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Common Ground, Still Moves
Collaboration for the Sake of the Planet

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See table of contents

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Common Ground, Still Moves

Collaboration for the Sake of the Planet

Debbie O'Rourke

Sarah Link and Joan Van Damme in *River Run*. Ash and choke cherry poles. Tallest 23' high. 128 trees, porcelain rocks. Photo: Vytas Béniusis.

The Burlington Art Centre is situated on one of those stretches of shoreline that has been so thoroughly domesticated as to give the impression that Lake Ontario is only a giant swimming pool. During the summer of 1994 at least, wilderness seemed to exist more powerfully within the unlikely confines of the art gallery itself, than in this poorly manicured piece of nature.

Still Waters, Sarah Link's black rectangular pool surrounded by pristine white porcelain rocks, hinted more at the depths to be found in nature that the beer-commercial view of Lake Ontario on a sunny day. Within her *Bird and Tree Museum* Joan Van Damme recreated a forest of young saplings, reminiscent of a peaceful winter's day, even to the tiny dark birds that rested in the naked branches. Rebecca Van Sciver's *Ponds*: rough, fabric-covered balls contained tiny amounts of water that, when rolled or shaken, delivered a sound as elemental and comforting as that of a seashell held to the ear. Okano's monumental white spiral *Cathedral* was a walk through a foggy forest, a date with intimacy: a small metal bird and a white rock that invited interaction.

Shortly after curator Bryce Kanbera offered her an exhibition at the Burlington Art Centre, Link met Haruko Okano at the Banff centre for the Arts. They discovered an affinity for one another's work and ideas that eventually led to an invitation from Link to collaborate. A writer, community organizer and an accomplished painter/muralist, Okano has also demonstrated that she is an intelligent sculptural conceptualist, and a riveting performer. She offered, as a performer, to help Link to realize her goals with respect to a particular performance piece: during which the performer submerges herself in slip, a heavy liquid mixture of clay and water. Underlying Link's process-oriented, material-sensitive approach (she insists that she "thinks in clay") is an intuition that marries the material to complex, almost archetypal concepts. Seeing an uncanny resemblance between Link's developing concepts and Rebecca Van Sciver's pioneering work in fibre/performance/video, Okano introduced Van Sciver to the collaboration. (*Give and Take*, the performance that grew out of this piece of match-making, was regarded by many as the highlight of the month-long collaboration.)Link also convinced Joan Van Damme to contribute to *Common Ground, Still Moves* her problem-solving abilities and her long-stading commitment to environmental themes.

