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Art in the Environment (AA401)

“Earthstrialization”

For: Angus McWilliam and Glen Coutts

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Since the beginning of our existence people have searched for knowledge, fulfillment and enlightenment. This search has taken explorers up to the tops of mountains and down to the floors of the oceans. This search has taken visionaries through the complexities of the mind and understanding of the soul. Whether the search is intrinsic or extrinsic, profound or shallow, positive or negative, people long for individual truth. Some find truth through interacting with the forces of the world.

Many people interact with the natural environment in order to connect with the natural life force of all living things. Others interact with the imagination to connect with

the creative life force found in expression.

The imagination and the environment are a natural match; both evoke powerful emotions and actions. These two strong forces are what many environmental artists draw upon for inspiration.

The focus of this paper will be the learning and experiences that lead to the inspiration and construction of my “Earthstrialization” piece. The University of Strathclyde’s Art and the Environment module is a five day interactive course that combines lecture, investigation, construction, review and analysis. Each day the course provided new insight into the understanding of environmental art. This newly acquired insight provided me with inspirational ideas for my final piece. This paper will outline the key learning’s taken from each day and explain how they aided in the development of Earthstrialization. The paper will go on to explain the various perspectives I considered when developing, constructing and interacting with the piece.

The introduction to the module was a lecture by environmental artist, Professor Timo Jokela of Lapland University in Finland. Unfortunately I was not present for Professor Jokela’s lecture however I will

refer to his writing (A WAY NORTH –reflections on the relationship between art and the northern environment) throughout this paper.

Timo Jokela explained the idea of local people’s difficulty to view their land that they work everyday as an esthetic landscape. To explain this concept Jokela (2003) quoted Esa Sironen:

The subject of a landscape is not the farmer, just as the subject of the water is not a fish swimming in it. To be such a subject, a person may not naively be part of nature but comprehend him- or herself as standing opposite to nature, distinguished from it. Landscape is a relational concept. It requires mowing hay, cutting down trees, stopping one’s mushroom picking, straitening one’s back and putting oneself for only a moment beyond the confines of work and productivity – looking at things as a child, artist, philosopher.

I began to think about how a Glaswegian views Glasgow and about how I as a Canadian viewed Glasgow. The first participatory day of the module was a trip to Perth Sculpture trail and the Scottish Natural Heritage. I had not visited Perth before and my first impression was excellent. The sculpture trail was set along the beautiful river Tay. The gardens and ponds were filled with natural beauty and the energy of spring. As we walked along the trail I heard many of my colleagues say “the environment alone

makes more of a statement than it does with the art.” Many of the pieces were large and constructed with very artificial and manufactured materials making them quite intrusive.



A small group of students agreed that their reactions to this piece were quite negative. This piece reminded us of the conflict and often domination of industry and technology over the natural environment. I found myself thinking that the real art with regards to this piece was the drained reaction of its viewers. I tried to capture this feeling in a picture and thought about incorporating this reaction into my final work.

The Perth sculpture trail did introduce, the idea of framing, into my thought process. Timo Jokela’s writing had me thinking that framing would not effectively capture the true essence of the landscape. “I do not place myself before a landscape as a visual observer nor do I frame what I see; rather, I

try to discover the landscape from within it using all the senses that enable me to experience it.” When I saw the frame on the trail I thought it took the emphasis off of the physical structure of the piece and directed the viewer’s attention to the natural beauty of the park land.



I realized that what was beyond the piece was as important to the understanding of the art as the piece itself. This frame was very effective in catching and keeping peoples attention.



The pieces that I found really blended with the park were the interactive or purposeful artworks. The stylized throne looking

rubbish bins were lovely and helped to keep the park liter free. The Perth trail and the Scottish National Heritage both featured artistic benches which I found helped create a link between the natural environment and people within the environment. I found the aesthetic pattern of these benches to be very pleasing.



The mushroom garden on the Scottish National Heritage trail could serve as an excellent instructional site for outdoor groups learning about the natural environment. The mushroom design allowed the benches to almost completely blend into the landscape.

