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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

SCULPTURE IN THE ENVIRONMENT

AN ANALYSIS OF

THE BOG
SYMPOSIUM

GLENCREE, CO. WICKLOW

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN
AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART
DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

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MARCH 1991

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Boglands have always interested me from a time when I played with the peat at the bog during the summer months right up to when I started to incorporate peat into my sculpture. Over the past few years in my work I have used natural materials to create sculpture responsive to the environment. My studio work is mainly concerned with creating environments such as **IN THE LANDSCAPE (fig.1)**. For me as a sculptor the bog has proven to be very enriching. Working with an array of natural materials in relation to their environments, I found the idea of a "Bog Symposium" to be exciting and it offered a step forward for my work. I submitted a proposal to the symposium of the Sculptors Society of Ireland but I was unsuccessful.

The idea of working in the landscape began with my participation in the Yeats sculpture workshop in 1989 where I met Japanese land artist Hiroshi Mickami, who talked about the earth in terms of time, space, sound and evolution. During the workshop he made **WORK IN EVOLUTION NO. 16 (Fig 2)** which was later sited in Hazelwood. Over the past year I observed the sculpture and watched it change in relation to the environment in which it was sited.

In this thesis I am going to discuss the developments in work of the Irish artist in relation to the landscape. Through symposia the Irish sculptor has returned to the

land, like the sculptor of the 70's, who also saw this step into the landscape as an advancement in his work. First of all I am going to examine Irish landscape painting because I see it as the first development in the relationship between the artist and the land.

In chapter two I will look at the land artists of the 70's in relation to the gallery system and how, through the advancement of sculptors into the landscape, they have returned to some of their "grass roots". It is through symposia that the Irish sculptors have developed their work outside the gallery. In chapter three I will refer also to the progress and developments of symposia.

I will examine the work of the participants in the Bog Symposium in chapter four and see how their work developed personally as a group. The historical peatlands will be discussed as an environment and I will deal with how the sculptors adapted to and learned from their surroundings.

While the bog was a new idea for many of the participants. I felt that Gerard Cox responded to this environment well, I will examine this in chapter five. This was mainly because his work in the bog is an extension of his previous work. I will also look at Gerard Cox's work before and during the symposium and see how he coped with his new surroundings.

Historically the peatlands of Ireland have attracted

historians, geologists, writers and poets as a vibrant but enduring subject matter. Now the sculptor has started to form contacts with these primal lands, as Seamus Heaney writes about

I

*I love this turf-face,
its black incisions,
the cooped secrets,
of process and ritual;*

II

*Ouagmire, swampland, morass:
the slime kingdoms,
domains of the cold-blooded,
of mud pads and dirtied eggs.*

III

*But bog
meaning soft
the fall of windless rain,
Pupil of amber. (1)*



FIG. 1

IN THE LANDSCAPE

MARY MULROE



FIG. 2.

WORK IN EVOLUTION NO. 16

HIROSHI MICKAMI

C H A P T E R I

IRISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Eighteenth to twentieth century

The surrounding land is not just mystic in terms of pre-historic settlements that are scattered around the country but also in the compounds and modules that make up each component of nature. The landscape has been constantly used down through history and even more so today as a source of inspiration and as a means of trying to find new roots.

While the farmer uses the land intuitively as a means of survival, artists use the landscape as a form of expression. The farmer works the land with traditional means, while the visual arts in Ireland however lack continuity. Historically the visual arts have been exclusively in the hands of the upper classes and inevitably the type of work produced for them bore little resemblance to the lives of the majority of people. In Ireland the arts were predominantly controlled by the English landed gentry who involved themselves on a superficial level with Irish life. As a result of this most Irish painters at one time or another in their artistic career, centered themselves in London with the consequence that the development of the visual arts had limited significance for the majority of Irish people.

By the eighteenth century, the artist started to deal with the landscape by taking topographical, classical or imaginary views of well known sites and cities like Dublin. Thomas Roberts the Elder (1760 - 1826), was

probably one of the most influential artists of the century for future generations. In works such as **VIEW OF THE COUNTRY SEAT OF MR. CHRISTOPHER DEEYO OF BELLISLE AND PART OF LOUGH ERNE** (fig.3), Roberts deals with the landscape realistically by conveying the atmosphere of a rich misty land. He had a "*poetic understanding of light*"¹ through handling tonal gradations with great delicacy.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw transitions from eighteenth century classicism to nineteenth century romanticism and by the end of the century some continental influences could be seen also. James Arthur O'Connor (1742 - 1841) was probably one of the most influential artists at the beginning of the nineteenth century, making the transition from the classicism of the eighteenth century to the romantacism of the nineteenth century. Along with Francis Danby (1793 - 1861) both artists dealt with how "*infinitely small and inferior man is in face of the grandeur of natural phenomena*"(2). O'Connor dealt with wild rugged scenes as well as the atmospherics of **THE POACHERS** (Fig.4). The isolation and sense of loneliness surrounding the figures emphasises the insignificance of man under moonlit sky. O'Connor's work has the subdued colours of the eighteenth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century Irish artists like William Osborne and Nathaniel Hone had travelled abroad. These artists were subsequently influenced by the Barbizon

painters, Millet, Rousseau as well as the French impressionists.

Later Osborne and Hone returned to Ireland where the post-impressionists had virtually no impact. Hone who was one of the most prestigious painters of his time, retreated to North County Dublin where he exiled himself from the contemporary art scene. His works were pastoral and reflective of the fresh spontaneous brush strokes of the impressionists, such as **YACHTS AT SEA (Fig. 5)**.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw the revival of both the visual and literary arts. The two major exponents were the Yeats brothers, William Butler Yeats and Jack Butler Yeats. Jack Butler Yeats was the main artist at the beginning of the twentieth century. In works such as **A RACE IN HY BRAZIL (Fig. 6)**, he incorporated figures into the landscape like many other painters down through the centuries.

Paul Henry (1876 - 1958) was the main artist who dominated landscape painting in the early years of this century. He concentrated on the topographical landscape unlike Yeats who balanced the landscape with the presence of the figure on his canvas. In his early years Henry worked in Whistler's studio and later in France with the impressionists. Henry worked mainly in the West of Ireland. In **LOUGH ALTAN, CO. DONEGAL (Fig. 7)**, he does not capture the vibrant and strong colours associated with the area but instead he

incorporates a technique associated with the impressionists. He paints the rough, sombre landscape with subtle light filled colours. Henry found it difficult to balance the influential European trends with his approach in dealing with the Irish landscape.

The West of Ireland and its vibrant landscape captured many painters in terms of subject matter. By 1960, Patrick Collins was at the forefront of landscape painting, but it wasn't until after a period spent in Connemara that he developed a new insight into the raw materials which he was painting. Collins had the ability to combine atmospheric qualities with structural images on the canvas, by incorporating animals or people into the landscape. His work was flat and smooth in approach. By the 1970's his palate had become much richer and the canvas contained an atmosphere of a mist filled land such as in **A PLACE WITH STONES** (fig. 8).

The landscape proved to be an influential subject from the eighteenth century right up to the twentieth century. Historically Ireland has formed a tradition in landscape painting. Eighteenth century painters captured the romantic side of our land but by the twentieth century they had started to abstract areas of the landscape. Through their reactive responses to the environment they not only captured the atmosphere and vibrant colours of Ireland but also through their personal interactive response to their

surroundings, they formed links with nature which can be seen in their work. It is here now that the Irish sculptor must acquaint themselves with the landscape like the painters have done.



Fig. 3.

VIEW OF THE COUNTRY SEAT
OF MR. CHRISTOPHER DEEYO
OF BELLISLE AND PART OF
LOUGH ERNE.

THOMAS ROBERTS THE ELDER



FIG. 4.

