin the production of food. (Strelow 1999: 61) Within the space of the museum the food becomes artifact, a record of craftsmanship which in turn raises questions about consumption, collection and daily life. All of the artifacts, the wheels of cheese, are freely distributed for consumption at the end of the exhibition. This curious work is primarily critical. A rational and oppositional program strategically located in the museum ⁴. Yet the work is also transformative. Bertuzzi's work relies on interaction to achieve his goals and make his point about quality, care and human attention.

In modern farming cow milk is often only used for humans, with calves being fed substitute nutrients. Farmers keep their milk cows for only for three to six years. Then they are slaughtered. In order to sustain human life, many other lives are sacrificed. This sacrifice has to be sacred. Bertuzzi's work did not make me feel guilty, but it made me more appreciative of that sacrifice. Cheese is a product of human wisdom across time and diverse cultures, products of places rather than the homogenous industrial product most of us consume today. There is wisdom in this idea that is relevant to the future.



Georg Dietzler has been using oyster mushrooms to remove toxins from contaminated earth materials such as PCBs and heavy metals. Oyster mushrooms usually feed on oaks. The tannin in oak is similar in chemical structure to PCBs. Using plants to

absorb pollution in soil is a new biotechnology called Phytoremediation. Dietzler created the mushroom piece for the *Natural Reality* exhibition as a temporary installation. The piece consisted of an oak and straw structure with stucco and oak table areas filled with earth infested with PCBs. The process takes years, so Dietzler and a scientist calculated the amount of toxin that was present in the soil and how long it would take for the mushrooms to decontaminate it. He made the structure so that the mushrooms would do the work. After the exhibition ended, Dietzler's work was kept until the structure collapsed. The soil was examined by a scientist and it was completely clean. Dietzler's work is clearly transformative. The work embraces the world yet retains a poignant critical position. The work transforms the culture of science and the culture of the museum. The former in terms of new bio-technologies to mitigate industrial byproducts. The latter in terms of an artifact, that carries within it the biological condition of its own demise. A potent reversal and commentary on modernist works that celebrate industrial self destruction. The work is also lyrical, the relationship between the structure, the significant threat of PCB pollutants and the tiny mushrooms is evocative in strange ways. The work both welcomes the audience in its simple construction yet denies entry due to the toxic materials it contains. Finally the work is time-based, but at a pace most of us would not perceive.



Herman Prigann's *Terra Nova* project is a grandiose plan to integrate humanity and nature through the restoration of former industrial sites. The work has evolved during his travel and work in Eastern Europe. He presented definite plans for a brown coal site in Hiederlausitz, where the goal is to integrate the industrial waste through the efforts and knowledge of indigenous agricultural experts. Herman sees restoration as a mix of re-occupation and education that leads to new expertise and a restorative economy. Prigann uses the formal language of the earth artists, to frame and explain his concepts while describing a deep social/ecological systems methodology to realize that work. This work is primarily transformative. To achieve these projects Herman has to work both within and outside the systems of state regeneration; he has to embrace the real need to compromise and to interact with a mix of decisions makers, scientific experts, agricultural experts, laborers and citizens interested in the regenerative capacities of this work.



Eve Andrée Laramée presented two movable gardens on large trucks. These gardens were driven around Aachen. One garden held topiaries and the other held growing herbs, vegetables and corn. Topiaries are a manicured and managed garden form, mostly evergreen trees trimmed into geometrical shapes or simple figures. Food gardens are also highly managed, hybridized forms of nature pushed to perform for human interests. Driving these trucks around Aachen suggests a captive yet mobile museum of nature-culture. Even though the vegetables could be harvested and eaten, this was not Laramée's intention. Her intention was similar to that of people who decorate their houses and gardens with natural materials without connection or reflection upon the natural environment. From the beginning Laramée claims this work in a humorous vein, a mobile pun that challenges the human relationship to nature and its stereotypical manifestations. This work is primarily critical, an external rational analysis, but it is not oppositional. The form of the work is poetic and ultimately complicit with dominant cultural interests. It is a mirror of society.



Helen and Newton Harrison re-presented *Casting a Green Net: Can It Be That We Are Seeing a Dragon?* In 1996, in England, they explored the land between the estuaries of the Mersey River near Liverpool and the Humber near Hull, bordered on the north and on the south by old Roman roads that went over and between the contours of the Pennine Mountains. The shape of the 900 square miles of land looked like a dragon that had wings. In the museum, the Harrisons presented three large maps. One was about the current site condition while the other two were future predictions. One prediction looked like the dragon was dying because of over population and the neglect of a green network. Each scale of the dragon was marked in dark gray. The other prediction looked like a healthy dragon that was saved by a green network which was created between cities and communities. The scales of a healthy dragon were the green space that was surrounded by hedges, as multi-valent wildlife habitats. This work is primarily transformative, it

is both internal in terms of the decision makers and policy experts that participated in its formation, and external in terms of the artworld context of the presentation. The work embraces compromise in terms of the decisions that humans make to either enable or destroy nature, but the artists do not compromise on this conceptual vision. The work is about interaction in terms of development and ultimately in terms of realization and potential transformation. The work is particularly hard to verify for impact because of its scale and intent. This is rational and real utopianism, with transformative intent.

Conclusion

Much of this work presented in the *Ecovention* and *Natural Reality* exhibitions builds upon a new environmental practice called ecological restoration. Integrated with the preservation and conservation practices and methods of the last century restoration adds the potential to heal the ravages of the industrial economy. The importance of ecological restoration is that many different professionals, including artists, and communities, are involved, experimenting with ways to rethink the nature-culture relationship as well as ways we can heal and repair problems that we have created. The work creates new intellectual and physical relationships between humans and nature, which can result in new understanding and interrelationship with great meaning.

Some people think ecological restoration is like fixing a damaged painting. William Throop, in *Environmental Restoration*, argues that while the restorer of paintings works on the original and seeks exact fidelity to a pre-damage state, environmental restoration cannot claim that the original system remains after disturbance. Another way to see it is like getting a false tooth. Once a natural tooth is damaged, there is no way to make it as it was before but a false tooth certainly helps its owner eat, which in turn feeds body and mind. Restoration ecology plays a similar role in nature impacted by industrial avarice. This is the first step in a healing relationship to nature; like the peglegs of antiquity we are learning that life requires attention to health. There is no split between nature and culture, simply shadow and light relationships.

Notes

- 1 Available online at <http://greenmuseum.org/c/econvention>
- 2 Available online at <http://greenmuseum.org>
- 3 Initiated at Documenta 7, in 1982. 7000 basalt columns were placed in a pile in front of the main exhibition hall. One basalt column would be paired with a newly planted tree. The diminishing pile indicated the process of planting trees and completion of the work. By 1987 the last tree was planted with an attendant basalt column. (See 7000 Oaks: Essay by Lynne Cooke with Statements by Joseph Beuys. www.diacenter.org/ltproj/7000/essay.html)
- 4 This methodology follows Danto's statements about modernism, "With Modernism, the conditions of representation themselves become central" (Danto: 1997: 8)

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