My colleagues and I agreed that the

mushroom garden awakened the spirit of the child within all of us. We composed a haiku that we thought captured the imagination and innocence of the garden.

*Beautiful Fungus
Plucked into Enchantment
Seated Merriment*



We continued our walk through the Scottish National Heritage trail passing interactive pieces and beautiful points with romantic lookouts. We rounded the next bend and all we could see hear and smell were the busy landfill site and garbage dump that dominated the view for a good portion of the remainder of the trail. The experience once again made me consider the impact that ‘modernism’ and human wastefulness has on our environment.

The following day of the Art and the Environment course allowed us an

opportunity to construct a collaborative piece on an assigned theme. My group was given the word ‘balance’ as a guideline to construct a piece of art with natural materials. The theme suited my chain of thoughts perfectly. The balance between natural and manufactured, positive and negative, life and death had all been running through my mind. As a group we decided to collect material from the surrounding environment and construct a freestanding, naturally balanced structure. The balance point was difficult to find just as each individual struggles to find balance in their own life or as the human race struggles to find balance with the earth.



We found the balance point for our piece. We were not sure if this type of balance was actually possible in life or in terms of human interaction with the environment. We composed a haiku about balance and about our work.

*a point is delicate
impossibly stable
centered force*

The words in this haiku evoked further contemplation about the balance of our world. The momentum and force of the constantly industrializing society will continue to offset the delicate balance of our world.

The third day of the module was filled with lectures and further readings. Angus McWilliam lectured about creative acts: “Through these we can reflect, explore and share our emotional and considered response to the situation in which we find ourselves.” I began to consider the idea of personal interaction with the piece I was planning to create. By this stage I had decided I wanted my work to comment on the effects of technology and I also began to wonder if I could make a personal statement about my experience as a Canadian living in Glasgow.

My ideas grew as I read reviews by journalist and artists. Free-lance writer Katherine Kormendi wrote a piece for Talking Leaves Magazine in which she dealt with “artists who use ritual or performance to explore new ways of relating to nature either individually or collectively” (Kormendi, 1998). Kormendi referred to artists such as Joseph Beuys. Beuys is an ecological artist and member of the German

Green Party who tried to expand the role of artists in society.

Artists must go out of the real world of museums into the “real world” and deal with a range of issues including ‘problems of nature.’ For Beuys, performance and ritual become a means to invoke and re-embody the idea of the artist as shaman or communal healer. (Kormendi, 1998)

I immediately empathized with Beuys spiritual beliefs during interaction with his art. The idea of some type of performance or interaction with my piece was beginning to take shape in my mind.

The concepts and messages I wanted to relay in my art work were beginning to come together. The format of the piece was also developing in my thoughts. On the fourth day of the module we visited the site where our art was to take shape. The selected site was a trail on the banks of the River Clyde.



Photograph: Luke Durston

The site was a contrast; it was both beautiful and ugly. The beauty of the site was

represented in the natural cycle of the tidal effect, the abundance of wildlife and the rolling Scottish hills in the background. The ugliness of the site came from the way the land has been mistreated. People have used this site as dumping grounds for all sorts of rubbish. The River Clyde also washes up litter that was disrespectfully tossed into the water and forgotten about.



Photograph: Glen Coutts

The River Clyde acts as a symbol of Glasgow. The Clyde is the main source of Glasgow's industrial development.

Just as the Clyde became navigable all the way up to Glasgow the shipbuilding industry was turning to steel fabrication. The coastal shipbuilding industry moved up river and by the 1900's Clydeside was producing around 25 per cent of the world's ships.

(<http://www.sunnygovan.com/PLACES/Clyde/RiverClyde.html>)

Art work seen throughout Glasgow reflects the significance of industry. "Glasgow's public art can act as a metaphor of the city's imperial and industrial past, it is perhaps ephemeral present and as a possible focus of consideration as to its future." (Coutts, 2004) I enjoyed the creativity and shock value of George Wyllie's "The Straw Locomotive"

While sitting on a rock revealed by the receding tide I considered the historical and cultural significance of the River Clyde I realized this would be the perfect location to make a statement about myself, about Glasgow and about the world.