THE POACHERS

JAMES ARTHUR O'CONNOR



FIG. 5.

YACHTS AT SEA

WILLIAM OSBORNE



FIG. 6.

A RACE AT HY BRAZIL

W.B. YEATS



FIG. 7.

LOUGH ALTAN, CO. DONEGAL

PAUL HENRY



FIG. 8.

A PLACE WITH STONE

PATRICK COLLINS

C H A P T E R I I

CONTEMPORARY LAND ART OF THE 1970's

"RETURN TO THE LAND"

By the end of the sixties modernism had excelled. Instead of looking for "a process of realising new possibilities"¹ which the modernists had centered upon, the artists of the 70's now directed themselves towards a Pluralist era.

*The 1970's has not been just another decade something did happen, something so somentous that it was ignored in disbelief : modernity had gone out of style.*²

With fresh approaches and ideas the 70's saw formations of new groups of artists such as black art, conceptual art, process art and earth art. The artists wanted to uncover and reveal an art with some sustances that in some way concerned themselves in a more personal way. Instead of categorising themselves within the rules and regulations of a particular movement they sought to exclude themselves from this commodity basis of art practice.

Soho provided the artist with greater freedom by creating new spaces and environments for the artist to work and display in.

*"These were created for artist who wanted to make art beyond the object, beyond the gallery, beyond the audience."*³

These "*alternative spaces*"⁴ encouraged and incited sculptors to escape from the white cube installation of the gallery and to return their work to it's natural surroundings. Instead of dealing with the diffused fluorescent lighting of the gallery the artist now had to deal with the external elements of this environment : air, water, light, space, time, sound, movement and the raw materials of the earth. The concept of using the environment as a new space helped the artist to bridge the gap between man and nature so the artist could interact with his natural surroundings. These were the earth artists.

(Robin, 1984 P.5)

*The earth artists in the 70's wanted to make contact with time, to reintroduce space/time coordinates into art. They started making their art in and from the earth as a way of starting over, of beginning again at the beginning.*⁵

Earth artists in one way or another returned to the land, each moving with their own specific interests in association with the landscape. The land is made up of simple and basic materials which have been relied upon down through the ages both for survival and aesthetic purposes. Each artist through their intuitive response to the landscape guided them to work in a variety of sites. A particular place generated particular types of

perceptions and so determined the type of work. These sculptures become inseparable from their sites. The main exponents were Robert Smithson, Richard Long, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Michael Heinzer, Robert Morris, Alan Sonfist and Dennis Oppenheim.

Smithson understood his sites and left each piece to rest within its particular environment. Water played a major part in his work along with universally acknowledged symbols which were consistently reused in his earthworks.

SPIRAL JETTY(fig 9) which was constructed in 1970 has a centrifugal draw. It encases and delves into the depths and unwinds by escaping back into the core of the dry earth. Smithson wanted to return to the past in his earthworks. He speaks of the past through his work.

SPIRAL JETTY is used to try and convey a process of hypnotic therapy, which helps lead him into a state of consciousness. Robert Smithson creates a dialogue with the piece in a particular time.

The spiral has also been used by pre-historic man as a symbol presumably of time or religion. Smithson uses the strength of the natural materials as a medium where he tries to form communication links between man and nature. Smithson's work uses symbols which have retained their philosophical symbolic meaning from the earliest civilisations down to the present. The spiral was concerned with movement into time, while the circle

described a certain space or plane. With the aid of his forms he lures himself back into the natural substance of the landscape where he tries to find a way of letting nature absorb him into the core of the earth. In Smithson's **SPIRAL JETTY** one moves directionally towards the centre of the piece where one gets a feeling of moving backward in time. There is a sense of ease and cohesion between water and stone, man and nature.

The land artists of the 70's used the land as a response in both positive and negative ways by exploring different ideas which they as artists associated with the landscape. Instead of using the beauty spots of the landscape, certain artists, such as Robert Morris and Michael Heinzer opted for the more remote sites of the desert and derelict areas. Their work was both architectural and monumental in comparison with the landscape. In Robert Morris's **OBSERVATORY** (fig. 10) and Michael Heinzer's **COMPLEX ONE/CITY** (fig. 11) they made gestural markings on the landscape. Their architectural structures were monumental, like places of worship where they acted as protectors. There is a certain sense of mystery pertaining to the works. Their pieces had associations with primitive cultures who had once built permanent monumental works for ritualistic and religious means of trying to communicate with their surroundings in a spiritual way, much as Newgrange did in prehistoric Ireland.

These works tend to be over powering and convey the sense of wanting to conquer their surroundings. They make gestures to man's power and strength over an area of earth but they in no way compare to the delicate touch which Richard Long uses while working in the environment,

*"I like the idea of using the land without possessing it"*⁶.

Richard Long creates small geometrical patterns with stones or twigs such as **A LINE IN THE HIMALAYAS 1975** (fig. 12). Unlike Smithson, Heinzer, Morris and Long adhere to the forces of nature and give precedence to the landscape. With his interaction with the landscape Long makes modest gestures in response to a particular site.

Each of these artists had their own ideas and identities, Alan Sonfist based his on *"the positive interdependence of humans and nature"*⁷. In his works he started to form new relationships between the society of the twentieth century and nature. He concerns himself with the earth and the role society plays in connection with nature.

*"Sonfist is an artist-historian not of past civilisation, but of the earth itself"*⁸.

He leans his ideas towards the innate materials of the earth and especially so to lost history which was

associated to the area he now lives in, such as in **TIME LANDSCAPE** (fig. 13). **TIME LANDSCAPE** is the re-creation of a pre-colonial forest set in the middle of New York city. The forest is set with natural species of trees and plants that existed on the site before New York city was formed. Sonfist wanted to bring society closer to their natural origins and let the forest become part of their everyday existence. **TIME LANDSCAPE** exists alongside everyday situations and so brings man and nature together with equal status. Sonfist reverts back in time like Smithsonian did in **SPIRAL JETTY** (fig. 9). In an historical sense he tries to recreate a lost cultural identity which was associated with the city and people.

With the extension of the gallery into the environment the artist was not only affected by the natural surroundings but also by the social effects of the specific environments. This is another aspect of Pluralism. The artist had not only to deal with the complex modules of nature but also with the economic factors which surround each work such as the leasing of land, financing and photography. When dealing with the environment one is not only taking into account it's raw materials but also the economics and politics of the fast moving society which we live in. Some artists choose not to be represented by galleries and had to deal with their own commercial affairs.

With such interactions between the artist and society

one hopes that this type of breakthrough by the artist into his surroundings will help society in turn to shape their own environments. This was also one of the main aims of the Irish sculptors at the start of their involvement in symposia. The initial symposium was started up in Austria in 1959 by sculptor Carl Prantel and since then it has spread to many countries. It is only in the past ten years that the idea of symposia has been practised by the sculptors in Ireland. Through symposia their work has developed and progressed. Like the landartists of America and Europe they are now working with specific environments and their materials.



FIG. 9.

