



THE TREE MUSEUM 2 0 0 6



INSIDE FRONT COVER



THE TREE MUSEUM 2 0 0 6

THE 9TH ANNUAL EXHIBITION

SEPTEMBER 17 TO OCTOBER 30, 2006

RESPONDING TO NATURE

NEW WORKS BY

DIANE BORSATO

KELLY MARK

PETER VON TIESENHAUSEN

EXHIBITION CURATED BY DAVID LISS

ESSAY "RESPONDING TO NATURE" BY DAVID LISS

THE TREE MUSEUM • DOE LAKE ROAD • MUSKOKA

KELLY MARK
A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN



FOREWORD

RESPONDING TO NATURE marks the first curatorial collaborative project at the Tree Museum. This collaboration with David Liss, director and curator of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), is part of a long-range plan by the Tree Museum Collective to ensure that the site remains relevant for outdoor work and to extend the range and open new possibilities for collaborations among artists, curators and the Tree Museum Collective. We want to thank David Liss, Diane Borsato, Kelly Mark and Peter von Tiesenhausen for inaugurating this new direction with insight, humour and creative rigour.

E.J. LIGHTMAN AND ANNE O'CALLAGHAN
CO-CURATORS, THE TREE MUSEUM

RESPONDING TO NATURE



AS THE 21ST CENTURY UNFOLDS following at least a hundred years of rapid and unprecedented industrialization, we may have reached the appropriate moment to consider our estrangement from nature. “Responding to nature” suggests a dialogue. As we have come to know in our advanced era of information and communication, dialogue is increasingly confounded by the complexities of a heavily constructed, multi-channel universe. Lines of communication are frequently crossed, and while everybody may have a voice it matters not unless someone is listening. What is nature, if not ourselves? If we respond to “it,” how can we tell if it is listening – and how can we be sure if we are even speaking the appropriate language? While the language of art may be well suited to communicate across linguistic lines, it too is confined within the narrow strictures of its own constructed vocabulary.

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The modern land art tradition is understood to have emerged with Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and others in the late 1960s. Almost fifty years later “land art” – earth art, eco-art, outdoor art in rural settings – has evolved as a genre unto itself, embodying its own vocabulary, characteristics and criteria. Since 1997 the Tree Museum in Gravenhurst has been the site of more than twenty-five projects by artists that have in remarkably diverse ways embraced or challenged traditional notions associated with outdoor, site-responsive art in the landscape. The artists selected for the 2006 project were chosen for their widely disparate practices, with the anticipation that they might challenge or even contradict and thereby expand the parameters and possibilities suggested by the site of the Tree Museum and by the genre itself. Eschewing the conventional creation of aesthetic objects in their widely varied approaches



to the project, Diane Borsato, Kelly Mark and Peter von Teisenhausen “respond to nature” by diverting attention to deeper engagements between ourselves and the world around us.

*There seems at present to be little symbiosis between humans and that which sustains them.
For me to make a grand if even temporary sculpture at the Tree Museum was therefore immediately
inappropriate.* PETER VON TEISENHAUSEN (IN CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE CURATOR, NOVEMBER 2006)

In addition to his prolific exhibition history in conventional gallery and museum settings, Peter von Teisenhausen is regarded as one of Canada’s foremost practitioners of outdoor and land art. But there is no convenient way to classify his practice. Besides producing paintings, drawings, videos and work in other media and materials, he has created sculptures, installations and site-responsive artworks in remote woodlands and urban centres right across the country. Perhaps his most well-known work to date is *Figure Journey* (1997-2002), a drive around the entire perimeter of Canada with five of his Forest Figures in the back of a pickup truck. For von Teisenhausen, no site is so specific as to limit the scope of geography or his artistic imagination.

Particularly in his outdoor work in rural settings, he often fashions sculptures and installations using materials indigenous to the site. In many of these cases, after the object is completed, it is left in place intentionally to disintegrate and be reclaimed by the earth. Nature and time are integrated into the artistic process, implying that art, humanity and nature do exist in balance and harmony. Now twenty years into a career based upon the exploration of art’s relationship to nature, von Teisenhausen

is probing beyond assumptions that have formed around his practice and the land art genre in general. He questions the ability of Western formalist aesthetics to genuinely engage the imagination with nature. Inspired equally by the difficult necessity of defending his rural property in northern Alberta against the oil industry, and by his readings in pacifist eastern philosophies, it is fair to say that von Teisenhausen directly engages with nature, artifice, commodity and humanity on all fronts. It seemed then quite obvious to invite him to participate in the Tree Museum project. He arrived at the site in mid-September with one week to be inspired, and to conceive of and execute a work by the opening reception.

