



David Nyzio: *Perfect Progression of Random Spacing* (1988)

And Meg Webster, whose earth mounds are verdant ecosystems in situ, practically grew lawns at the Whitney Museum and at Barbara Gladstone Gallery last spring.

The old Enlightenment image of Nature, devised to justify the violence of industrialism, pits humanity in a never-ending struggle against the unscripted, not-yet-built environment. But one of the lessons of the new "eco-art" is that Nature is not found: it's made. Where we once thought Nature was everything that resisted human production, an antiproduction, as it were, today art reminds us how "the natural" is itself socially produced.

Last November at the Sonnabend Gallery, Ashley Bickerton showed a group of wall-mounted sealed drums with glass fronts that enclosed seed, plants, and minerals, as well as cigarette butts and other dirt. At Sonnabend, Bickerton's subject was "nature" as archive and grid. A central trope in the discourse of conservation and natural history is this very act of cataloguing, in which nature is as much "produced" as any piece of merchandise.

Today's eco-art is not a reprise of the land art of the 1960s and '70s, which fled the city and the gallery system for the hummocks of rural America. In those days, Earth artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer were, in effect, the visionary agents of the commune movement, with a utopian program and plans to make monuments out of dirt and rubble. No surprise, then, that the passing of Earth Art coincided with the withering of the counterculture. Contemporary eco-artists are hardly pastoral utopians or communards who would toss it all in and move back to the farm. Their tactic is, well, citified. By creating objects for traditional, elitist consumption, today's eco-artists prefer to stroke the neuroses and shame that urbane people have about capitalism's destruction of the earth.

One of the most guilt-inducing shows of the past season was Sue Coe's agitprop plea for animal rights, "Porkopolis—Animals and Industry," at the Gallerie St. Etienne on 57th Street. Using about 50 gouaches and watercolors, with images of pigs being stunned and flayed, and titles like *There Is No Escape*, Coe devised a dyspeptic critique of agribusiness and the industrial slaughter of mammals.

While galleries are now selling such portable, eco-conscious merchandise, some of the older land and Conceptual artists continue to produce monumental sites. Since 1983, Michael Heizer has been carving vast monoliths in the shape of animals out of 150 acres of strip-mined land on the Illinois River. Called *Effigy Tumulus*, the project will ultimately include five land sculptures, each 25 feet high and as long as 1000 feet. Meanwhile, with his *Roden Crater Project*, James Turrell continues to transform a dead volcano in Flagstaff, Arizona into a gigantic apparatus for viewing the heavens. The Roden Crater seems precapitalist, even Druidic in its ambitions. Turrell's mediums are light and air themselves, which he merely attempts to "frame." When it's complete, visitors to the Roden Crater will languidly observe the sky through the natural frame of the volcano's inert cone. Back in New York, Turrell's

Meeting, a room with its ceiling cut out for viewing the heavens at twilight, recently reopened at P.S. 1 in Queens after renovations. The extraordinary room manages the unlikely effect of imposing calm on whoever enters it.

In the year since the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground and belched oil that killed one-quarter of the world's otter population, eco-sensitive exhibitions have spread like

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seeping groundwater. Museums have acted as though their boards were run by a cabal of Sierra hikers. A current group show of earthy art at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers (511 Warburton Avenue, through August 12) bears the title "A Natural Order." Two Whitney Museum branches, downtown and midtown, recently shared the green-theme show, "The (Un)Making of Nature," designed by students in the museum's Independent Study Program. In June, the Grey Art Gallery at N.Y.U. had a show, "Paysage Demoralise: Landscape at the End of the Century." Even the Museum of Modern Art popped up last spring with "Welcome to the Water Planet," a solo show by old-line Pop artist James Rosenquist. Unfortunately, while Rosenquist purported a close friendship with Earth, he actually offered no more than his usual billboard-size cut-up paintings of women's faces and consumer debris, only with a few flowers thrown in.

Probably the most urban nature show was "Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos" at the New Museum last fall, organized by Laura Trippi (with the help of the late William Olander). Militantly inchoate, the "Chaos Show" attempted to engage and deploy the 10-year-old science of chaos. Some of the work hinged on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law that holds that in any physical process, entropy will always increase over time. The Second Law is the law of dissipation, uncertainty, and unusable energy; it describes what is natural in the physical world, namely, disorder. Leaning heavily on such philosophical underpinnings, the New Museum presented a kind of cerebral version of eco-art: involuted, intricate, a paean to randomness.

Because the closest I normally get to the land is weeding the flower box on my window ledge, as a fact-finding trip I went down to Wooster Street to visit the *echt* piece of eco-art, Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room*, just before it closed for the summer. A big loft filled waist-high with aromatic black dirt, the *Earth Room* has been a patch of Iowa in Soho since 1980, kept open thanks to the Dia Art Foundation. The *Earth Room* is a kind of omphalos of eco-art, if you will, the navel of the genre. If eco-art develops, as I suspect it must, De Maria's splendidly useless urban landscape may become a moldering mecca. Here, I thought, is the nomen of this eco-business, a spirit that can be visited. A friend used to work for Dia, hovering over the dirty deity and watering and raking the room every day. Now when I walk past the building I look up and think, that's it: that's what it's like to work the land.

The Greening of Art

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By Edward Ball

The emblematic 1980s' art object was the gleaming Cibachrome print, so glossy and clean you knew it was made with toxins. It was the high era of commodity art, when artists rushed to mimic consumer culture and celebrated its production values. But suddenly the discursive climate has changed: environmentalists have begun to win battles, and the American zeitgeist seems to be turning green. All at once last season, ecologically sensitive art lanted itself in the galleries, and now the art world seems poised for a festival of dirt.

A growing number of artists

have rejected the ironic pleasures of appropriation in favor of exploring natural processes such as entropy and growth. David Nyzio is probably furthest along with such metaphors. His works, seen this year and last at the New Museum and at Postmasters Gallery, typically concern humankind's relationship to nature and tend to recall a science project by some refusenik biology student.

Perfect Progression of Random Spacing (1988), for example, is a wall-mounted vessel of water, seaweed, and (genueflection to suburbia) golf balls, in which the balls have been "choked" by skeins of green growth. *Bug Excrement* is a six-foot sheet of paper covered by

the radiant red, green, and blue shit-tracks of hundreds of millweed bugs that Nyzio raised while feeding them food coloring. Other Nyzio pieces investigate the cruelty of nature (and humanity), like *Form*, comprising hundreds of iridescent butterfly wings tacked edge to edge in rows to form a luminous rectangular sheet. An avid birdwatcher, Nyzio will be a figure to observe in coming years.

Eve Laramie, working in a related milieu, uses oxidation, sedimentation, and evaporation to create inorganic but virtually living floor sculptures, like *If water would flow through this room*, a kind of enclosed mineral system, which showed at Stux Gallery.

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