

André DU BOIS', Transformations

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John K. GRANDE

In the future, art may represent an integration of Eastern and Western influences on what art is or could potentially be. All cultural activity that engages art and its interactions with our ecosystems involves a certain volatility of the elements, and bio-regional specificities. Our relation to nature is a key to the creative process. Nature's holistic processes are part of the energy of life. This energy is as invisible as it is physical. Likewise the creative process for artists reflects something of that cycle of life's energies. Ephemeral sculpture is an art form that seeks to reunite the language of art to ecology, ecosystems, and permacultural values. By permaculture, one can speak of a culture that embraces notions of permanence, of pre-existing contexts and that counters the ephemera of a throw away consumer society.

For André Du Bois the gesture and the found nature elements he uses and integrates into his public and independent sculptures, all relate to a notion of transformation and the inevitability of disappearance. This is a subject he was already addressing in his artist's notebooks in 2002, and that has resurfaced continually since then. In conception and realization, all of Du Bois' art and sculpture, his scenaristic drawings and photographic documents, always retain a notion of our place in nature. His use of materials conceives of the cycle of life as an inbuilt feature of the artistic process, hence the use of nature's materials, as opposed to store bought artist's supplies. The structures likewise merge the geometries of the industrial and man-made with the chaos and varied elements found in nature. There is a bridge between culture and nature in all of Du Bois' performative sculpture. Undoubtedly living 31 years in Rivière-du-Loup in proximity to nature, to

the St Lawrence River and its Estuary has influenced André Du Bois' vision of what art is or can be. Geo-specific, bio-specific, yet always carrying clues to an ongoing human presence, Du Bois' art seizes the main issues of our times with modesty and majesty. Fragility, ephemeral notions that attach the human spirit to the broader cosmos, to our place in an immeasurable universe are central to this artist's sculptural and more recent environmental practice. Du Bois' site specific sculptures combine a relation to the specifics of a site or place. The materials Du Bois uses also reflect a geo-specifics of natural history to which our own cultural development has been linked over the centuries. Art is thus, for Du Bois, a medium that enables him to express the living state of culture in the present moment via the processes, materials and places he works in and with.

During a seven-week artist's residency in Banff, Alberta (2007), Quebec City-based Du Bois merged sculpture with performance in an art action that was generated and stimulated by the limitations of the studio site and residence space he had to work in. Within the studio was a part of the Rocky Mountains, a very visible