SPIRAL JETTY

ROBERT SMITHSON

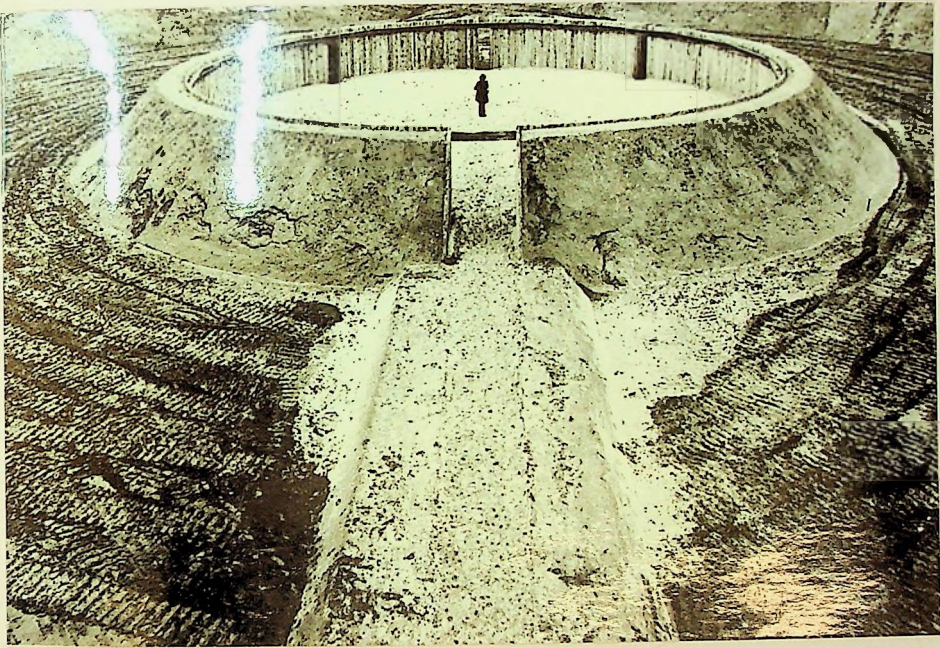


FIG. 10.

OBSERVATORY

ROBERT MORRIS

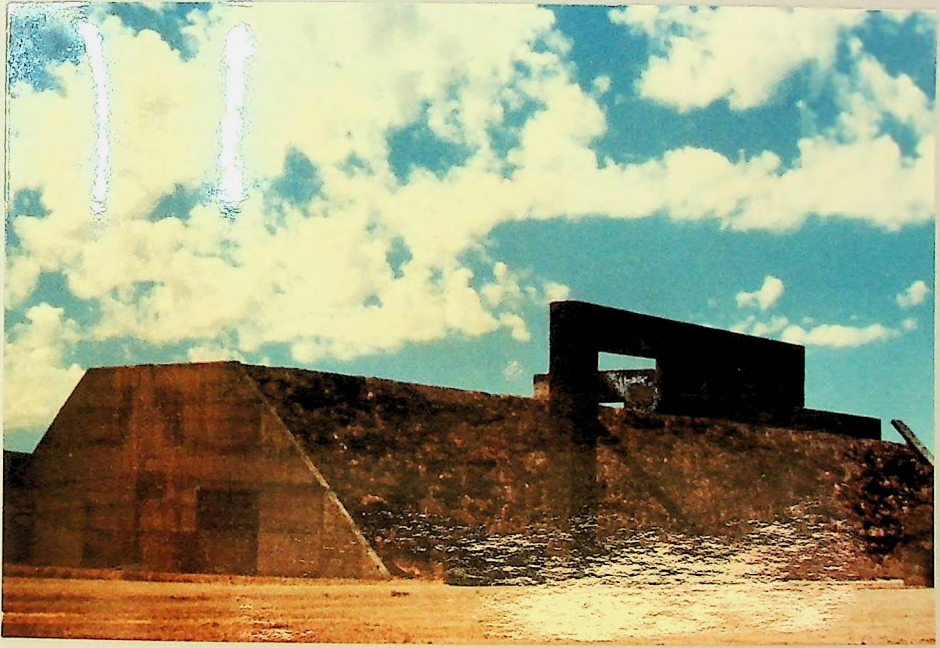


FIG. 11.

COMPLEX ONE/CITY

MICHAEL HEINZER



FIG. 12.

A LINE IN THE HIMALAYAS 1975

RICHARD LONG



FIG. 13.

TIME LANDSCAPE

ALAN SONFIST

C H A P T E R I I I

IRISH SYMPOSIA

*"There was a time when Irish sculptors
were almost as rare as honest politicians
and sculpture exhibitions even rarer".¹*

In Ireland today contemporary sculpture is slowly being accepted by the public into their surroundings. Young sculptors are prospering in their field by opening up new avenues for themselves. With the setting up of the Sculptors Society of Ireland in 1980, sculptors throughout the country have had the chance to work openly and collectively together by enjoying and experiencing their own work and others. Since the setting up of the Sculptors Society, ten symposia have been held: Arklow Steel, Cumar na Goloch, Celbridge Concrete, Hazlewood, Cork 800, Letterfrack, Dun Laoghaire, Limerick and the Millenium.

The early symposia started in Ireland as a response to the cultural economic and social conditions with which the sculptor was surrounded. The Irish sculptor was not seen as a worker but rather, as in previous generations, as *"the artist as modeller or designer"*² the reason being because of the lack of public sculpture in the form of commissions.

*"There was a revival of longing to give
art a function in society again",³*

Up to then Irish sculptors worked in isolation. Symposia gave them the opportunity to work together and socialize.

It also gave the sculptors the opportunity for future collaboration of work.

*Like so many other facets of symposia
we must remain flexible and let our
own form(s) of symposia emerge in
Ireland through experiment and critical
reviews.⁴*

The symposium movement has not generated any rigorous investigation. No critical reviews have been published on the progress or the achievements of its participants. From symposium to symposium no real questions have been asked about the direction of the work.

In asking the following three questions I am going to trace both the development and progress of the movement and try and find out what the sculptors have learned from their participation in such events. By going through a number of symposia and discussing a few artists who have taken part in more than one over the past ten years, I will trace and discuss their work in terms of the following three questions. First, are the sculptors forming a recognised style which one might associate with symposia in Ireland? Secondly, through their work in symposia, do they distinguish themselves globally? Finally, after ten years of symposia, have the participants progressed in their field, by opening up new avenues for themselves.

Early symposia in Ireland were not site specific. The work was mainly made in workshops or outside depending upon the materials being used. At the end of each symposium the work had to be transported to the site. Sometimes the sculpture made no reference to the environment it was sited in. However it demonstrated to the public, that sculpture was still being made in Ireland. From the beginning one of the main aims of the Sculptors Society of Ireland was *"to create opportunities for sculptors and to promote sculpture in Ireland"*.⁵

Arklow steel was the first symposium held. Colm Brennan speaks about the Arklow symposium as if it was a godsent in terms of opportunity and generosity. This was mainly because of the finance available as well as the sophisticated computer linked steel cutting equipment. The work made at the ship yard reflected the environment it was constructed in. There was no reference made to the sites which the sculptors had to find after the symposium. An example of this is Vincent Browne's **NECROMANCY** (fig. 14) which is now located in Marley Park. It is very severe and sharp looking compared to the rich foliage that is underfoot and in the background. **NECROMANCY** is grotesque and cold looking, reflecting the working method and style of the material.

The works constructed at Arklow are rather predictable and similar in style to the American steel constructivists,

Joan Caro and Robert Smith. Unlike the American constructivists who had a particular style associated with them, however the participants in this symposium left no distinguishing marks that could be associated with them personally or as a group who had worked in close contact.

The sculptors ran up against the same barriers again in Cuma no Gcloch, a stone symposium held in a quarry in the Dublin mountains in 1984. One of the main drawbacks of the first two symposia was that they were not site specific. The participants were not aware of the implications that the pieces would have on the environment in which they were sited. The Sculptors Society prompted the artist to publically site the work. Throughout the symposia the media acknowledged the existence of the movement and the society, but no indepth evaluation was made on the success of the symposia or the work produced. One must recognise that sculpture is always public but it creates a sense of place if the sculptor starts to work on the idea in the immediate surroundings of the site.

From this emerged the organisation of site specific symposia dealing with both urban and rural environments. In 1985 there were three symposia, two urban, Celbridge Concrete and Cork 800 and Hazlewood, set in the quiet rural setting of the serene location of County Sligo.

