CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHridge

TERRA FIRMA,
IDEAS AND IDEALS IN GEO-ECOLOGICAL ART.

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Sculpture
by
Richard Joshua Katz

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The abstract of Richard Joshua Katz is approved:

California State University, Northridge
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for my parents
and
Suzanne
My Art is a personal exploration of geological and ecological relationships of matter and energy. The principles used are natural processes, forms and philosophies.

I believe that the most important concerns for the artist are those that reflect the Universal and the Eternal. It is these qualities in art and philosophy that can elevate man beyond his everyday existence to the level of the godly. The product of the Universal and the Eternal is the Natural.

Through my studies, experience, and art, I have assembled an evolving set of principles that form and guide me in my learning. I view my works as answered questions that inevitably ask new questions. The principles are as follows:

**Ecology** is the relationship between organism and environment.

**Time** as expressed on a geological scale, as opposed to our comparatively short-termed, highly-divided scale of consciousness, through the entropy of form and the transmutation of matter. This is effected by:

**Natural Processes**, as physical and conceptual tools of natural evolutionary change. Our culture is in transition from object orientation to systems orientation. Change emanates not from things, but from the way that things are done. In the case of Nature, this means all the natural physical processes on the planet, as determined by the reactive relationships between Energy (sunlight, magnetism, gravity, etc.) and Matter (earth, water, air, etc.). In the case of Culture, this means the emphasis should be placed not on manufacture of enduring objects, but on conceptual ideological speculation. This entails definition by intent of concept rather than by material limits.
This can be summarized as:

**Anti-craftsmanship**: not to do things sloppily, but rather to forego dependence upon sweetly crafted objects as one's artistic, and ultimately, intellectual fare.

Emphasis is placed on **entropy**, which represents the de-evolutionary half of any natural cycle. In nature, this is the erosionary type of process that washes a mountain out to sea. This is reflective of entropic dominance in present social process; the moral and intellectual erosion evidenced in the prevalent values and standards of mankind. I use it as the process whereby my pieces are integrated with and ultimately accepted into the environment. Generally, the geological pieces are conditioned by the environment and the ecological pieces condition the environment.

The various physical stages of geomorphological change that are the characteristic manners in which matter reacts to energy as known in erosionary (land destroying) and depositionary (land making) processes. Landforms are the visible results of these concurrently occurring processes.

The **transplant**: introduction of a situation (artificial or foreign) into an environment for purposes of studying interaction. The natural processes indigenous to the site evolve and complete the piece in their own time. In their occurrences according to natural cycles, the effects of agents of change (wind, rain, plants, animals and people) are visibly focused on the piece. This gives the sculpture an evolving state of being similar to that of any other life form. To me, objects are static because they are meant to exist in a finished state of being. My outdoor pieces are situations that
I introduce into the environment and are never finished until they are gone. They are doing something, participating in the ever-changing environment, the whole time they exist. This constant change is a quality of living.

Physical and Temporal Scale: The mass of a human in space and the designed lifespan of a human in time make up the scale of many of the pieces. They are not complete until they have undergone their full entropy.

Transposition of time as reversed by visual emphasis.

Compression of time into a scale readily conceived by the mind of man.

Rejection of man's arbitrarily imposed artificial systems of measurement that seek to gain understanding by containment.

Interruption of natural processes and environmental conditions to see how nature recclaims her own. This becomes the study of:

Lifecycles: the stories of existence from birth through death to rebirth. In nature a plant's life cycle is determined by the seasonal changes of daylight hours and temperature. As the cycle is continuous, it does not matter at which point it is entered. Because nature always restores harmony to interrupted cycles (saying in effect "The purpose of life is life."), works in this area express a faith in and hope for life.

Reactive potentiality of a transplanted situation is dependent upon design concepts. This is the measure of the pace of change and acceptance into the environment of the piece. The greater the potential, the faster things happen.

Relativity as an attitude is to train oneself to consider all
questions from as many viewpoints as possible in order to arrive at the most objective conclusions. This is in order to transcend not only the fashionable trends and traditional values of fine art, but to escape the limited and self-centered outlook of mankind; a huddling horde of insignificant insects on a back-water planet. I regard the works of man to be the least important concerns with which to occupy oneself when seen within the context of the natural process that is the Universe.

A devout man would call this totality "G-D", and would call my art my "Religion". However, melding my ideas and ideals within the context of Art as I do, I have not met any.
STACK, 1974

Stack is a dynamic situation which I have introduce to this environment to be acted upon by all forces and life forms naturally present at its site. It serves as a concentration point for visible change.

The forces of wind, rain, sun, and gravity coupled with the merging of the piece's life cycle with those of random plants, insects, animals and people act upon Stack. These elements are the hammers and chisels by which nature accomplishes all its de-evolution of geological form. I set up the situation; natural processes do the piece. It won't be finished until it is a sandy patch in the soil thirty thousand years hence.

Stack takes the form of a lone mesa made up of sandstone strata that evidence faulting and shifting. Now it is new and bare; soon it will be a layered garden of plants with insects and animals burrowing through it. A ring of rock and soil debris will build up against its sides as it erodes. The structure will settle and blur into a mound. The mound of material will spread out and eventually become a sandy area completely accepted into the local order of being.
STACKS II and III, 1975

These pieces work on the same principles as Stack I. However, more emphasis is placed upon the visual aspects of erosion.

