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Ted Rettig

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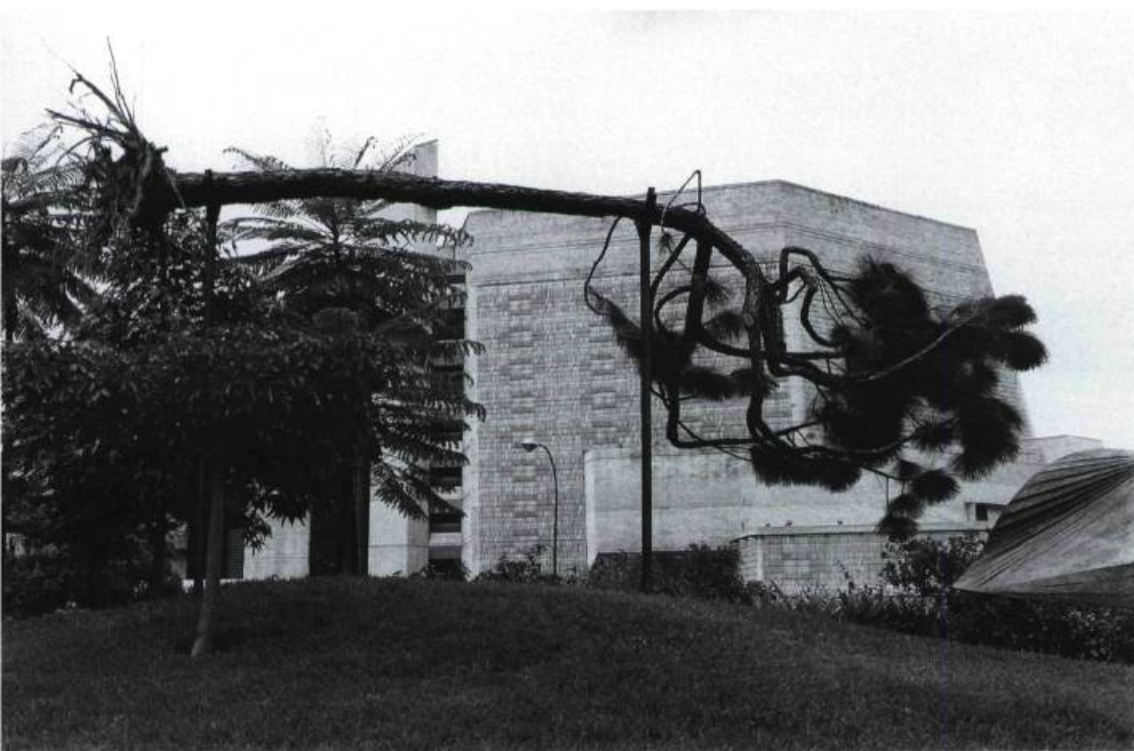
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CONTEXTUALIZING THE WORK OF

REINHARD REITZENSTEIN

Ted Rettig



Reinhard Reitzenstein,
Compromiso Veriditas,
1992. Caracas, Venezuela.
Photo: R. Reitzenstein.

Memory Cell
July 15 — August 18, 1993
Olga Korper Gallery

It is important to introduce Reinhard Reitzenstein's recent body of works and the nature of his creative research to a larger audience. Reitzenstein has been exhibiting since 1971, extensively throughout Canada, in Europe and in South America.

What makes his creative project extraordinary is his commitment to an in-depth experiential dialogue with First Nations traditions. He stresses that his role is to learn and not to direct to the process or the outcome of the learning. He says that he is not there to establish something. He participates as a novice and sees himself as a bridge builder. He has worked with individuals from the Cherokee, Ojibway, Cree and Iroquois nations. This dialogue with individuals from non-western indigenous cultures results

in the opening of depth experiences and of political engagement within another cultural perspective. It is a process that is well begun in Reitzenstein's work. It is here that a truly creative exploration and formative growth can happen. This dialogue can also be extended to all non-western cultures.