Through trial and error one learns. Celbridge concrete

was quite unsuccessful. The sculptors were unfamiliar with working in site specific environments and especially so with concrete. At the end of the four weeks only two pieces were completed by the six participants which were sited in a new developing housing estate.

In Sean Taylor's piece UNTITLED (fig. 15) his subject matter does not reflect the activities of young families or the development of the area but rather,

*"Decay, slow change and abuse of technology,
were some of the ideas I took as a starting
point".⁶*

I feel that this sculpture would have been more appropriate for a built up area in a city centre. The statement and strength of the material drowns the background trees and local vegetation. There was no relationship formed between the site and material. Taylor talks about death and decay but he does not make any reference to the natural cycle of decay that takes place in the park. In his work he wanted to make a "monument to time"⁷. Through his bold statement in his work Taylor tries to conquer his environment by creating a work that overshadows the surroundings.

At this stage one cannot speak about a specific type of style associated with symposia. However the site

specific environments have helped the sculptors to form contacts with their surroundings. This is especially so in Eilis O'Connell's piece **UNTITLED** (fig. 16) for Cork 800 and Vincent Brown's for Limerick Symposium. In both cases sculptors on the symposia worked on a range of sites "*from the immediate attractive to the downright formidable*"⁸. The works were sited close together, creating a miniature urban sculpture trail.

In Eilis O'Connell's **UNTITLED**, she made two forms, an inner dome shape left open and exposed and an outer curved element, totally covered over. O'Connell created an internal environment with the piece allowing for the participation of the public. This open form became an internal part of the environment by allowing the natural growth to grow and intertwine among the steel bars. The curved element at the edge of the dome appears to be moving in the direction of the open form.

It contains the elements of being both public and private. O'Connell has successfully created this installation for the site through her understanding of her public and of nature. This piece is made with great craftsmanship and with an intuitive sense for the material. It is much more subtle than the work of Vincent Browne's **NECROMANCY** for the Arklow Steel symposium.

However in 1987 Vincent Browne made another piece, this

time for a specific site for the Limerick symposium. The style of the character for his figures are in keeping with **NECROMANCY** (fig 14). In **AIR-WAR MEMORIAL** (fig. 17) the busts are much more subtle compared to the former, blending into the setting in terms of its forms and materials. The two pieces sit facing each other under the over-hanging tree.

While these sculptors worked on site specific areas in an urban setting, they had to deal with elements beyond nature, graffiti, vandalism and maintenance of the sculptures. These considerations were only at the back of the minds of the sculptors working in rural environments. Hazlewood was probably one of the most successful of the site specific rural symposia.

The pieces were made reflecting the geological and historical surroundings of Yeats county. The wood was taken from Hazelwood and it had to be set back into the surroundings reflecting the natural forest trails. All of the participants had preliminary walks around the sites before commencing work, but they did have, as in previous symposia, specific formalised ideas before starting work.

Hazlewood is an enclosed built up area. It is exposed to the naturally harsh elements associated with this environment. Each artist built his sculpture from his understanding of his surroundings. Participant Jackki

McKenna carved the **WOOD GATHRER** (fig. 18) in Hazlewood. This piece is very much in keeping with McKenna's style of work which will be discussed in later symposia. McKenna deals with home based issues by referring to locals, their traditions and customs.

Man and nature make up the basic ingredients of most environments. The **WOOD GATHRER** was based on an old lady from McKenna's home town Manorhamilton, a woman who had toiled and slaved with the elements. People integrate with their surroundings by working with their materials and understanding them and not destroying their environment. The **WOOD GATHRER** stands hunched over among the trees without disturbing her surroundings.

The integration of wood with its natural environment was one of the main priorities of the sculptors in Hazlewood. The trail has become an integral part of the forest. Eventhough the ideas for the sculptures for the trail were formalised before the work started they have however through their reactive and interactive response with nature become an integral part of the environment. The strength and force of the pieces solidify the spectators idea of sculpture in the environment.

Among the Irish artists of the symposia era Jakki McKenna was probably one of the most distinguished in terms of being typically Irish in her work. Instead of finding

expression in the nature of materials in which she worked, she directed her sculptures towards the conceptual idea of the finished piece which was traditionally Irish in character. In *TEACH CEOIL TULLY* (fig. 19), Letterfrack, her piece was designed to *"reflect the activites which take place within teach ceoil which is the performance and teaching of traditional music and related activities"*⁹ Her works, like that of many others who created pieces for the symposia, may be described as

*"Original and well made; a number look well made but not original. A number look neither the one or the other"*¹⁰

It is safe to say that the sculptors from the symposia along with McKenna have not distinguished themselves as a group globally yet.

By concentrating on their environment greater care and consideration should be taken when integrating their work to their surroundings. This will leave the work with a greater sense of skill, excellence and understanding. Then, as in McKenna's case, she may no longer be described as *"folksy"* in her work.¹¹

That was the beginning of an idea which grew into a powerful movement. But even the best of movements grow weak and eventually die if there is no

*permenent and imminent developments.*¹²

After ten years the symposium movement was due some changes. The sculptors had moved from non-site to site specific work in both rural and urban environments. In the site specific pieces the sculptors allowed themselves to adapt to the environment. This is especially so in the "*Bog Symposium*" held in 1990, where the artists entered new surroundings. Unlike previous symposia they had to work totally from this environment. The participants allowed the experience of working in this area to influence them personally and their work.

It is through symposia the Irish sculptors have started to work as a group in their environments. The "*Bog Symposium*" has initiated landart for the Irish artists. While past symposia have progressed gradually it is hoped that this most recent one will develop the whole concept surrounding Irish symposia.



FIG. 14

NECROMANCY

VINCENT BROWNE



FIG. 15.

UNTITLED

SEAN TAYLOR

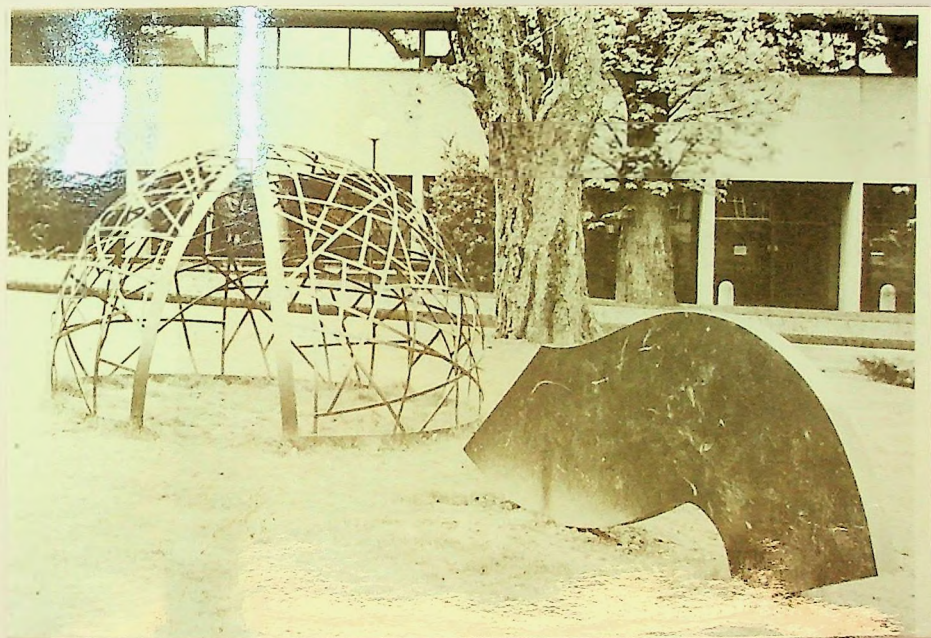


FIG. 16.

UNTITLED

EILIS O'CONNELL



FIG. 17.