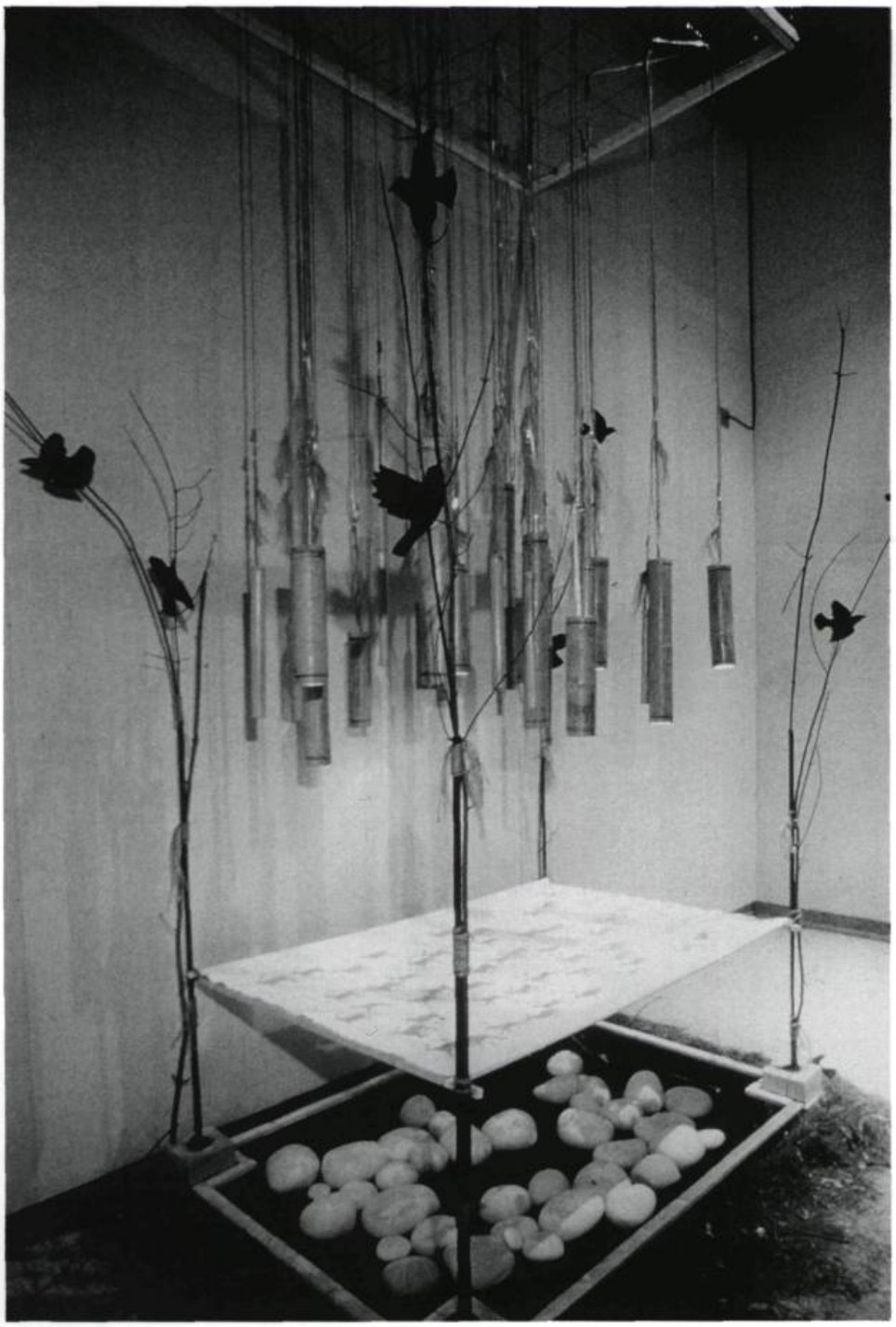
The Healing Circle, (1992, the Carnegie Gallery, Dundas, Ontario) was a collaboration among five women: Link, Van Damme, Marie Jose Crete, Pauline Shirt, and Priscilla de

Villiers. It served as the seed for *Common Ground, Still Moves*, in the sense that it was the first occasion when Van Damme, Link and Cree elder Pauline Shirt worked together, and it led to Kanbara's invitation to Link. Shirt was
unable to participate at the Burlington Art Centre as a full collaborator, but she helped Link to fulfil her dream of bringing young trees into the gallery. The story behind the taking of the trees is a good parable, for a culture that has abandoned the vital territory between the clearcut and the pristine "tree museum". The saplings that were cut for the exhibition were carefully selected: a cull of these trees was an essential stage in the restoration of a diversified forest. Pauline Shirt thanked the trees for their sacrifice, and released them to the care of the artists. The saplings were employed by Van Damme in her *Bird and Tree Museum*, and by Link in *River Run*. Van Sciver and Okano used them to suspend their fabric constructions, and they were an element in Van Sciver's performance *Web*. The artists have determined that the trees will continue to be circulated and used, after the exhibition is over. Some will return to the land to be put to various uses; the rest will be distributed to craftspersons and others who have a use for them. There will be no waste. This approach and that of a multinational company operating a clearcutting machine, are literally a planet apart, spiritually and materially. Essayist Lewis Hyde has written a book called *The Gift*, a comparison of gift cultures versus commodity cultures that carries very special meaning for artists as well as for citizens who are trying to learn a new relationship with the earth. He has written: "Just as treating nature's bounty as a gift ensures the fertility of nature, so to treat the products of imagination as gifts ensures the fertility of the imagination."[1]

After many years of thought and struggle within their respective artistic communities, Okano and Link have become commited to sharing the creative gift through collaborative processes. Collaboration has often been regarded with suspicion because it is assumed that it will lead to compromises that degrade the quality of the artwork. Sarah Link, while labouring to create a setting for combined effort, described the need for boundaries to preserve the artist's individual integrity within the context of a collaboration: "It's very important to me that people can do what they wish to do. It's very democratic, when it comes down to the actual art-making. We're not there to make a piece that's a composite; the installation is a composite. It's the context that's the composite, not any individual piece. We each do what we do. It's important not to interfere with that. I think also you have to be careful not to let big egos become involved. It really comes down to picking the right people."