The next day of the module was for construction and presentation of our art work. I was full of thoughts and ideas about the topic of my piece however I was still unsure about materials and construction. I woke up that morning knowing I wanted to make a harsh dramatic statement. As I laid in bed thinking about the construction of my art piece, the sun shone in the window and reflected a glare in my eye. I looked in the corner of my room and saw that the light was hitting my disco ball and casting beams of light everywhere. I instantly thought of my work. I considered the irony of introducing such an artificial object into a

natural environment. I wanted to express the irony I had felt when viewing and learning about environmental and ecological art.

The irony I sought to suggest in my work was demonstrated by innovators of ecological art.

Two leading lights, Robert Smithson of "Spiral Jetty" fame and Michael Heizer whose "Double Negative" consisted of twin trenches cut into a high-desert mesa, built massive earthworks out of soil and stone, and "environmental art was born. This early land art however, was constructed with little regard for environmental consequences. Smithson and Heizer bulldozed and scarred the earth's surface, damaging the "wilderness" they so ambiguously elegeize. (Kormendi, 1998)



I decided the disco ball would be the feature of my piece. When we arrived at the site that day the tide was not at all at the level I had anticipated. The rock I had originally intended for my work was completely submerged. I remembered the frame piece we saw on the Perth Sculpture trail and gazed across the river for a possible backdrop. A large industrial factory with cranes and other machinery stared back at

me. I envisioned the disco ball suspended and covering the view of the factory. Then I thought of the disco ball being removed and revealing the busy industrial plant across the River Clyde.

All the pieces began to come together in my mind! I would violently interact with my art. I would suspend a blatantly artificial object from a completely natural frame and smash the sphere into the River Clyde – a dark, powerful and shocking statement representing change, consequence and destruction. The structure was a labor to construct but the physical exertion in the collection of the branches and the piling of rocks was all part of the personal interaction with the piece.

Physical work in one's environment becomes a type of meditation in which the body opens pathways to sensations, to the environment's stream of consciousness and disengages for a moment our Cartesian brains with their dualist conceptions. This releases creative potential, engenders esthetic experience and restores the link between body and mind in a way that leads to richer experience. (Jokela, 2003)

The large branches were not bound together. The structure's stability relied on the cooperative force of the branches and the land at their base. The piece was constructed and presented from three different perspectives. Each perspective embodied a

duel whose victor could be chosen by the viewer. The piece could speak to self, Glasgow, the world or any combination thereof. Opposing sides of the conflict were represented by the natural wooden club and the manufactured reflective sphere.



The suspended ball had personal, local and global significance. I could easily see myself in the disco ball. Each mirror on the sphere reflected back a life experience that influenced decisions and actions. I could see a busy and industrialized Glasgow in the reflection of the ball off the River Clyde. I could feel my own personal interaction and experience with the rich history and culture of the city. In contrast I saw the confusion of the often cynical and self-destructive nature of Glasgow. The globe spinning in the wind logically portrayed the earth. The shiny surfaces told a story of the future technological dominance of the earth. A small piece of moss at the top of the globe showed respect for the will of natural life.

With one powerful swing the structure was shattered into pieces. Was it the end? Or was it a new beginning?

This... emphasis on our "capacity to identify with the larger collective of all beings" is essential to our survival... precisely because it can serve in lieu of morality and because moralizing is ineffective.

Sermons seldom hinder us from pursuing our self-interest, so we need to be a little more enlightened about what our self-interest is.

It would not occur to me, for example, to exhort you to refrain from cutting off your leg. That wouldn't occur to me or you, because your leg is part of you.

Well, so are the trees in the Amazon Basin; they are our external lungs. We are just beginning to wake up to that. We are gradually discovering that we are our world.

-Joanna Macy (Caddy, 2003:5)

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