AIR-WAR MEMORIAL

VINCENT BROWNE

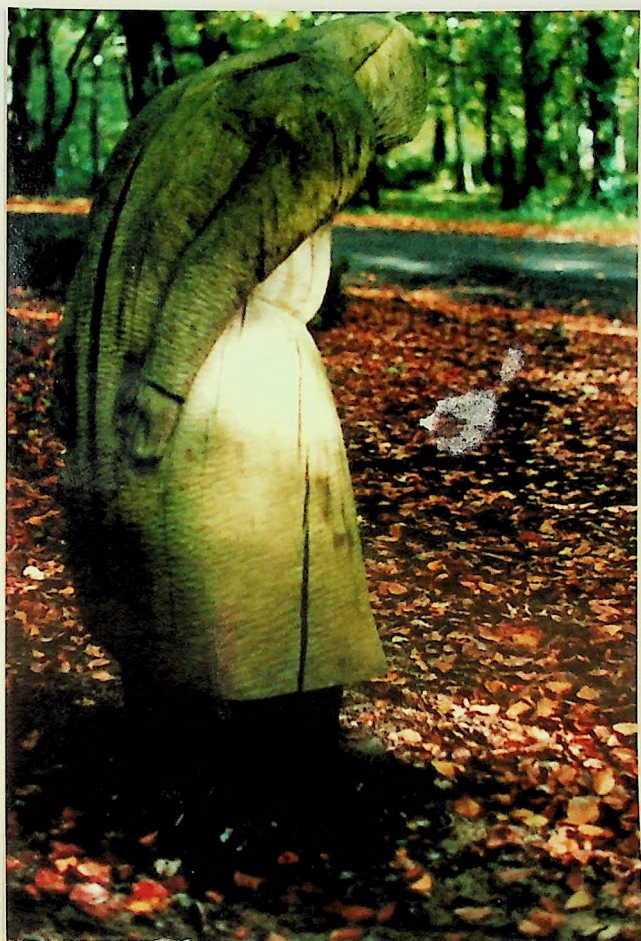


FIG. 18.

WOOD GATHRER

JACKKI MCKENNA



FIG. 19.

TEACH CEOIL TULLY

JACKKI MCKENNA

C H A P T E R I V

An Analysis of the "BOG SYMPOSIUM"

Irish bogs today are under threat from drainage and peat extraction programmes. Botanists, naturalists and archaeologists have initiated interests in wanting to preserve these sites. However it is only lately that the Irish people have come to realise that our land has not got an exhaustable abundance of boglands.

Ireland still holds a sizeable amount of boglands but it is slowly being eroded by turf harvesting which is becoming more mechanised every day. However it is only by returning to our environment that a level of understanding can be established with nature.

"In that respect alone the bog symposium will be doing great work; sculptors and visitors alike get a feel and a taste of the bog and realise they're not standing on waste ground but on a living ecological entity, a community of plants and animals, too easily destroyed".¹

The bog symposium was held in August 1990 in Glencree, Co. Wicklow, which is situated about one hours drive south-east of Dublin's city centre. A total of sixteen artists took part which included three artists from abroad. The participants selected from the thirty two counties included Gerard Cox, Remco de Fouw, David Dunne, Romy Gray, Catherine Harper, Anne Henderson, Kathy Herbert, David Kinnane, Betty Maguire, Ann O'Connor, Marian O'Donnell,

Amanda Ralph and Niall Walsh. The three invited guests were Joost Barbiers from the Netherlands, Mamoru Abe from Japan and Chris Drury came from England.

They worked on the blanket bog of War Hill, Dijouce mountain, Maulin, Tondiff north and south, and Powerscourt mountain for a period of three weeks. One of the main rules of the symposium was that

"nothing must be introduced into the bog that is not innate to it and above all there must be no damage to the environment".²

Each of the artists adhered to the regulations set out while they resourcefully worked with the available materials taking into account the flexibility of these elements.

One of the main aims of the symposium was to help the sculptor to confront and overcome the fears and hurdles which were associated with the environment. Each artist dealt with the boglands in different ways that was perhaps close to them and which eventually guided them towards a greater understanding of nature.

The sense of wanting to compete with the landscape yet leave it untouched was one of the major priorities of each artist. The whole idea and concept surrounding

"nature" held each artist at a distance at first. To overcome this hurdle each had to make their own mark whether ephemeral or permanent. Amanda Ralph

"wanted to compete with the monumental landscape, to sneak in, stick my tongue out, know that I was there yet leave no mark".³

Ralph felt that she was in competition with the boglands. She wanted to put herself on a level with nature and become part of the environment. In her interactive performance piece **BOG HOLE** (fig 20) she moved, jumped, landed and imprinted the soft lushy bog peat with her feet. It was like moving through an unknown space not realising where she was going to land.

Each artist moved into the bogland where they were able to work with and experience the environment. The boglands opened up new avenues for Mamoru Abe,

*"Bog, grass, flowers, wind and stone
teach me a lot of things
The bogland tells me the direction to
nature".⁴*

While walking and moving over the wild open expanse of bog and exposing oneself to the elements of the rich floor of the peatlands one is effected by the fierce and sharp wind that blows around. There was an air of

reluctance felt by Anne O'Connor and Betty Maguire to interfere with their surroundings. They both took a few days to establish themselves in the boglands. After over coming their state of uneasiness and fear of working with this environment they both came to terms with their surroundings.

Feeling exposed, uncomfortable and alien to the "*primitive, beautiful and cruel landscape*"⁵ Betty Maguire unconsciously made a shelter as a protection from the external elements. She created a home or enclosure alongside a sluggish flowing stream. This helped Maguire to create a situation where she could build her sculpture, **SHELTER** (fig. 21) into the environment. Using her hands as her only tools Maguire ties, binds, weaves and plaits moss, heather and rods, leaving openings in the framework where she could see out. She created a secure area which also exposed her to the elements and this formed a "*relationship of the shelter to the sky and environment*".⁶

In **BAITE** (fig. 22) made in 1988 for the Millenium, Maguire's piece reflects an historical viking ship. This piece is very open and exposed having only an opened webbed bow and stern for structural form. Unlike **SHELTER**, people can participate in **BAITE** where they can sit in it. It's site is in Dublin's inner city where it blends into the day to day activities of the public as it acts as a focal point for a bus stop and as an historical reference

to the Wood Quay site. Maguire installed her piece into Wood quay with preconceived ideas unlike her work on the boglands where her ideas came from her responses and interactions from the materials, and the environments themselves.

The idea of enclosing and containing oneself within ones own visually created environment was thematically consistent with other artists on the bog symposium, Chris Drury (an invited guest from England), Ann O'Connor and Kathy Herbert all dealt with this theme.

O'Connors work is reminiscent of an Indian tepee but it is securely bound and tied like the traditional oat sheaves at harvest time. In **THE LIVING WATER FORM** (fig. 23) there is a ritualistic feel about the overall work and something symbolic in the way that the three outer poles are simply formed and placed parallel to the shelter. The overall effect of the work looks tight and securely tied perhaps because of the fresh cold breezes of the exposed site and the associated elements of the river.

Chris Drury has thematically continued to deal with the subject of shelters in his work. He built his shelters and baskets from the materials he found in the surrounding areas, such as **TURF LAVO** (fig. 24) made in Lapland. In each of his enclosures, he reflects the type of external elements to which he is exposed and he usually used these

shelters as his living quarters. He does not "make interventions in nature rather I let nature work on me".⁷

The CLOUD CHAMBER (fig. 25) is reminiscent of cairns which were made by pre-historic man in Ireland. Drury's sculpture is built into the already existing stone wall and it's form echoes the Dijoure mountain in the background.