In 1984, Reitzenstein was in Europe and met with Jean-Christophe Ammann, the Director of the Basel Kunsthalle. Ammann was one of the first European curators and writers to have a sustained and supportive interest in Canadian artists. During this conversation, Ammann mentioned that the trouble with Canadian culture was experienced in flying from Montreal to Toronto, that there was nothing in between, that it was empty. From his European perspective, nothing of cultural significance had developed outside the larger urban centres. This comment angered Reitzenstein in its implicit arrogance that denied that all of the land he flew over had meaning for First Nations' peoples for millennia. In the early 1970's, Reitzenstein traveled to the Thunder Bay area where he interacted with hunters and trappers. He experienced the degree and quality of meaning every part of that territory that has existed for thousands of years. After his conversation with Ammann, Reitzenstein renewed his interest in the Canadian context by deciding to learn more about First Nations cultures and by attempting a complete identification with the land. He saw himself as an uprooted European whose aim was to investigate the

possibility of engaging in a symbolic process of merging with the land.

In current art practice, there are two streams of dialogue with non-western artists and cultures. One is being developed in Harbour by Stephen Horne and Lani Maestro. In this stream, artists' voices from outside the mainstream establishment are heard. These artists are engaged in an articulation of issues of identity, voice, displacement, racism and social and political critiques of colonization and oppression. The

and time consuming excavation of a hole under the centre of the mature tree to reveal the intricate root system. He would crawl into the hole under the tree to dig the soil away from the small roots with a spoon. This remarkable feat of perseverance, care and discovery reveal qualities and a degree of engagement that characterize more recent projects.

This piece and others during these years were documented and exhibited in photographic form. During the 1980's, Reitzen-

the context for the works lies more outside mediated works and is closer to the audience. He has moved towards a heightened real experience with associative content layered through diverse sources such as psychoanalysis, alchemy, physiology and First Nations myths and metaphysics.

Post-modern photographic artists are highly aware of the appropriated and simulated nature of their projects. Another contrast to these methodologies is his attitude to appropriation of images and sym-



second stream can be seen as complementary. Artists like Reitzenstein are in a formative dialogue with leaders of non-western traditions. A person involved in a dialogue of this nature is open to the human riches, in this case, of the First Nations cultures, and is formed in a significant way in these encounters.

His work with trees began in 1972 and has remained a constant theme for twenty years. At that time, he tied together younger trees to have them hold fallen leaves. This early work and others were in the range of post-minimal, process and environmental works. It was in these early years in his career that he first encountered with First Nations culture took place near Thunder Bay.

In 1975, Reitzenstein worked with a large ironwood tree in the Ottawa Valley. The work consisted of a careful, elaborate

stein moved away from photo documentation as the primary means of his gallery exhibitions. He gradually gained a mistrust for the medium since he saw it for the most part to be about set ups and strategies for images. His work developed in a different way than artists such as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Andy Goldsworthy, with whom he shares similar working methods on the land. Each of these artists brings aspects of distant wilderness sites, transitory atmospheric moods or ephemeral relations among natural objects to European and North American urban audiences through photo documentation. Reitzenstein's works are made for specific places and communities often outside major urban centres and sometimes very close to northern forests. By insisting upon an encounter with the pieces,

Reinhard Reitzenstein, *Orthogonally Through the Garden*, Solo Exhibition at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, 1990. Installation View, Photo: R. Reitzenstein.

bolic content from First Nations cultures. Due to a sensitivity to the cultural genocide that they have undergone, he feels it is essential that he discusses

certain projects with elders of the community. These elders have in turn become guides in the very formation of specific projects.

The name of the work, *No Title*, refers to the land claims process involving Topsail Island near Sault Ste. Marie that community elders wished to have remain sacred land. Instead it was bulldozed and cleared for a park. Reitzenstein's work, installed on the island in 1987, consists of eight trees set upside down in a circle 60 feet wide. The trees were trimmed to about thirty six feet long with 28 feet above ground and the rest set into the ground. Seven of the trees had

the bark removed, the eighth did not. The piece was made with a First Nations guide advising on major decisions in its formation. *No Title* is one of the most significant works in Canadian art. A work at a cultural intersection relevant to Canadians from diverse backgrounds. It highlights a number of political issues in past and present colonial assumptions and in ecological concerns in the use of resources especially clear cut logging. Since the mythic and sculptural content is supportive of the underlying cultural



frameworks, it fits into First Nations and mainstream contexts in unique ways.

First Nations people see the image as eight people in a circle and as evidence of the activities of the Trickster in a sacred place. For a mainstream audience, the work powerfully recalls European Neolithic stone circles and is also perhaps the largest and most striking sited contemporary sculptural work in the country. The work is far from didactic because it has been situated within intercultural dialogue. It is essentially about the meaning of the place and about a ritualized exploration of mythic unknowns.

