Art in Space
Public Art in an Expanding World

Annie Gérin
The Earth is the cradle of humankind, but one cannot live in the cradle forever.

KONSTANTIN TSIOLOVKY, 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 principals to describe the challenging use of shared spaces and territories. How, he argued, could it be coined, 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.
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 see 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 skeptical towards the human imagination. 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 Noesthéden 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). Noesthéden 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 launched into 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, Noesthéden 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. (~)

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

Robert MASON & Vessna PERUNOVICH: Wounding, 2002. Nylon, plastic hose, hangers. 2,7x3,6x1,1 m. Photo: Boja Vasic, courtesy of the artist.

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 25,000 inhabitants, seems to be an unusual place to examine this question. Like the host republic of Montenegro, Cetinje finds itself 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, Andrej 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 30 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 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 Petrovic 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, Whole, portrays an emotional journey through landscapes by positioning a video of lush and potent