

# Shape-Shifting: The Need for Sculpture

SEPTEMBER 21, 2016 *By* intsculpturectr *in* MATERIALS & PROCESS, ON VIEW, PUBLIC ART

*Tags:* GIL MCELROY 3 COMMENTS

Laura Moore, *One Man's Junk* (installation photo by Paul Cimoroni)

I want to talk a bit about context – specifically, what sculpture can do to our experiences and expectations of public and private spaces. It's all about shape-shifting.

I'm drawn back to this because of an exhibition recently opened at the Maclaren Art Centre (<http://www.maclarenart.com/>) in the city of Barrie, Ontario, just north of Toronto. Laura Moore's *One Man's Junk* is a seemingly simple and understated installation: essentially a wooden shipping pallet carefully stacked with a number of carved limestone sculptures – 1:1 scale – of old cathode-ray tube computer monitors. The contextual part of this has to do with the work's placement in a small, interior courtyard at the gallery that is shared with an adjacent café. There are plants in concrete containers, and a few tables and chairs. Moore's work sits off to one side atop a concrete slab.

Laura Moore, *One Man's Junk* (installation photo by Paul Cimoroni)

It would be all-too-easy to call *One Man's Junk*

“discreet” based on nothing more than its small size and its location within this public/private space, but in reality it is anything but. The best metaphor here might be that of a black hole: The presence of Moore's tidy accumulation of hand-carved limestone works in fact radically distorts and reshapes this space at multiple levels including (but in no way limited to) how abandoned technologies continue to exert a tight socio-economic grip upon us. Whether, say, dumped into the corner of a little-used space, or dumped (in a much more massive, industrial-

scale way) onto another part of the world, out-of-sight-out-of-mind is a fiction. An illusion. And a socially, culturally and (of course) economically pricey one at that, one that might end up costing us our home.

I mention Laura Moore's interventional installation at the McLaren (it's up until mid-October) by way of brokering an evocation of two important sites in Canada where the sculptural interceded into rather set and understood spatial contexts and did its shape-shifting thing. They're both all but gone, now – well, sort of. One was urban, the other rural.

Peter von Tiesenhausen, 'the land is the canvas,' 2006 (detail, photo by the artist)

The latter was called The Tree Museum (<http://www.thetreemuseum.com/>) and was situated about two hours drive north of Toronto near the town of Gravenhurst, and at the end of a winding, rutted mile-long dirt road. Founded in 1997, it was curated by artists EJ Lightman and Anne O'Callaghan, and over the course of its fourteen-year tenure, 80 artists used the museum acreage (320 of them to be exact, owned by a Toronto private school) to create site-specific and largely temporary installations. Now, this isn't wild, untrammelled nature we're talking about here; this is rugged, rocky land (part of the Canadian Shield) with thin soil and numerous bogs, and it was entirely logged-out a hundred years ago, covered now with second-growth forest and abutted by a growing number of nearby cottages. Working with the fundamental guiding principal of "we tread lightly upon the land," Lightman and O'Callaghan included work by environmentally-based artists like Peter von Tiesenhausen, whose '*the land is the canvas*' from 2006 comprised eye-like shapes he incised into the bark of over 1,000 trees on the property using only his thumbnail. It was an extension of ongoing work he had done on his own rural property in Alberta, and which he successfully used to legally block oil and gas exploration upon it.

See? Context really *can* change everything.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, The Toronto Sculpture Garden

Tim Whiten, *Danse* (detail, photo by EJ Lightman).

(<http://www.torontosculpturegarden.com/>) was about as urban as you could get, located on a tiny parcel of land (80' x 100' in size) in downtown Toronto that had once been a parking lot. Opened in 1981 as a joint venture between the city of

Toronto (which owns the property) and a foundation created by the family of benefactor Louis L. Odetts (which funded and administered exhibitions), it played host to a couple of exhibitions each year that addressed the contexts of this place.

And they were myriad. In 1996, for instance, Liz Magor built a small log cabin on site and landscaped trees and bushes around it for her *Messenger*. A year later, James Carl installed a gently arcing line of nine pop machines emblazoned with an image of Niagara Falls upon them (mirroring the artificial waterfall that was part of this site) for his *Fountain*. In 2003 Charles Goldman's *Infinitely Intersecting Orbs* comprised a gridded playground of fifteen functional (albeit, slightly modified) tetherball poles across the lawn, and before that Micah Lexier installed his time-based *The End and the Beginning October 10, 2001 to April 2002*, a brick wall that rose incrementally over a period of fifteen weeks (402 bricks laid each week), completed fifteen weeks before the show itself ended. Shape shifting in the most literal sense.

Both The Tree Museum and The Toronto Sculpture Garden are now all but gone. The Toronto Sculpture Garden ceased its exhibition programming in 2014, though it has been employed since then as a venue that has been a part of the annual *Nuit Blanche* events held in Toronto since 2006. Shape-shifting remains a viable possibility here; the property itself remains in the hands of the City of Toronto. Further north, the Tree Museum ceased formal operations in 2012, though many of the works there remain on site. The temporary scarring of von Tiesenhausen's mark-making has long since healed over, but a work like Tim Whiten's *Danse*, skeletal figures sand-blasted into a rocky outcrop of Canadian Shield, will endure far longer and so maintain its context-shifting role amidst whatever the changing fortunes of this property might entail – at least for awhile, anyway.