Cross Cut is a work installed in Owen Sound, Ontario in 1988. It is formed by a forty feet long cedar with its bark and twigs removed, that has been cut in half along its

length. The two pieces were then bound together about two-thirds of the way up the length and then placed on a steel support pole in an X-like formation. It is sited among trees in a community situated on Georgian Bay near the area where farm land turns onto forest. As with subsequent works involving entire trees, Reitzenstein asks people in the community to take part in its realization.

This work is reminiscent of a work by Penone in the National Gallery of Canada, the long plank/tree piece. In Penone's work a milled beam has been transformed back into a tree trunk with stubs of branches by carving along a specific ring of the grain along its entire length to reveal a sapling at a stage of its growth. Penone's work deals with the restructuring of a concept, an alteration of perception by remaking by hand a naturally grown form. The reality of the milled beam has been altered, bringing it back to its natural state by artifice, by invisible hand work. The content of the work is situated in the realm of ideas, perception and natural and artificial processes. Reitzenstein's work has a different context. The content of the work is more in the range of image and process with social critique and metaphor. The title and sculptural means are similar to pieces by Richard Serra. The content is actually the reverse of Penone's work in that Reitzenstein presents the death and reification of a living entity in a stark and dramatic way. Penone's work is an elegant commentary of this reification.

Another work that necessitated a vertical cut into a tree was installed at the Woodlands Cultural Centre in Brantford, in 1992. It is entitled *Replanting T-his-tree*. Here a spruce tree was replanted on to the site and the lower branches were trimmed off up to nine feet high. A long vertical cut was made into the tree, a section of the trunk was removed and books were placed into the opening. The books are nineteenth century histories of colonialism dealing with the First Nations peoples. The books and the cut were covered in bees wax. Reitzenstein was the only non-native artist invited to participate in the exhibition. He is returning paper to its source and the story of colonial oppression to the land by inserting these documents into a living tree that will heal its incised wound and continue to grow. It is a work that integrates the

past in a vision of reconciliation and hope for the future with a distinct view of the land as the respected and living source for human activity.

Replanting T-his-tree is a good work to compare to pieces by Lothar Baumgarten. Baumgarten, a German artist, has traveled to South America to live with a remote tribe in the Amazon basin. His resulting works are lists, in elegant typography, of names of First Nations tribes, language groups, etc. His bookworks contrast European colonial depictions of these peoples with photos of everyday life that he took while there. Baumgarten's presence seems more like that of an anthropologist who observes and records data. He remains an outsider. Reitzenstein's engagement is significantly different in that the process of dialogue is one of personal and artistic formation for the artist. His works also have content that is meaningful from different cultural perspectives.

Three other recent works used whole trees in their installations: *Displacement Veriditas*, in Peterborough, Ontario; *Compromiso Veriditas*, in Caracas, Venezuela and *The World Tree*, in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. In each case, members of the boards of directors and others in the community were asked to assist in the realization of the work: in finding land with a suitable tree, in the removal of the tree and in lifting it into place on the steel supports.

Displacement Veriditas was installed outside the Art Gallery of Peterborough in 1992. The forked cedar had its bark and twigs removed. The tree is held in a horizontal position by two twelve feet high steel posts. The tree, almost completely intact, has a skeleton like appearance in its pale coloration. The image has strong sacrificial and possibly burial overtones. The title derives from the writing of Hildegard of Bingen, a medieval abbess and mystic. She saw and named the earth's elemental fecundity, its "greening" power, as *veriditas*. She wrote that the earth sweats green. Here again, Reitzenstein has removed the living tissue and has displaced the green to become a specimen and a memorial.

A second version of this work entitled, *Compromiso Veriditas*, was installed in Caracas, Venezuela in the same year. Here a pine tree was removed from high in the mountains surrounding Caracas. It was brought down and placed horizontally on two steel posts beside the art gallery in the centre of the city.

The World Tree was installed in the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, in Charlottetown this year. A cedar was hung upside down from the concrete ceiling so that it almost touched the floor. It too was stripped of its bark and was covered with bees wax. The work has a strong pres-

Reinhard Reitzenstein, *Replanting T-his-tree*, 1992. Woodlands Cultural Centre, Brantford, Ontario. Detail with books. Photo: R. Reitzenstein.

ence and a coloration that is close to the colours of the cement gray and the white walls. It has the appearance of an apparition suspended in the space. It does function like an axis central to the two storey gallery space.