Like O'Connor and Maguire, Drury has used a process of reversal and transformation with his form where an internal environment was created within the piece and at the same time allowing the external environment to enter the work through naturally broken spaces. Drury continually uses this theme in his work such as

In THE PRESENCE OF FOREST DEER STUPA AND THATCH CONE (fig 26) a piece made outside but when exhibited indoors it still held the feel and atmosphere of containing interior environments.

Instead of building a form overground which has a feel of wanting to occupy and dominate an area, Kathy Herbert made an enclosure by using a reversal method to the three artists already discussed. In CONTAINER (fig. 27) she dug a bowl or pot shaped vessel into the bog surface. Here she lay into, sat on and became totally immersed in her piece. Herbert refers to the bog as

*"Time aged bog
time worn and sculpted
makes a laugh of little art".⁸*

Kathy Herbert was very conscious of working in this environment, she felt that this rich bogland was already an art in itself and sculptors would be working in competition with nature. While working in this area which totally engulfed her senses Herbert found that she needed to come to terms with the *"strenght of elements"*⁹ of the boglands in order to be able to create a form that was both effective and creative in relation to this environment.

CONTAINER is a simple minimalist piece with its strength enriched by the contrast of material effects - smooth, soft, broken, cracked and encased bog peat.

All of these artists encased themselves in their environment. They sank in and surrounded themselves with the immediate materials. Like wild animals they burrowed and built their homes for security, leaving openings where they could move out to the external environment and as a passage way where they could return back into the internal environment for security. They relied upon their surroundings for their inspiration *"falling on resourcefulness answers creativity"*¹⁰

The immediate materials of the boglands ranged from bog

cotton and heather to rods and stones. This rich accumalation of colour and texture added contrast and versatility to the way materials were used by individual artists.

*"Tomb memory, compost history
soft cushion, turf mountain face
with quartz morning"¹¹*

David Dunne did not conform to a conventional method of working like Joost Barbier or Gerard Cox, who tried to use a formalised method of working with the found materials. Dunne did not make any major interventions into the peat, instead he used the already existing cracked and eroded embankment. **WORDS MEMORIES AND SILENCE** (fig. 28) moves swerving, curling and unwinding while burning and diffusing into the peat. Following the lie of the land it unobstrusively hides itself under the tufts of heather and wild grasses. The broken crevices in the soil are naturally carved into the gorge, while Dunne tactfully adds small stones to these natural incisions which soak in the bank. The hap-hazard way in which the quartz stone lies on the floor of the embankment adds contrast to the work.

In Dunne's earlier work made over the past three years he has been working on the theme of "Arcs". He started to make arcs in north Donegal in 1987 from the natural materials of the environment. This was the first contact

Dunne had made with the landscape. Dunne built his work *"in relations to the landscape using the arc as a vehicle"*.¹² Here he used a concept for guidance in the landscape but in the boglands he let the surroundings dictate the direction of his work. In **ARC** (fig. 29) made for a *"Tree"* exhibition in Sligo in 1989, Dunne used wood for the sculpture from the local forest, Hazlewood. He created an installation where one could move through and walk under the arc. It was very straight and rigid compared to **WORDS MEMORIES AND SILENCE** because he constructed the twigs on a metal frame not letting the wood dictate the natural form.

Dunne's return to the landscape has helped him to form closer links with nature where he can use the environment and its materials without any barriers or restrictions.

Unlike Dunne, Cox used the top base of the disgarded embankments, creating patterns, passages and seats almost like a Japanese garden (fig. 30). Instead of using the natural rough effect of the turf blocks Cox carved away these areas. Using the river for his source material, he removed the stones and placed them systematically on specific areas of the land. This piece is technically severe and schematically embroidered by Cox unlike the sluggish flowing river and discarded material along the rest of the gorge.

Cox came to the symposium with some ideas but these were discarded because of the lack of wood to be found on site. His ideas came *"directly from my interaction with the site"*.¹³ Eventhough there is a certain sense of technical planning in his sculptures, the rough texture and hue of the materials however, soften out the edges of his systematically controlled area in which he worked. It is almost like a pilgrim's walk around Lough Derg, rough and open with only the bare necessities available.

Surrounded by a flat open span of low lying heather, bog cotton, and moss, this designated area of Cox's stands out in comparison to the free, natural landscape. Cox found refuge here, holding his site captive by his interactive response to the area.

Cox and Dunne used stone as a major material in their work but they did not allow it to dominate their ideas and concepts about this environment unlike Joost Barbiers a carver from the Netherlands. Barbiers has strong affinities with stone. Eventhough he had the opportunity of working openly and freely with an abundance of fresh and raw materials he still felt loyalty to his own materials. He felt that stone in this environment was treated as second class and that *"the human blanket of the bog succeeds in suppressing stone"*.¹⁴

One is surprised and confronted with a high abundance of stone in this area and which is often omitted or

camouflaged because of its competition with the wild bog grasses.

*"Only by surprise, the rough rock
may show itself to the bone"*¹⁵

Hid away by overgrowing heathers, Barbiers has carved an entrance fromation into the rock where he reveals the true core of the material.

In **ENTRANCE** (fig. 31) there is a static feel about the work. There is little input or sense of adventure attached to this piece considering the opportunities he had while working in this environment. I also sensed this in Niall Walsh's work, **GRAVE YARD OF THE PRESENT** (fig. 32) where he wanted to convey *"the timelessness of the surroundings"*¹⁶, yet he layers his idea with an already existing subject and disregards the naturally suggestive ideas of the landscape.

While some artists bombarded themselves with questions and challanges associated with the bog David Kinnane saw this opportunity of working in the bog as a time and place where he *"did not have to justify what he was doing, only enjoying each others excitement and adventures"*¹⁷. Here in the bog he is free,

*"Dilema, Paradox, Ambivalence were
all put aside and I stuck my hands
into the brown-black stuff".¹⁸*

While Kinnane seems to have approached the subject of nature in a different way to the rest of the sculptors, I feel that when he was confronted first by such primal surroundings that the strong and forceful elements of nature absorbed him for a time. He conversed with his surroundings with free and open actions which came naturally to him. Here he made contact with some of his natural origins.

The Irish sculptors interacted and responded to the environment deducting and investigating the external elements of their surroundings. However as already discussed some became more naturally involved than others. Each one started with their own ideas yet,

*"Artist after artist from Ireland and abroad
suggested coolly and calmly, that the
symposium had in one way or another
actually changed their lives".¹⁹*

While evaluating their own work, fresh new ideas were conceived gaining a better understanding of the bogland and it's make-up.

Through their work on the bog symposium they brought the symposium movement a step further in the right direction. Where previous symposia started and finished over a period of a few weeks the Bog Symposium I think will have lasting effects not only on the participants but also on the development of sculpture in Ireland.

These artists have worked as a group where they

"examined, developed and interpreted work using the intrinsic qualities and recognising the historical and contemporary importance of the bogland".²⁰



FIG. 20.

BOG HOLE

AMANDA RALPH



FIG. 21.

SHELTER

BETTY MAGUIRE



FIG. 22.

BAITE

BETTY MAGUIRE



FIG. 23.

THE LIVING WATER FORM

ANNE O'CONNOR



FIG. 24.

TURF LAVO

CHRIST DRURY



FIG. 25.