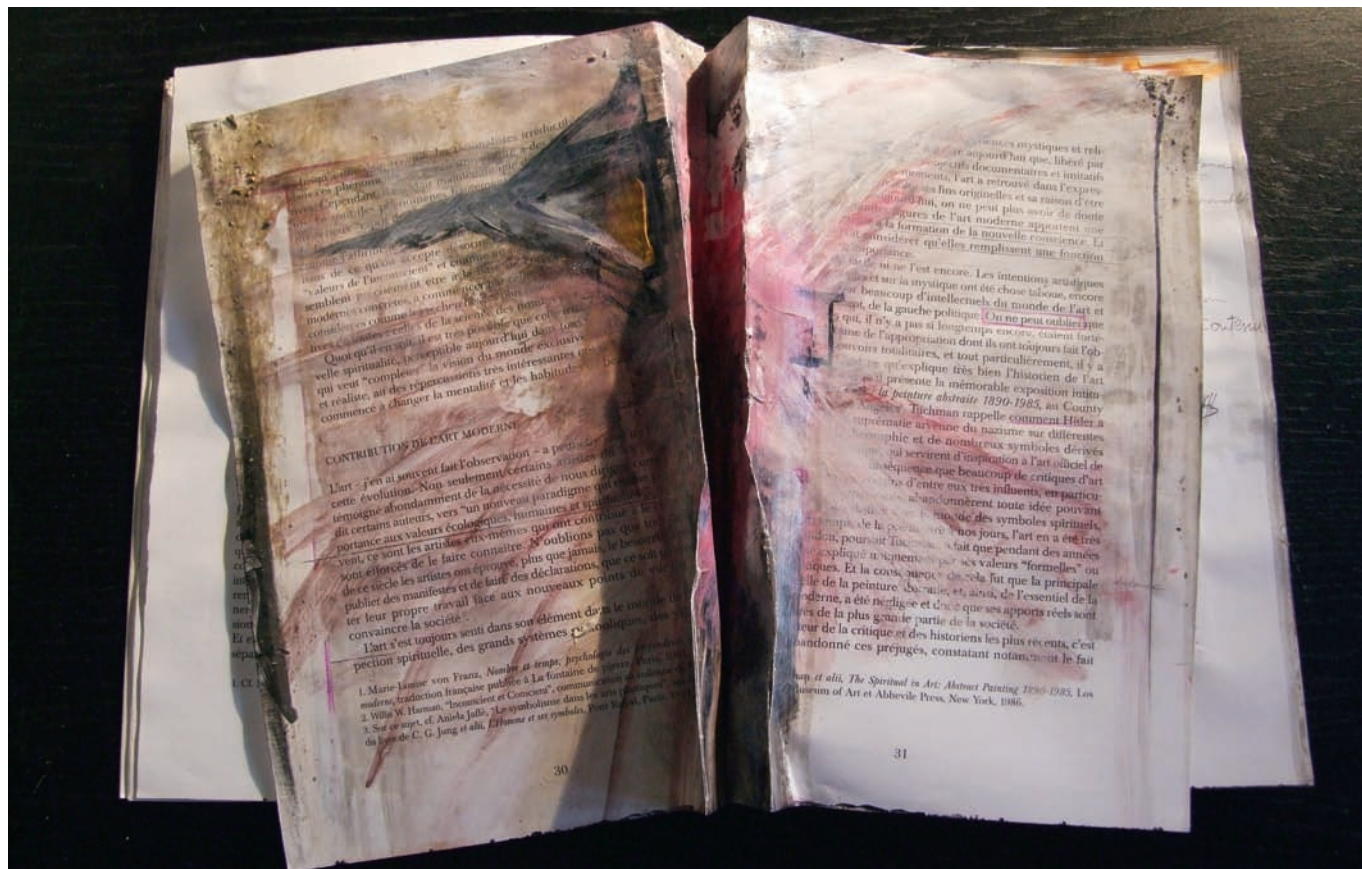
presence, a rock intrusion. As a chunk of nature in a studio, the rock face was an enigmatic, neglected area left by previous residents. Like an archaeologist, Du Bois painstakingly began to clean and remove waste materials, accumulations that had been embedded on the stone surface. Over time, tiny elements of nature appeared within what started to look and feel like a miniature landscape, a real life maquette of nature. Even cedar roots were rediscovered and unburied in this thirty-foot-long foot long found nature sculpture. The rock became rock, and the stone became stone. The meditative process of cleaning the rock surface was a direct interface with stone. Tools used for cleaning included a toothbrush, a vacuum, and a broom. What was not art—rock—a continuity of the environment outside the studio inside—shifted the focus of the project from creating an object to emphasizing its aesthetic isolation and object-ness, an unconventional approach to sculpture as process in tune with our times. Wooden lathes were recycled as Du Bois began building a miniature symbolic wall or fence traversing this stony chunk of nature in the studio. The work was neither like

Richard Serra's long metal sculpture project in New Zealand that literally walls its way through a pastoral landscape nor was it a representation of the Great Wall of China. Change became the focus: this "landscape" was a symbolic one. Small terracotta steps like Inca blocks became stepping stones to walk on through this mini-scaled territory as if one were a giant in a Lilliputian land. Nature is unframed by the scale shift. The Site Non-Site Land Art locators of Robert Smithson come to mind with Du Bois' Banff piece. Du Bois' work is site specific, but the land for the site is in a gallery-like non-site setting. Paper pulp was then laid out onto the rock surface to become a direct print of this found nature. Du Bois added another dimension to his Art Aktion when Flatrock, Newfoundland artist Tara Bryan decided to collaborate with him. She used her bas-relief piece made from molding wet sheets of paper to the rock for an art project.

Toward the end of the residency, the two artists collaborated on what resulted in a final performance. Tara Bryan cut a wing out of the large paper mold she had made with the intention of covering as much of the rock as possible during the residency.

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André DU BOIS, *Identité d'une perte*, 2009-2010. Charred wood, trace on floor. 38,1 x 396 x 63,5 cm. Photo: A. DU BOIS.

→ →
André DU BOIS. Performance of "feu," Banff Centre, 2007. Photo: Tara BRYAN.





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André DU BOIS,
Sarcophage état 1,
 2009-2010. Wood,
 charred wood. 33 x 231 x
 50 cm. Photo A. DU
 BOIS.

