Espace Sculpture

Art in Space
Public Art in an Expanding World

Annie Gérin

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Stone, like Tornado Chair (2001-2002). A circular, roughly chiseled chunk of limestone sits on the gallery floor enwrapped in its own private whirlwind. Bronze vines swirl upward around the limestone — the seat of the piece — weaving in and out of one another until they tighten together into an apex, where all form and implied motion cease. The shape is roughly that of a inverted cone, and from without the work resembles a cyclone turned upside down. Until, that is, the chunk of limestone is actually put to use as a seat, for this is a piece intended to be experienced from within. A gap in the intertwined network of ersatz vines makes for a low access point through which to enter the work, and once there and seated somewhat uncomfortably atop the rock, one is left to stare upward as the interior of the whirlwind seems to recede up and away. Perspective, then, is what makes the work, and it works very well indeed.

Reitzenstein's other pieces can be somewhat less physically daunting. Like the Lost Wood series (which predates Tornado Chair), where bronze vines are used for a series of stand-alone works — seats, all of them — without dominant stone elements. Lost Wood Series #10 (2000) is pretty much indicative of the series: cast bronze vines intertwined into something with a passing resemblance to an upholstered piece of household furniture. Other works echo the shape of a loveseat or couch (Lost Wood Series #9) or even a high-back chair (Lost Wood Series #8, which includes a small chunk of limestone attached to what would be one of the legs of the work). It all makes for something with an uncomfortable closeness — intentional or not — to twig furniture, as the eroding benches are intended to be experienced from within. Twisting to get inside, the viewer eventually travels in and through the piece until they tighten together into an apex, where all form and implied motion cease.

The walls inside the gallery were given over to a number of Reitzenstein's recent photo-based works, large colour images, most of lone trees depicted within a variety of landscapes. And trees figured in a very primary way in the sculptural pieces shown here, though not in any kind of overt manner. There was, then, nary a sapling, conifer or evergreen to be seen, though all the work was in every way arborescent inclined. Rather, we encountered vines and rock, elements literally taken from Reitzenstein's backyard in Grimsby, Ontario, along the very edge of the Niagara Escarpment that curves about the western end of Lake Ontario. It's an endangered landmass, subjected to the dual pressures of commercial activity (gravel pits are eating it away) and the ever-burgeoning population growth of the region. The trees that have figured so prominently in Reitzenstein's work of the past thirty years are also the trees that populate his backyard, and they too are under another threat, that from the fast growing wild grapevines that parasitically climb the forest canopy, choking the life from the trees and bringing them down under their very weight.

Reitzenstein has called some of those vines — wrist-thick monsters — with the dual purpose of saving the trees and using the vines themselves as the basis for new work. So trees indeed figure in every way in these works (albeit subtly), but it is the siting part of things that comes into play here as well. These new sculptures are ostensibly benches, seats and chairs created of a fecund mix of facsimiles and real stuff: cast bronze vines and thick slabs of actual limestone. Like Tornado Chair (2001-2002).

The Earth is the cradle of humankind, but one cannot live in the cradle forever.
— Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, 1896

Hawking created a stir when he commented on the post-September eleven biological warfare threat in the London Daily Telegraph: "I don't think that the human race will survive the next thousand years, unless we spread into space." (October 16, 2001) While the remark about the need to expand human usable space was a reaction to political and ecological events, it also conjures up ethical questions about ownership of space and about use of shared spaces in general, questions often put forward by contemporary public artists.

The constant flow of infrared radiations and chemical emissions streaming from Earth's industrialized countries to outer space seems to indicate that humans already consider the cosmos as an extension of their terrestrial spaces. Indeed, much before the Earth's richest countries had claimed a presence in space with satellites and occasional forays into deep space, it was already colonized by artistic, cultural and scientific discourses. Science fiction, for example, carved the profile of desirable worlds where humans would eventually travel. Even before Armstrong slowly dropped onto the Moon, the rock was the legacy of terrestrial children who were told they would grow to explore it. And in spite of rivalries between superpowers to first conquer new worlds, as the Earth's backyard, the cosmos has long been considered a shared space and, in a way, a public space. Yet, this galactic space apparently differs from other public spaces; it is fluid, unlimited by geopolitical boundaries and, according to Big Bang theories, ever-expanding.