As I found the markers of that land, it became ever more evident how ludicrous and arbitrary those boundaries are. PETER VON TEISENHAUSEN (IN CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE CURATOR, NOVEMBER 2006)

During his time there, with the aid of surveys von Teisenhausen walked the entirety of the property's 320 acres, stopping frequently to quickly cut discreet, eye-like shapes with his thumbnail into the trunks of more than 1,000 trees. The rudimentary symbol has become a trademark for the artist, who has carved more than 5,000 similar marks into the trees on his own property. Interestingly, these marks have aided his thus far successful legal battles to prevent oil and gas companies from drilling and laying pipes on his land as they allow him to invoke artistic and cultural copyright. At the Tree Museum, these marks provided the opportunity for him to explore and be in the land, as they do for the visitors seeking them out. The act also allowed him to declare the property itself to be the work of art. Adding



PETER VON TIESENHAUSEN



an object would only have been detracted. Not only do the personal, political and universal fuse in this case; the almost infinitesimal action and mark become a profoundly grand gesture.

While remaining true to his own engaged commitment to art, nature and humanity, von Teisenhausen's conceptually based approach to the project represents at once a challenge to his own working methodology and to the expectations of the audience. For Kelly Mark, producing work in an outdoor rural setting is completely antithetical to her approach to making art. In fact, Kelly initially turned down the invitation to participate due to her aversion to the outdoors or any circumstance that might lack a full complement of domestic amenities. Through the course of several discussions, however, this contradiction began to intrigue her.

Working in media that include photography, performance, drawing, sculpture, installation, video and more, Mark's approach is always straightforward and never predictable. Dry wit, acerbic humour and provocative irony are strategies she often deploys to create work or situations that call attention to many of the habitual behaviours, benign rituals, banal routines and overlooked absurdities that characterize everyday existence. Indeed, her project *A Little Piece of Heaven*, is a typically contrary gesture that playfully mocks her own and society's estrangement from nature – as well as our desire and need for nature – at the same time critiquing our attempts to manipulate it.

Despite the massive territory of Canada and the cultural stereotypes that persist to the contrary, the large majority of our population resides in urban centres and suburban sprawls. Within these environments, however, much attention, effort, money and resources are spent nurturing and maintaining that most sacred of aesthetic domestic icons: the great North American invention, the lawn. Growing up in



KELLY MARK
A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN

suburban Ontario during the 1960s and '70s, I remember my father's annual fertilizer-fuelled campaign against the weeds and dandelions that threatened to overtake his patch of green perfection. Even today, in many municipal jurisdictions the use of health-threatening pesticides is an accepted means of ridding lawns and gardens of arbitrarily unwanted plant species. And though Gravenhurst is celebrated for its lakes and forests, i.e., its "natural" beauty, the well-manicured lawn is a prominent feature of many properties in the area. Here and elsewhere the lawn still stands as a symbol of pride, achievement and status, like well-groomed hair, unblemished skin, a well-tailored suit or a late-model car – and for Kelly Mark, a splendid target for her poetic brand of satire.

In keeping with the spirit and character of much of her work, the direct and deceptively simple visual artifact – the little piece of heaven – belied the multiple layers, sly complexity and double-entendre ironies it embodied. To start with, and true to form, Mark's approach to the project intended to undermine expectations and clichés associated with site-responsive art making. At no point in the process did she visit the site. Nor did she request site plans, photographs or any historical information related to the site. Her project was completely conceived from the comfort of her studio in downtown Toronto.

Supplying measurements based approximately on front-lawn sizes of modest residential properties in Toronto's west end, Mark requested that a 10 x 10-foot area be selected anywhere amidst the rough terrain of the Tree Museum grounds. This patch of ground was to be cleared and replaced by sod, and maintained in pristine condition until the exhibition opened – a near-impossible task. In early spring Tree Museum co-curators E.J. Lightman, Anne O'Callaghan and I selected a site on high ground with a picturesque view of the lake, and placed a thick tarpaulin on the spot to retard growth during the

summer. Several weeks prior to opening, the sod was laid. To visitors coming upon the hilariously incongruous sight of this perfect little green lawn in the midst of waist-high brush, the “joke” was immediately apparent. The sight gag, though, quickly gave way to implications and meanings related to this futile attempt to redirect the course of nature. Needless to say, the lawn would become overgrown and reintegrated into the habitat within weeks, if not days.

It is important to note, however, that the entire property and surrounding woodlands are composed of secondary growth. Looking up from the lawn across the lake, one notices cottages along its shores and overhead wires and hydro lines crossing the sky. The land has been cleared to make way for intrusions such as buildings and the roads and pathways that have been cut to provide convenient access for people and cars. Mark’s piece can be considered as a touchstone reminding us that, idyllic as this spot is, it is far from natural. Here we are not “in nature” as much as we would like to think: evidence of human intervention is visible at every turn. Within this context, even the notion of art – an imposition of human ego and artifice – comes into question.

Ubiquitous and generic as a good lawn might appear, many nevertheless regard it as a highly individualized achievement, a triumph of stewardship and dominion over the forces of nature.