Gone, but by no means forgotten. Both sites – and, yes, even venues like the small interior courtyard of the Maclaren Art Centre – underscore sculpture's radically transformative ability to switch the channel, to alter the proverbial course, to rework context...to shape-shift. More than any other medium, I would suggest, the very thingness of the sculptural can upend, even subvert, the narrow conventions and expectations of place, can suggest something else – something *other*. Richard Serra's now destroyed *Tilted Arc* may have pissed off a lot of office workers forced to confront it every day, but it did make them acutely aware of the role of context and what a physical space actually meant to them. And Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* may be situated in such an isolated location that few people

actually ever experience it first-hand, but it can be seen from space, and images of this almost otherworldly structure meaningfully play into our fundamental understanding of place.

Sculpture's otherness matters, and that's become even more important as *this* place – our very planet – is being deformed, perhaps beyond all recognition, by our rapacious quest for even more.

By Gil McElroy (<https://blog.sculpture.org/gil-mcelroy/>)

### 3 responses

ALAN WHITE says:

September 21, 2016 at 12:03 pm

“Best metaphor is a black hole?” Please, the only thing a black hole can be compared to is another black hole.

GIL MCELROY says:

September 21, 2016 at 12:46 pm

The Tree Museum is not entirely inactive, so I'm passing along information here about what is currently going on at the site:

The Tree Museum is

Celebrating Cultural Days in Ontario

Deeter Hastenteufel and Badanna Zack

September 1 – October 31, 2016

Opening Reception: October 2, 2016, 2pm to 5pm

Artists will be Present

With Icarian Poetics in the Tree Museum House, Hastenteufel's main concern was to generate an “Installation” which is entirely based on the available space the gallery provides and at the same time reflects on the environment of The Tree Museum site. The goal was to use the Gallery like a canvas to create an overall picture. This he has successfully achieved with Icarian Poetics. The

work is a fugue-like and somewhat elusive collage aesthetic, a woven narrative of shifting associations and strange juxtapositions, the constructivist and the surrealist at work.

An artist is the product and reflection of society, and the only responsibility she or he has, is the dramatization and realization of his or her concerns, dreams, ideas and inner discoveries of the mental labyrinth, called the mind. DH Deeter Hastenteufel, (born in Basel /Switzerland) is a multi-disciplinary multimedia artist and Canadian citizen. Throughout his career he has worked with stone, wood, steel, clay, sand, gravel, water, fire, glass, Neon-light, waste material and many other materials. He is a sculptor, painter, video and performance artist! Placing him in art history terms, he is not easily put into a box, although he is definitely a contemporary inventor of new moulds. He oscillates between constructivism and the surreal. Hastenteufel shows National and International, showing annually with the collective Tranart in Germany and Canada.

Badanna Zack's sculptural installation *On The Shield*, references the era of early settlement in the Muskoka area. And here Zack reconstructs the human histories emanating from the site. *On the Shield*, a domestic structure fabricated from contemporary building materials is introduced into the site, and the incorporation of large boulders found on site, attest to the geological age of the area. *On The Shield*, a re-imagining of a time when humans and nature co-habited in harmony.

Returning to *The Tree Museum*, has given me a voice to express my concerns about the environment, in particular the clear cutting of old growth forests, from Vancouver to Brazil. We cannot return to the past and a simpler time, but we must learn to take care of Planet Earth. BZ

Zack's work is characterized by its' large size, scale, and her use of recycled and found materials, from: newspapers, discarded cardboard, pop cans and old junk cars, that she uses used to construct her objects and installations. In 1998, Zack was invited to participate in *The Tree Museum's* inaugural exhibition. Working with the discarded vehicles found on site Zack created the installation, *A Mound Of Cars*, a monument to our insidious inability to deal with the remnants of our acquisitive society. Zack's work is also rooted in an

awareness of conflict and the contradictions of our time. Her work consistently contains allusions to current topics and her new work at the Tree Museum, On the Shield, testifies to Zack's constant concern with the present. The strength of her work lies in her commitment to humankind and planet earth and her continuing efforts to restore the broken connection between the two.

The Tree Museum was established in 1997 and is a site set on the pre Cambrian shield amidst the cottage county-side of Muskoka. It is located on Ryde Lake near the town of Gravenhurst, Ontario. The site is undeveloped and includes both waterfront and forest. For the participating artists, this opportunity represents a rare occasion to realize major outdoor artworks in an uncultivated environment. 1998-2012, artists, both National and International, have created unique projects relating to the site of the Tree Museum. These works engage the complex reality of the relationship between man and nature; adoration, reliance, and exploitation. Collectively, the projects explore concepts of identity, memory and territory in respect to nature and natural processes, while underscoring the imbalance that characterizes our current relationship to the environment. We are also cognisant of our responsibility as conservators of the land where the work is created. Eighty percent of the pathways are temporary and as the work disappears, or is removed, so too is all evidence of its presence. Some of the works are permanent and others are of a transitory nature, with the elements and nature determining their life span. We tread very lightly on the land. EJ. Lightman, Founder and curator of The Tree Museum

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<http://www.thetreemuseum.ca>

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Anne O'Callaghan: [currentseparate@gmail.com](mailto:currentseparate@gmail.com)

DEREKIVORY says:

December 25, 2016 at 7:33 am

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