Stack II was begun at an already well-worn stage in its progression. This is evidenced by the top layer of plaster being cut in two at its narrowest point, by the fact that it is smaller at the top (where erosion is always greatest), by the talus cone sides, and by the white detritus spreading down the structure.

Stack III is made of different colored earths and sands. It was constructed with an open rectangular mold that was lifted up the structure until it was finished. Its life cycle will move swiftly because of its granular composition.
**SLABS, 1974**

Slabs is a row of seven upright sheets of sandstone. The sheet on the end tilts toward the others creating a suspenseful impending "domino effect" and a spatial compression. This yields an anxiety about whether or not the natural process of destruction will occur within the viewers own limited allotment of time.

The piece is reminiscent of a prehistoric monument in its form. The sheets of stone with their uneven shapes and sizes, their rich tactility and various natural details provide ample reason for their use as elements of sculpture.

The natural forces of wind, sunlight, rain, gravity, and plant growth will constantly work on Slabs to make an evolving situation that offers ever-changing appearances and conditions.
Strata takes the form of three tilted layers of rock projecting from a hillside.

It is a transposition of time. The hillside is a record of recent geological conditions and events while the transplanted layers of rock are a record of earlier conditions and events. From their position, it is implied that they are but an exposed fragment of great layers of rock that extend infinitely down into the earth. By use of a figure/ground relationship, the older is made more prominent than the newer.
ADOBE TIMEPIECE, 1974

As geological time is a true measure of long-term temporal progression, to relate forms of geological elements as affected by accumulated natural processes, i.e., effects of time on physicality, is a valid method of expansion of understanding of relativity.

Therefore, displacement of form in space as a result of natural processes can be used to measure passage of real time.

Adobe Timepiece is a statement on the futility of measurement; of man's doomed attempts to contain nature within an artificial and arbitrary framework of "understanding."

It is constructed of yardsticks that are each labeled as a different scale of real time such as "solar orbits" and "lunar cycles" that theoretically measure the rate at which the adobe block melts out of and escapes from the artificial framework of man's.
HYDRAULIC HILL

A Time Warp, March 1973

Geological time is very slow by human standards; it takes millions of years (years: a human invention—solar orbits in real time) for a hill to form and be eroded away. Conversely, humanity has existed for only a second in geological real time; an aberration of the moment.

By pneumatic means, although "hydraulic" sounds better for the purpose of title, I created a turf-covered area with a 10 foot diameter that, when inflated, would form a 4 foot hill in a minute and a half. Similarly, it would deflate in the same period, thereby compressing millions of years worth of natural processes into a handy condensation readily conceivable by the mind of man. By the physical alteration of the environment in space and time, that point of the space/time continuum in which Hydraulic Hill existed experienced appreciably more than the surrounding environ in terms of geomorphological processes and change.
(Flat)

HYDRAULIC HILL Dia. 10 Ft. Ht. 4 Ft.
(Risen)
Hive, 1974

Hive is an effort to concentrate life forms in an open environment. It is an alien situation introduced into a given environment to find out how it is accepted into the local order of being.

To be integrated into its surroundings, Hive offers the water in its catch basin, shelter in gradated sizes, shade, and good hunting. The physical format is purposely artificial in appearance that it may draw attention to itself from the local animals, birds and insects.

Now, in its third site placement, Hive has proven itself a viable environmental transplant by attracting life to itself in each case. It could do so anywhere.
DEFOLIATION SERIES, 1974-5

The field given is uniformly timed within the same synchronous life cycle. The natural progression of seasons and environmental conditions has formed a cycle of being that is enacted in full each year.

Since the cycle is continuous, it doesn't matter at what point it is entered by the artist. The selected area is treated by simple processes that have the effect of dis-synchronizing it from the surrounding cycle.

The burned area is brought to the bottom of the life cycle immediately but is the first to be reborn. The salted earth is unaffected until it rains, and then takes years to be renewed. Plant life within the treated area will die and be reborn at different rates as nature recovers her own whether in the life part or the death part of the cycle.

The third defoliation piece is a belt of sand that forms an environmental transplant which acts as a barrier to physical movement by fauna, especially when heated by the summer sun. It is a "no mans land" for the local flora, too, as none of them will grow there.

I am working in concert with natural processes to produce and record the works. Because nature always renews the dead areas, the works express a faith in and hope for life as an ideal.
DEFOLIATION I  12 Yds.

DEFOLIATION II  14 Yds.
DEFOLIATION III  10 Yds.
Living in earthquake-conscious California, it was inevitable that I would deal with mass tectonic forces of this type. The piece is a visual allusion/illusion of this natural phenomenon.

Emerging from the bamboo hedge at one side of the yard, it splits the earth in a jagged rip as it works its way across the field. A double section of corral fence was torn apart, shattering the boards, before the fissure disappears into the sage brush-choked enclosure. Its visual impact is rather unnerving.
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This is a mass collapsing in upon itself in a self-negating manner. It is kind of a volcano in reverse. It is a double piece because next to the Collapsing Hill is the sucked-in depression of one that has already been returned to the greater earth from which it originally arose.

The concept of reversing natural processes in an accelerated time sense is particularly valuable to comprehension of the areas that I wish the viewer to understand and appreciate.