CLOUD CHAMBER

CHRIST DRURY

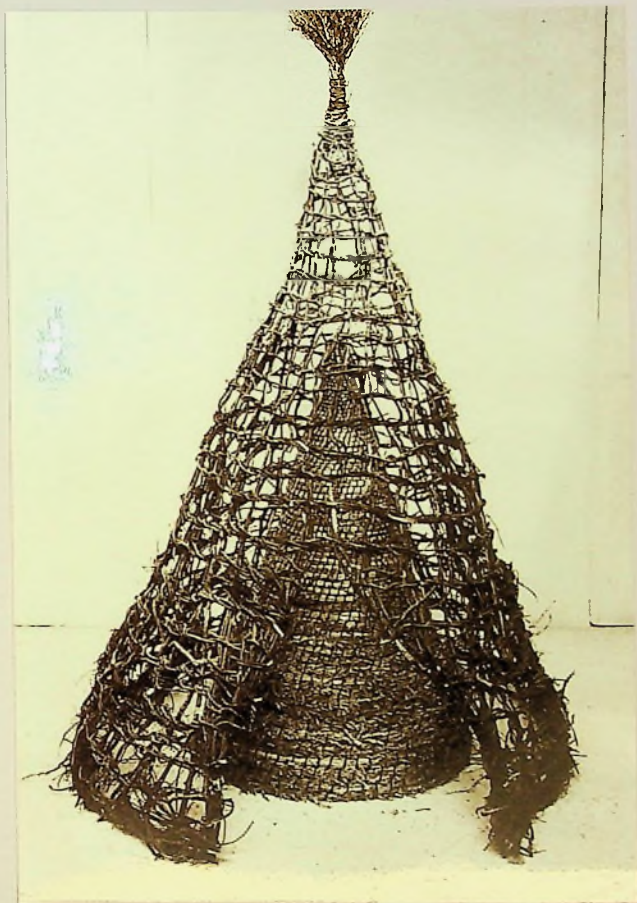


FIG. 26.

IN THE PRESENCE OF FOREST DEER
STUPA AND THATCH CONE

CHRIS DRURY



FIG. 27.

CONTAINER

KATHY HERBERT



FIG. 28.

WORDS MEMORIES AND SILENCE

DAVID DUNNE



FIG. 29.

ARC

DAVID DUNNE



FIG. 30.

UNTITLED

GERARD COX

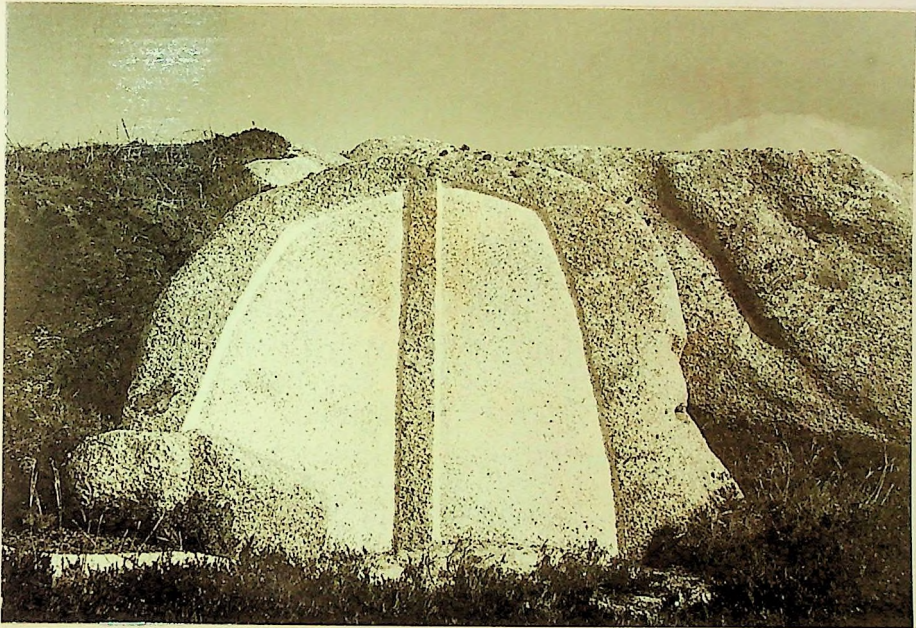


FIG. 31.

ENTRANCE

JOOST BARBIERS

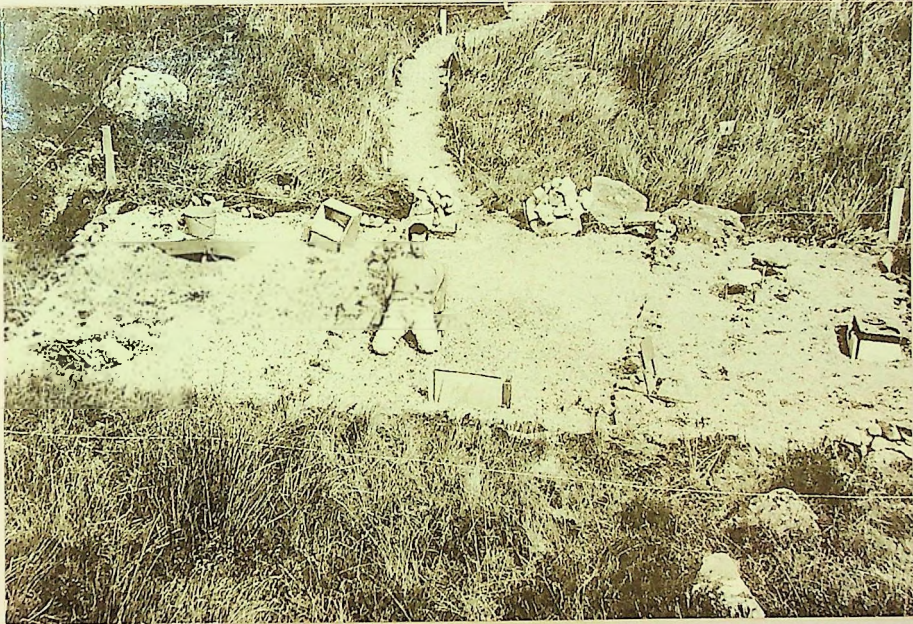


FIG. 32.

GRAVE YARD OF THE PRESENT

NIALL WALSH

C H A P T E R V

AN ANALYSIS OF GERARD COX'S
WORK BEFORE AND DURING THE
'BOG SYMPOSIUM'

The primal land of the Wicklow mountains provided each sculptor with a medium and inspired them with an array of ideas. It was overgrown with a rich density of flora and fauna which had insets of dark muddy waters that drained through the peat. Each artist emerged with their own view points on the boglands and on the success of their time working there.

"Walking these hills in the company of fellow artists, seeing and expressing the bog through their eyes, was for me, the most fruitful aspect of the boglands symposium"¹.

Gerard Cox had been accustomed to the idea of symposia through his participation in Hazlewood Sculpture Trail (1985). Hazlewood is set in a quiet and peaceful setting on the shores of Lough Gill, County Sligo. The main aim of this symposium was that the sculpture pieces would be made from the wood of the forest and put back into its indigenous setting, creating a sculpture trail in addition to nature trails of the forest walks.

BOAT HOUSE PLATFORM(Fig. 33) is a piece reflecting the activities on the lake. It is very stern and not in keeping with his earlier work. The sculpture is set into the overgrown forest almost like Alice Aycocks and Mary Miss's

where they used firmly constructed work to form environments within a particular space. Cox approached the bog symposium in a totally different way to Hazlewood. His work on the boglands seems much freerer and in keeping with its environment. In Hazlewood he reflected the activities of the public on the lake and used the natural environment as a stage back-drop for his sculpture. Cox did not work in the area where the piece was sited but in a workshop beside the forest. He got all his wood cut at a local sawmill but in the boglands he used his hands and spade as tools.

*"Cox reduces art to nature in order to
show that nature is art"²*

In Cox's studio work he uses the natural forms of twigs, branches or blocks and he lets the wood direct his ideas and finished work. Natural forms guide his art. In his wooden pieces the energy of the sculpture is found in the twisting and curving movement of the stripped twigs. His wood makes the first move, allowing the form to provoke a response in the artist. The forms of the sculptures are naturally created and imposed upon by the wood itself and not by the artist. While some of his pieces may seem to be hard and destructive, they are in fact reflective of the material and not of the idea which Cox works into the wood.

