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Body, Technology & Environment

ANDREW CHARTIER's Mount Orford Autopsy Odyssey

John K. GRANDE

Denaturalized, we think of nature as something distant from us, whereas the environment we live in, and depend upon for what sustains us, is nature. Water is a precious resource, and one that carries traces of industrial contaminants within it.



At Mount Orford as artist in residence, Andrew Chartier set up the chalet where he stayed as a pseudo-scientific base of operations.

Decamped on site meant exploring local flora and fauna and integrating his public art process into a nature art process—nature being the public more often than not here, aside from the occasional tourist.

With from ten to twenty visitors to day, who dropped by to ask questions about the natural and artificial in the modern environment, and questioned Chartier's approach to artmaking, the project stimulated debate about the ongoing threat of development at Orford and selling off of land for condominium development near to Orford's ski lift area.

Chartier's summer of 2006 Orford experiment plays with the role of animator. In this case his art becomes a pretext for engaging in a dialogue on the nature/culture divide and environmental issues but equally the contrasting machine and interacting body (artist) infiltrating nature.

For the project he brought two of his A-Machines—mechanical prototypes for a prototypical world, where logic follows design, yet design counters the logic of consumer

production. Among these were the *Anemometer* and the *Pluviophone*. Chartier's *Pluviophone* is an on-site sculpture that registers and responds to rain and can measure acidity in water. Using the natural effect of rain following gravity, this sculpture moves a series of wheels, causing them to turn. The water from several funnels was collected to pass through a pipe where its pH level was then measured, and during a few days in June, due to consistent rain and provincial smog abnormal pH levels (below 5.6) was found to exist in this nature setting. The *Pluviophone* is a measurement device on wheels that has an electroacoustic and synthetic voice accompaniment integrated into its various functions. As water passes through a series of funnels that act as rain catchers, sensors measure the flow of the water. This causes various tones or sounds to be emitted according to the intensity of the rainfall. The water then falls in a container at the bottom of the machine where its pH level is measured. A synthetic voice then announces any contamination and/or if the water is normal.

Chartier's backpack *Anemometer* with its wind catching propellers confected out of soup spoons was attached to a bridge beside a pond near his chalet. The *Anemometer* measures wind strength by remote control, and this activated a pendulum-like drawing mechanism in the chalet, just as Chartier's device activated a window display at Galerie Horace in Sherbrooke in 2005. The wind is caught by the anemometer and sends electric signals to a pendulum that moves in a semi-circular fashion over large sheets of paper, measuring and drawing semi-circular marks in ink. The markings are cumulative and more or less severe according to the strength of the wind at a particular time. A smaller hand-held version of Chartier's backpack *Anemometer* was likewise worn on eight— to nine—hour walks along Les Crêtes at Orford Provincial Park. From peak to peak (Pic de la Roche Fendue, Pic du Lynx, Pic de l'Ours, Mont Alfred-DesRochers, Mont Orford and Mont Giroux) and site to site, Chartier measures wind movement. He plays scientist but as practicing artist while his hand held what Chartier calls "the soul of the mountain"—a mountain threatened by investor aggres-

sion and pure speculation on the part of unknown personages at the cost of public park and nature preservation.

The most fun of all Chartier's summer intervention inventions was undoubtedly the *pH Duck* that infiltrated the natural duck population floating and paddling their way on the pond's water surface. While this duck looks like any other duck, it is the typical plastic model hunters might use, but this one had a difference. Operated by remote control, and respecting Chartier's concept of techno-extension of the body, the *pH Duck* delivered its low-tech message with a small recorded voice amid the real ducks, "DEAR CITIZENS! YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE! LOCAL PATROL FOR ACID RAIN! SENSITIVE ECOLOGICAL ZONE!" In its memory were two other recorded messages. The first: "PH LEVEL IS OVER 5.6, QUALITY OF WATER IS NORMAL!" The second: "« PH LEVEL IS UNDER 5.6, WATER QUALITY IS COMPROMISED!" Chartier likewise added a *pH Goose* to his repertoire later on in the project.

The hybridity of Andrew Chartier's art activity plays on the ambiguity of his public/nature practice at Orford and raises aesthetic questioning making us aware of our civilization's misdirected desire: art history's incredible oversight of the place planet earth plays in our sustenance regardless of how pretty a picture our genius artists (There are SO MANY of them) could have, did and do paint. As Chartier states:

"Sometimes invested in interpreting basic climatic subtleties and sometimes provoking our consciousness on the contaminated landscape, my goal is to work with these phenomena in the present time in order to show the urgency of acting now. My work is in no way aimed in changing the world and having the pretext to hold the truth but simply to act has a reminder that something is happening here and now! The idea of being far away from the city can lead to delusion concerning the actual state-health of nature. Actually witnessing that acid rain is acting in what seems wild and natural instantly directs our attention on the idea of nature becoming an artefact... like any other man-made object."

Chartier makes us realize what an invisible tragedy we as a society are participating in. His works are often every bit as, if not more, effective, ecological and efficient, than the technological artifacts and tools

whose pollution effects they record.

Chartier's Orford experience ignites controversy and hopefully generates discussion about current social, ecological and public issues. He is an amicable provocateur who hopes to raise public awareness of increasingly critical ecological issues that affect our lives. The machine is a pretext for renewing a dialogue with the public on nature, its processes, and the great gap



between humanity and the natural environment. As Allan Kaprow, one of the originators of the Happening, a 1960s forerunner to today's public art intervention has commented, "Deprived... of imaginary ideals, [the artist] must work towards an art, which [he] sees functioning neither for church nor state nor individual, but in a subtle social complex whose terms [he] is only beginning to understand."¹ Chartier's artistic practice demonstrates that one of the areas for future growth in artmaking activity is precisely an art that is socially, ecologically and publicly engaged. Chartier's art has a wholesome sense of the irony of its own undertaking. The subjects he deals with involve what we cannot see as much as what we can—environmental pollution, the result of over-production and state-enforced economies of scale as well, inadvertently, as environmental destruction... the effects of so-called globalization. ←

John GRANDE is author of *Balance: Art and Nature* (Black Rose, 2004), *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (SUNY Press, 2005) and several monographs on artists including Patrick Dougherty, Alan Sonfist and Nils-Udo. His latest book of poetry *In Memory of the World* was recently published by Go If Press.

NOTE

1. Allan Kaprow, "Should the Artist be a Man of the World," *ArtNews* (1964), 35.

Andrew CHARTIER, *Le Pic de l'Ours*. Intervention in August 2006 across Les Crêtes hiking path at Mount Orford Provincial Park. Eight- to nine-hour walk sampling and collecting wind intensity on a series of six peaks. Equipment: basic hiking gear and a light-weight handheld drawing machine with anemometer built mostly from found plastics. Photo: Anne Bélard.

← Andrew CHARTIER, *Le Pluviophone*. 2006. Interactive sound sculpture sensitive to acidity in water. Mechanical and electro-acoustic system (water wheels, micro-controller, *Speaklet* speakers, encoders, pH sensor, rechargeable battery, plastic box. Found objects (gulf cart, metals, funnels, flexible tubing, aluminium containers). 99.06 x 119.3 x 71.12 cm. Photo: A. Chartier.