

## Art in Space Public Art in an Expanding World

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# Art in Space; Public Art in an Expanding World

ANNIE GÉRIN



REINHARD REITZENSTEIN, *Tornado Chair*, 2001-2002. Cast bronze and limestone. 416.5 x 127 x 122 cm. Photo: Michael Cullen.

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 arboreally 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 curls 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 culled 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 sitting 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 lime-

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 interwoven 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, those tables and chairs of small pieces of wood bent and nailed together that are a pastiche of real upholstered furniture and seem to be beloved of cottagers.

Of greater interest are Reitzenstein's *Red Hill Valley I* and *II* (both 2002). They're benches with thick rectangular slabs of limestone that make for the seating space. The cast bronze vines are here used as support structure for the limestone slabs, wrapping around the stones at one end to hold them in place, and snaking along beneath them to provide support from below. Reitzenstein makes no attempt to mimic home furnishings as he did with *Lost Wood Series*, and the consequence is work with both literal and metaphoric capaciousness: roomy enough to seat several, and aesthetically generous to boot. Much better. ←

◆ Reinhard Reitzenstein: *River Lake Ice*  
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery,  
Oshawa, Ontario  
November 15, 2002–January 19, 2003

*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.

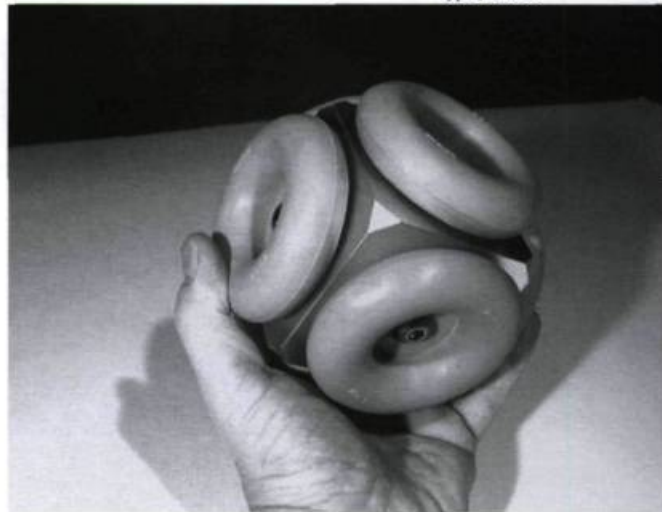
The constant flow of infrared radiations and chemical emissions streaming from Earth's industrialized countries to outer space seems to indicate that humans already consider the cosmos as an extension of their terrestrial spaces. Indeed, much before the Earth's richest countries had claimed a presence 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, paralleled 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. A river, he explained, 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 infect 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.

JOHN NOESTHEDEN,  
*Spacepiece* prototype, 2002.





# Robert MASON & Vessna PERUNOVICH: The Fourth Cetinje Biennial, Yugoslavia

VIRGINIA M. EICHORN

So what if, pointing specifically to this pressing issue, one were to devise a work of public art, as a paradigmatic object, that would flow down a river, crossing the boundaries of states? What if someone were to propel an aesthetic object into space, to traverse layers of atmosphere, to orbit the Earth, drifting over oceans and continents? This idea is not as far-fetched as it seems; artists are waiting in the wings to examine the overall significance of our expansion into space. Indeed, the European Space Agency (ESA) will soon drive into the cosmos a painting by Damian Hirst, on the space ship Beagle 2, destined to Mars in 2003. Aside from its aesthetic qualities (the work consists of a number of coloured dots located at the nodes of an invisible grid), the painting will be used to calibrate the cameras and set the spectrometers on the Mars Express rover. Beagle 2 will therefore act as the first intergalactic public art display site, images of its content and surroundings presumably sent electronically for all Earthlings to examine on the six o'clock news. The experimental context framing the art object will then deliver its own set of contingencies, some of them unpredictable, and allow various lay and specialized publics to reflect on the work and on the unusual site for aesthetic inquiry.

At first glance, ESA's interest in art seems somewhat gimmicky. It reveals, however, that space exploration is not simply driven by technology. Indeed, while the liberal arts and fine arts communities are overwhelmingly sceptic towards the need for space expansion, anthropologist Ben Finney and space psychologist Philip Harris, among others, say that space exploration corresponds more to deep-seated philosophical, psychological and social needs than the scientific and military imperatives that serve to justify the budgets. It has also already had irrevocable effects on how humans view their world; Harris explains that, even in the short term, space exploration has awakened humans to a new environmental ethos, largely as a result of seeing our small planet suspended in the apparently lifeless vacuum of space. As a result of arousing cultural and philosophical

interest, the ESA will surely not be the only organization 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 art destined for public 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 thrown toward the moon by an astronaut during a space walk. The highly polished, obsessively regular geometrical 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 Biennial 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 Biennial 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 biennial, Andrei Erofeev, Iara Boubnova, Katarina Koskina and Svetlana Racanovic, invited a wide mix of artists from Western and Eastern Europe to reflect upon the concepts of reconstruction and architecture. Among the 90 artists involved, two Canadians, Vessna Perunovich and Robert Mason, presented works revolving around this Biennial's main theme: Housing Sculpture. I had the opportunity to

VESSNA PERUNOVICH, *Wounding*, 2002. Nylon, plastic hose, hangers. 2,7 x 6 x 12,1 m. Photo: Boja Vasic, courtesy of the artist.

speak with Perunovich and Mason about their thoughts and experiences in having participated in this event.

In 1991, when Tito's Yugoslavia collapsed into a bloody war, Prince Nikolas Petrovich Njegosh, the Paris-based architect and heir to the Montenegrin dynasty, initiated the first Biennial of Cetinje as a way of fighting isolationism and ensuring a new internationalist cultural space. The purpose of the biennial remains true to this theme. Mason and Perunovich describe the organizer, Prince Nikolas, as a man of exceptional dedication and high principles. For a member of royalty he is remarkably unpretentious, and a real "hands on" organizer. But he seems to recognize that democracy and social justice come only with hard work and a broad sense of inclusion. All the art work taken together and all the artists coming together to one place at one time created such a positive effect, that any residual effect of the Balkan conflict/war/shame/resentment disappeared in a wash of sunlight.

Perunovich's and Mason's installations both use the unlimited regenerative and rejuvenating potential of nature as a metaphor for the reconstruction of a social landscape. Perunovich's video installation, *(W)hole*, portrays an emotional journey through landscapes by positioning a video of lush and potent