Reacting and responding to particular situations and contexts, spontaneously or through extensive research and planning, is characteristic of Diane Borsato’s practice. She usually does not produce inert objects for passive viewing, preferring instead to engage or even confront audiences with unusual experiences that might disrupt our understandings of relationships with each other, and with art. Inevitably this requires her to perform or to create relational and intervention-based works.

DIANE BORSATO'S
THE ROAD OUT



She is essentially a storyteller, and her stories are often stranger than either truth or fiction, especially when they combine both.

Approaching her project entirely differently than did Mark and von Teisenhausen, Borsato similarly deflates many antiquated romantic associations we have about nature. The Road Out is an audio-guided walking tour, developed specifically for this project, in the form of a 16-minute, downloadable MP3 file listened to through portable disc players with headphones.

The walk begins at the mailbox in front of the Tree Museum building and proceeds to the beaver pond along the road through the forest to Doe Lake Road. The narrator (the artist) leads the walk with humorous anecdotes and descriptions of the surroundings that become increasingly questionable, cautioning against carnivorous plants and invoking tango music to keep bears away. The preposterous tales and technological mediation cause a tangible disconnect between what is being experienced psychologically and what is being encountered physically, disrupting rational perception of the environment. Reality and fiction become difficult to separate. Additional audio material enhances the sounds of weather and birds. Nature becomes conflated with culture as the narrator sucks on candy, eats chocolate from Venezuela, sings along to a passing car radio, and, with her sound producer and musician, Joel Silver, conjures imaginary vibrations from the pre-Cambrian Shield.

Borsato also plays off romantic clichés that equate nature with pleasure as suggested by the candy, chocolate and the sounds of people having sex in the woods. Practically speaking, what few truly natural places still exist, if any, are largely uninhabitable by humans. If we went to them, such pleasurable activities as listening to tango music, eating non-essential foods, having outdoor sex and, for that

matter, making art, would not likely take priority over the need to survive, to urgently orient ourselves with our surroundings. The notion of nature as playground and site of recreation is, ironically, only possible through our objectification and subjugation of it. With this in mind, Borsato intervenes not upon the physical landscape but plays instead upon our (mis)perceptions: the interstitial slippage between constructed and actual realities.

Whether *The Road Out* is dramatic narrative, social critique or response to nature, its destabilizing effect precipitates a shift in our assumptions. The imagination then opens to the multiple possibilities through which we perceive and experience our surroundings.

It would seem a stretch to view any of these artists' responses to the project as advancing an overtly ecological agenda, but it is noteworthy that their impact upon the land is almost negligible. Here art, and the viewer's engagement with it, are transformed from the passive contemplation of an aesthetic fetish into a discourse that seeks to take into account the muted voice of nature. The privileged supremacy of the object and every notion and assumption associated with art making in the landscape is challenged. The field opens, attuned to the call, not from nature as some separate, distinct and distant entity, but to the reverberations that define our relationship and place within it.

DAVID LISS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

DIANE BORSATO is an artist working in performance, video, audio, photography and installation. She received an MFA from Concordia University and an MA in performance studies from Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York. She has shown her work and delivered artist talks at artist-run centres and museums across Canada and internationally. Recently she created a 12-hour performance of tango-dancing police officers for *Nuit Blanche*, [“an all-night arts festival newly arrived in Toronto”] and is preparing projects at the Art Gallery at York University (Toronto, Ontario), CAFKA (Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener & Area, Ontario) and Cambridge Galleries (Ontario), and at the Power Plant in Toronto. Borsato is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studio at Brock University

KELLY MARK completed her BFA in 1994 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Since then she has exhibited widely across Canada and internationally (including the United States, Australia and Europe). Mark works in a variety of media, including drawing, sculpture, photography, installation, sound, video and performance. She is represented by Wynick/Tuck Gallery (Toronto) and Tracey Lawrence Gallery (Vancouver).

PETER VON TIESENHAUSEN has lived most of his life in the boreal forest region of northwestern Alberta. He has exhibited multidisciplinary work nationally and internationally, in both private and public galleries and foundations, since 1990. Using all manner of material, his work responds to the environment in which he finds himself; much of it originates from and on the land where he lives. His claim of copyright on his land as an artwork has protected it against industrial incursions on numerous occasions.

DAVID LISS is director and curator of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto. Since 2001 he has organized more than 60 exhibitions and projects for MOCCA, in eight counties including Canada. From 1995 to 2000 Liss was director/curator of the Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre in Montreal, where he organized and curated numerous exhibitions by Canadian and international artists. His writings and essays on art and culture have appeared in various catalogues and publications, including the *Montreal Gazette*, *Canadian Art*, *Espace* and ARCO Publications and *ARTECONTEXTO* in Madrid. Liss is a contributing editor to *Canadian Art*, a curator at ARCO Madrid since 2004, an adjunct professor at York University in Toronto, and a practising artist.

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The Tree Museum

Doe Lake Road.

Muskoka, Ontario

Tel: 416-638-5082

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INSIDE BACK COVER

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