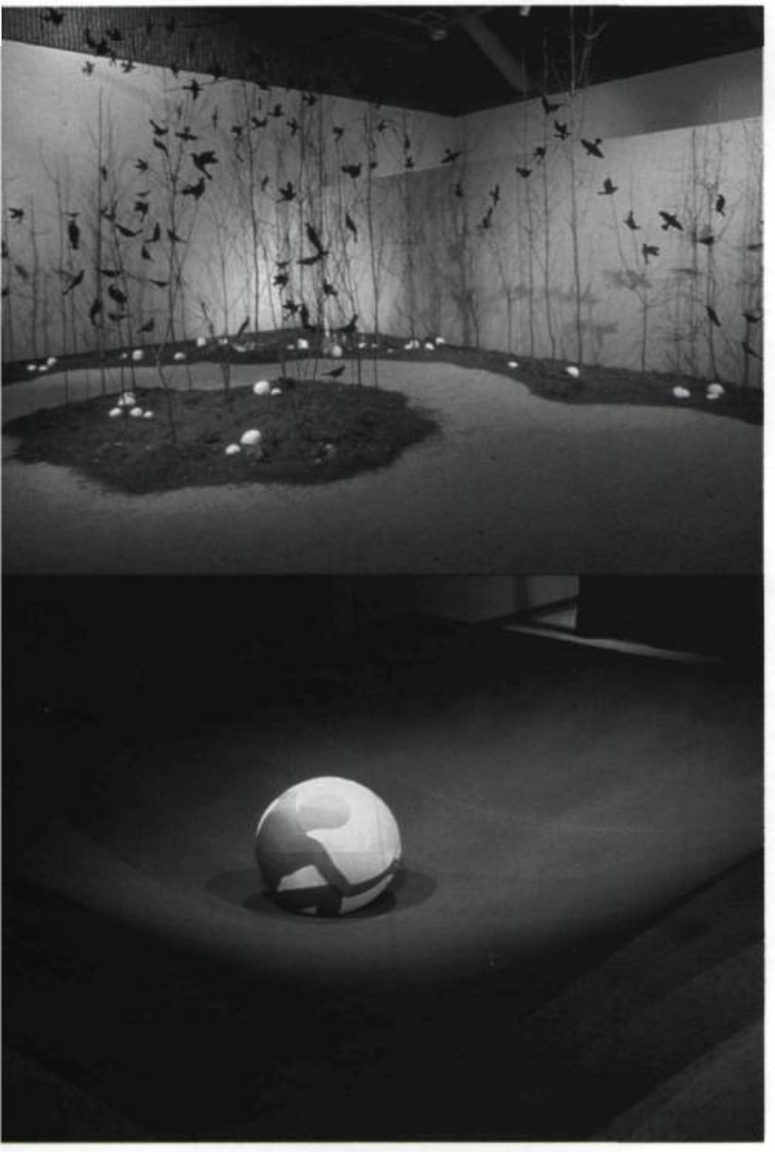
The success of a collaboration among artists who were not well-acquainted and who live many miles apart relied upon someone taking responsibility for designing a situation in which the invited artists could feel comfortable, and where generosity of spirit could flourish. This important task is, in fact, a curatorial function, one that is true to the roots of the term curate, "to care for". Link embraced this responsibility. She also ensured the formal success of the exhibition by introducing elements—the trees, the hundreds of porcelain river rocks—that could flow through and connect the various artists' works.

Those who attended the exhibition have been excited to discover that they were invited to interact with the artists and the elements of the exhibition. This created complex problems, for it undermined the gallery's mandate to preserve and protect valuable works of art. Many of the adults and children instinctively approached the mate-



Haruko Okano, *Spirit Pass*. Bamboo, light, canvas with caribou images, Sarah Links' porcelain rocks and Joan Van Damme's birds. Photo: Vytas Béniusis.

rials with sensivity. But too frequently, the public's treatment of the artworks was harsh, as harsh as the actions of schoolchildren who have been suddenly released from restraint. Artists and gallery found common ground in their mutual concern to avoid injury, destruction and litigation. The solution they reached was to give the public a series of guidelines to accompany each work; as well as to spend many hours in the gallery, personally assisting the public in engaging the work. George Wale, the Burlington Art Centre's Curator of Programs, took on much of the extra labour involved with the gallery's sponsorship of *Common Ground, Still Moves*.