This notion of a limitless, ever changing space, swirling in every direction towards infinity, is not entirely foreign to cultural or art discourses interested in the problem of public art and public spaces. Since the seminal writings by Henri Lefebvre on The Production of Space (1974), we understand that public art/spaces have an influence rippling out indeterminately (in terms of phenomenology, cumulative meanings, cultural influences in a nomadic world, etc.) in a way that defies man-made borders and rational-historical time. In spite of the structure of the modern city, where urban grids and street names conspire to contain cultural production, shared spaces constantly disseminate their meanings and forms, while themselves being endlessly transformed by their changing environment and users.

David Suzuki, recently discussing the Kyoto Protocol, parallelized this understanding of public spaces — equally applicable to alleged natural spaces. Suzuki used the metaphor of a river flowing through different principalities to describe the challenging use of shared spaces and resources. Having covered this ground, he argued, can indefinitely irrigate and nourish lands owned by different interests. But because of its fluid, roaming nature, upstream abuse of the resource can contaminate the current for all other discrete users, and even infest faraway lands and the stock grazing on them. Suzuki conceives of the spaces surrounding the Earth in such a way. Accordingly, outside of a certain ethic of collaboration and conservation, shared natural or cultural spaces on Earth or beyond could be terminally compromised.
So what if, pointing specifically to this pressing issue, one were to devise a work of public art, as a paradigmatic object, that would carry a message about sending cultural production into space as public art.

Canadian public artist John Noestheden hopes to be one of the first to take advantage of the International Space Station (ISS)’s plan to generate revenues through their Commercial Utilization Program, creating opportunities for space tourism and space experimentation for a fee (the Canadian Space Agency (CSA) plans to dedicate 50% of its share of the orbital laboratory to commercial experiments, along the criteria outlined in their brochure Space for Rent). Noestheden has fashioned into a sculptural prototype entitled Spacepiece (2002) an object that embodies humanity’s age-old fascination with heavenly bodies and the pragmatic considerations linked to building an art artifact of public art use. He hopes that his hand-crafted three-dimensional polygon, made of shimmering T-6 aluminium and protected with high impact rubber bumpers, will be taken on board the ISS, and placed into orbit by the Station’s robotic arm or thrust toward the moon by an astronaut during a space walk. The highly polished, obsessively regular geometric object (its exact form, dimensions and mass will be defined in relation to the guidelines and parameters set forth by the CSA, if it accepts the art experiment) will then exist among space debris as an intentionally aesthetic object. Living out its unpredictable life expectancy as a satellite, it will eventually deliver a fraction of a second of light as a shooting star when it is wrenched out of orbit by collision with other debris or by natural forces. The ephemeral work of public art will then disappear into infinity, most likely without encountering any accidental audiences.

At the moment of writing, Noestheden is in the initial stages of the Spacepiece project and, because of the overwhelming bureaucratic nature of such a venture, its outcome might remain purely conceptual. But whether or not astronauts take the polygon along for a space walk, the work already provocatively interrogates the colonization of (public) space by the human imagination. (—)

The Fourth Cetinje Biennale took place this past summer in the Kingdom of Montenegro’s old capital. The artists involved were asked to produce work that examines the role of artistic participation in the process of social and economic consolidation. Cetinje, a tiny city of 15,000 inhabitants, seems to be an unusual place to examine this question. Like the host republic of Montenegro, Cetinje finds itself the last in the process of breaking away from the Yugoslav Federation. This year’s Biennale was entitled Reconstruction, adopting a local saying, MOZE, MOZE (it’s possible, it can happen), as its slogan. By doing so the organizers have reflected the local community’s strong desire for change in a positive direction.

The curators of the fourth Cetinje Biennale, Andrei Erofeev, Iara Boubnova, Katarina Koskina and Svetlana Rasanovic, invited a wide mix of artists from Western and Eastern Europe to reflect upon the concepts of reconstruction and architecture. Among the 40 artists involved, two Canadians, Vessna Perunovich and Robert Mason, presented works revolving around this Biennale’s main theme: Housing. Perunovich’s video installation, Whole, portrays an emotional journey through landscapes by positioning a video of lush and potent

Robert MASON & Vessna PERUNOVICH:
The Fourth Cetinje Biennal, Yugoslavia

VIRGINIA M. EICHHORN