Here again it is useful to compare Reitzenstein's works to those of Fulton, Goldsworthy and Long. Hamish Fulton's photos of walks along ancient pathways in England are records of places with moods that recall the Romantic landscape tradition. Andy

works achieve a considerable integration into the life of the community and have therefore greater relevance and symbolic impact than do works by artists whose practice is more free floating and transnational.

Reitzenstein also has a large body of work exhibited in galleries over many years. His 1990 exhibition at the former Carmen Lamanna Gallery was entitled, *Orthogonally Through the Garden*. On work here was called *Reminiscent of a Motor Nerve*. It con-

viewer was to perceive natural and cultural metaphors of memory, in the arch, an architectural framing device; in the wasps' nest, natural memory encoded in insect cultures and a mythic memory in the bound wax covered trees placed horizontally. Organic bodily memory was presented in a digitally altered drawing of a human cell.

Reitzenstein is a very hard working artist. This year he has exhibited a large installation in Charlottetown, completed a commission for the University of Western

Ontario, in London and has assembled this strong solo show of new work. His commitment to dialogue and exploration with First Nations elders has led to a unique artistic path. His expansive imagination and engagement in intercultural creative research makes Reitzenstein's project one of the most important in Canada. ♦

L'auteur commente le travail de Reinhard Reitzenstein, un artiste qui, de plus en plus, instaure un dialogue fructueux avec les traditions artistiques des Premières Nations, traditions qui l'ont amené à une vision particulière de la culture autochtone. Les plus récentes oeuvre de Reitzenstein intègrent le post-minimalisme, l'art environnemental et le land art: un moyen de manifester ses impressions sur la

philosophie et la métaphysique d'un peuple qui a vécu près de la nature durant des centaines d'années. Ted Rettig établit une comparaison avec d'autres artistes qui ont oeuvré dans la même optique. L'art de Penone, par exemple, questionne la re-structuration d'un concept et ce, en l'altérant pour le ramener à son état naturel. Un procédé qui se situe au niveau des idées, de la perception et des processus naturel et artificiel. Le travail de Reitzenstein, quant à lui, se déploie dans un contexte différent, plus proche de la métaphore et de la critique sociale. Selon l'auteur, la particularité et l'originalité de l'art de Reitzenstein résultent, entre autres, de son désir d'impliquer dans ses projets les membres des communautés autochtones, d'intégrer ses conceptions artistiques à celles des traditions des Premières Nations.

Reinhard Reitzenstein, *No title*, 1987, 27 x 60 Ft. Diam. 8 coniferous trees peeled and inverted in earth.



Goldsworthy travels widely and produces beautiful ephemeral objects from leaves, twigs, stones and blocks of snow. He gathers the natural objects and crafts them into striking relations that are then photographed with great professional care. Richard Long is well known for his installation pieces usually made of stones of found timber in remote areas of the world. He has also exhibited similar stone pieces in galleries and has put hand smeared mud circles on gallery walls. Both Goldsworthy and Long remain in a post-minimalist stylistic mode in the form and content of the works. Even though the pieces are made from natural materials, they exist in an area of formal abstraction that excludes any specific time, place or cultural context. Reitzenstein's works have more layered content in their unique place between two cultures. The involvement of members of the community is an essential factor in the making of these works. In doing so, Reitzenstein's

sisted of a vine with a bit of foliage at the top end and a sphere at the root end, all cast in bronze. Here the vine has been transformed into a cell of the body. The three other sculptural works contributed to the overall theme of correspondences between microscopic parts of the body and larger nonhuman natural elements.

His recent July show at the Olga Korper Gallery was centred on memory and its extension into larger natural nonhuman areas. A ten foot high steel arch was covered with a reddish patina. The arch held a wasps' nest with the cells open to the viewer. Two trees were bound together so that the top of one was at the roots of the other; they were then covered in bees wax. The sixteen feet long element was suspended in space at eye level. There were also four aluminum cups with cedar oil placed in the gallery's steel roof structure. The cedar oil and the bees wax gave the gallery a wonderful scent. In this work, the