The differing styles of the artists was reflected in the varying techniques they employed to foster the collaborative process. Link provided materials for the artists and public to play with, including her porcelain river-rocks, and invited members of the public to contribute their own rocks to the installation. Okano seamlessly submerged herself within the efforts of others and designed into the works she instigated, an open-endedness that invited collaboration. Van Damme's touch, and Van Sciver's, gave the exhibition much of its user-friendly character. Link and Okano both have strong tendencies toward minimalism and formalism, that was balanced by Van Damme's warmth and Van Sciver's playfulness. Okano's *Elemental Wheel* possessed a weighty formality that might have been intimidating if Van Damme's painted decorations had not given it the character of an elegant plaything.

Van Sciver's contributions were something of an anomaly: *Common Ground, Still Moves* was virtually a black-and white show except for the deep blue of her Wave, a giant membrane of stretchy fabric upon which rolled a human figure, clinging to (or crouched fetally within) a large white ball. Still, consistency is not a dominant characteristic of nature, and Van Sciver's colourful interventions were as welcome as the flash of a blue jay, through a winter birch forest. Van Sciver was also the artist who was most successful at breaking through the public's shyness with respect to interacting with the artwork. Visitors wrapped themselves within her ever-transforming membranous *Fronds*, rolled her *Ponds* and reacted to *Wave* with a rambunctiousness that threatened life and property.

During the final performance evening, Link and Van Damme, with the help of a local barber, shaved Okano's head. Okano, layering this spectacle with a witty recounting of fairy stories in which long golden hair carries the essence of femininity and beauty, held cards that recounted in statistical terms the losses encountered through deforestation. This affected the suburban audience with an intensity far greater than would have been experienced by citizens of a city where young people have embraced baldness as a fashion statement. Children, particularly, were moved by what they perceived as Okano's loss. For adults, it was difficult not to see in Okano's shaved skull a vision of our planet's future. *Clearcut* was a sombre interlude, even as Link, Van Sciver and Okano's *Give and Take* was a deeply profound one.

Those who attempt to collaborate for the sake of the planet and its citizens, often find their efforts drained by internal strife. In this context, the success of a collaboration such as that undertaken by Link, Okano, Van Damme and Van Sciver, is worth examining. Significant role-modelling has occurred within the context of this exhibition: both in the taking of the trees and in the artists' interactions with one another, the gallery and the public. *Common Ground, Still Moves,* though growing from the soil of a threatened planet, is extraordinarily positive in its approach. It speaks to the power of creative action to make change. There is a deep need for positive vision to help pull the culture toward a state of health, even as the desperation of our situation pushes us. Artists were among the first to lose our jobs to industrialization, and we have deepened our isolation by speaking in code to one another and turning our backs on the society that excludes us in favour of mass-production and television. Possibly, artists can work our way back into our own culture by helping to supply the challenge and the vision necessary to draw frightened citizens out of their paralysis of denial and cynicism. ▮

Common Ground, Still Moves
July 24–September 18, 1994
Burlington Art Centre

NOTE:
1. The Gift, *Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, pg. 148: Lewis Hyde. (Vintage Books, Random House, 1983).

C'est au Banff Center for the Arts que Sarah Link et Haruko Okano ont découvert leurs affinités communes et qu'elles ont décidé d'unir leurs efforts dans une création conjointe (*Give and Take*). Élargissant leur cercle, elles ont ensuite travaillé avec trois autres femmes à *The Healing Circle*, une installation-performance inspirée par le meurtre de Nina de Villiers en 1990. *Common Ground, Still Moves* poursuit dans cette direction avec une installation interactive qui se double d'une réflection sur l'environnement. On y voit une membrane géante en matière extensible sur laquelle roule un corps humain enveloppé de blanc. Au terme d'une performance très agitée qui invitait la participation du public, Okano s'est fait raser le crâne en un geste symbolique qui rappelle le sort de la planète Terre.

Joan Van Damme, *The Bird of Tree Museum*. Trees, ash, pine needles, metal birds, porcelain rocks. Photo: Vytas Béniusis.

Rebecca Van Sciver, *The Wave*. 16' x 16'. Fabric, ball. Photo: Vytas Béniusis.