→ →
André DU BOIS,
Muraille, 2009-2010.
 Wood, iron thread.
 Variable dimensions.
 Photo A. DU BOIS.

←
André DU BOIS, *Œuvre
 sur papier*. Mixed media
 in Antoni Tapies' book,
La valeur de l'art. André
 Dimanche éd (2006-).
 Photo A. DU BOIS.

André Du Bois made a second wing on the rock. The wings recalled the myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun. And the heat and skies above made their summer ritual all the more powerful. For Du Bois, merging two myths—that of Icarus and Sisyphus—invented a hybrid myth as Icarus' descent from the upper stratosphere to earth, his landing on a rock next to Sisyphus... This hypothetical meeting of two mythological characters still surprises the artist. Burned, transformed from pulp to paper to ashes, Tara Bryan and André Du Bois' Banff experience was ritualized and reconfigured to the scale of life. The borders between art and life became blurred.

Du Bois has commented that his relationship to Tapies and his writings on art are an ongoing event. "Tapies is someone who follows me. I am always adding or transforming my artworks, the plans, drawings, sketches that I have woven into the book. It is a book of transformation," he comments. Since 2006, Du Bois has been adding his own art, traces, markings, painted and multi-media elements to Tapies' book on art. This ongoing process will continue indefinitely, as Du Bois adds, alters, transforms the painted traces to Tapies' texts in situ.

Choreography and dance (the oldest art form of all, according to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss) became manifested in Du Bois' art in a 2010 collaborative performance with Georgina Alacantha at his Quebec City atelier where the floor was covered in sand and had floating wood elements. Drawing ephemerally and gesturally in the sand, Du Bois' traces were themselves obscured and reconfigured by the dancer's movements that animated the space. Effectively Alacantha wrote the space with her entire bodily movement in space. The photographs that Du Bois captured from a bird's eye perch in the studio are all that remain. Alacantha continues to plan for future performance events, building perpetuity into the ephemeral collaboration.

A 2010 show, *Credo de Cendres*, held at Galerie d'art La Nef in Quebec City, had a miniature *Sarcophagus* like a ceremonial model of a larger object one might find in an Egyptian Pharaoh's tomb. A wooden box incorporated a found piece of charred wood. *Sarcophagus* alludes to the eventual disappearance of all things, their reconfigura-

tion, physical transformation... Recuperated from the river, this charred piece of wood is effectively protected like a rare manuscript or work of art, even as it originated out of the nature context that is part of all cultures. Du Bois' ritual re-burnings of container and contained (two burnings to date) will eventually return it all to ashes, pure and simple after the fifth burning. Fragility of life, this *Sarcophagus* is art about transformation, even as it is again transformed by fire. Traces of ash, traces of changes we do not see, a dialogue with time, and life in an ecosystem are what André Du Bois' performative actions are about. This ephemeral element, granular, unquantifiable aspect links Du Bois' sculpture to Anish Kapoor's early pure pigment covered sculpture, or even Wolfgang Laib's installations with yellow pollen, rice and milk.

At La Nef, Du Bois' *Wall of Lamentation* is a political piece that makes reference to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. For Du Bois, nature's ephemera in this miniature scenario or stage set, expresses the violence of apartheid, and the exclusion of witnesses in the Israeli Palestinian

conflict. Ashes and miniature blood coloured sticks express this ongoing Middle Eastern political issue through wood, expressing the grain and texture of violence. Time encapsulates, shifts. *Identité de perte* in *Credo de Cendres*, a suspended piece of timber recuperated from the April 2008 fire at the Armoury on Place Georges V near the Gates to old Quebec is given a new context as art and transformed into a Duchampian found nature object. Du Bois has drawn a shadow image in charcoal on the ground. The object is illusionistic, suspended in time. Life and art are interchangeable, endlessly transforming. Change is set in time. Matter reconfigures over time. Art is in the energies, the microcosm as much as the macrocosm. Physics and the energy of matter are forces over which we have no control. Sculpture, for André Du Bois, brings these forces that are part of life's process into a dialogue with time. ←

John K. GRANDE is co-curator of the exhibition *Eco-Art* with Peter Selz at the Pori Art Museum (2011) in Finland. Grande's *Homage to Jean-Paul Riopelle* will soon be published by Gaspereau/Prospect Press, 2011. www.grandescritique.com