Cox's work is in fact delicate with an easy almost sympathetic touch for the wood itself. In **SPIRIT DWELLING** (Fig. 34), made in 1988, he speaks about the sculpture as if each move and twist that the piece makes contains magical powers beyond the work,

*"Such is the delicacy of this state,
stretching blindly into space, that
its magic can have no object outside
itself".³*

Each fibre of wood was formed by the freedom of the elements of nature. This again adds to the complex mysteries that surrounds nature.

The English sculptor David Nash expresses, *"sensitivity to the biomorphically suggestive form inherent in the wood"*⁴. Along with Cox, Nash holds a certain reverence for the spirit of the material he works with. Nash and Cox both refer to the balance and continuity of nature in their work. In Nash's **HORNED TRIPOD** (Fig. 35), and Gerard Cox's **SPIRIT DWELLING**, they both used the natural forms of the wood while they cut it at points so as to control the overall form of the piece. Creating tripods with the wood, they then bound them at certain points and let the rest of the wood move out like a tree spreading its branches away from its trunk.

*"I prefer to use the wood as it comes
from the tree - the shape of the piece
acts as a trigger"⁵.*

In Cox's early work he dwelt on the intuitive responses of the natural forms while on the bog symposium, his ideas came from his interactive responses to the environment (Fig. 30). This area with its abundance of arrayed irregular forms and materials left plenty of scope for Cox to choose and eliminate materials and ideas which he could work into his surroundings. Instead of using materials which he could find above ground, he combed the river bed for quartz stones which helped to create a contrast both in terms of colour and texture of his surrounding area. In earlier large pieces of work he refers to them as being both solid and surreal because,

*"The natural colour and texture of the
wood blends strikingly with the abstract
configurations"⁶.*

Here again he uses this same method of working and choosing materials to convey his idea.

In his earlier work he grouped short blocks of branches together, he uses this same method again while paving the stones on the embankments. It is reminiscent of

Irish stepping stones which created footpaths to get out to islands. Cox likes to refine his work, by cleaning, paring and removing excess rough material from the outside. He cleared down the turf blocks, which helped to create conformity and strength in the sculpture. The farmer also does this when he is preparing the bog for turf cutting.

Cox likes to be in control of his sculpture pieces. He left his sculpture on the Bog Symposium untitled (Fig.30). It was designed specifically for this area. He is surrounded by an open expanse of wilderness where he isolates himself in a specific site. Cox's piece is like a focal point or a pilgrims altar where they acknowledge their reverence for the surrounding area. Cox created an area which was surrounded by an atmosphere of control. Each stone looks as if it was layed down in a specific area, almost like a jig-saw. He mapped out his site where he conformed his idea to the size and shape of the embankments when laying the stones.

The public were able to interact with the work. They could walk around and over the planned footpaths with a great sense of security. There is an atmosphere of security in the site, compared to the untouched heath lands. Perhaps Cox created this area as a protector or enclosure as Betty Maguire did in **SHELTER** (Fig. 21).

Cox as a sculptor reflects himself in his work by being sensitive and delicate when dealing with natural forms. Smithson rapes his environment to achieve his ideas, while Cox finds expression in the naturally constructed forms. Robert Smithson was attracted to the "landscape that suggested pre-history"⁷ while Cox used the bog and its natural forms without changing the whole face of the land and its mass's of layers which were also suggestive of pre-history.

*"because of its physical, geological
qualities.....*

*The sense of layers amassing in time,
giving the bog a particular living
history"*

Cox was very aware of the natural history and geological qualities which were associated with the bogland. Unlike Smithson, Cox carefully worked around and added to his forms in a peaceful and unobtrusive way. Cox was influenced by the way that the natural pieces of turf blocks were formed by the elements, and he only adjusted them slightly. His sculptures in the bog are soft and peaceful reflecting the natural growth of the bog while Smithson's SPIRAL JETTY was hard edged and vigorous, showing traits which were associated with the influential movements such as Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism.

Ann O'Connor, all of whom found refuge here in this dense and unexplored environment.

The work produced on the whole symposium, was developed through trial and error while each artist came to grips with their new surroundings. They reacted and interacted sensitively with their new surroundings and this reflected in their work and their understanding of nature. By returning to this environment Cox has formed new contacts and relationships.

*"Bog, grass, flowers, wind and stone
teach me a lot of things.
The bogland tells me to the
direction of nature".⁹*

Up to now Cox had been accustomed to the ways and directions which nature works, but through his participation in the Bog Symposium he has developed a better understanding of nature and himself.

While working in this environment Cox became more aware of the potential of each material but he couldn't have anticipated the destructive forces which nature would have on his work, after a few weeks. With heavy rain, the overflowing river started to submerge the work leaving only certain heightened areas of white quartz stone to be seen peeping up through the surrounding black water. Next spring perhaps, new heather and crusts will start growing back again, leaving the area camouflaged as if nothing ever happened there. Most of the work by late November was covered over by pools of water or had fallen apart especially the pieces made from rushes and bog peat.

Cox left the bog with manmade marks, but because of the strength of nature they are now dissolved into the bog. Amanda Ralph who through her ultra sensory vision of this environment just wanted to acknowledge her presence in the bog through an unknown space without hindering or destroying the life of the bog.

Gerard Cox learned to interact and compete with his environment without having a starting or finishing plan laid out. This was one of the downfalls of Cox in Hazlewood, where his constructive piece took over, leaving no interactive response with his environment. Feeling at home here, he eased himself into the area like Betty Maguire and

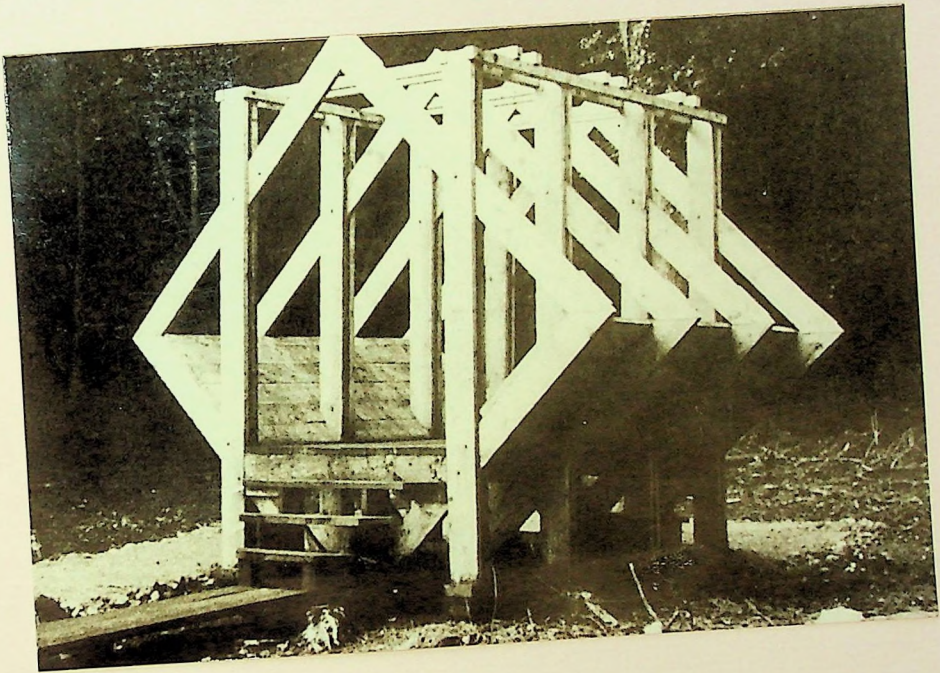


FIG. 33.

BOAT HOUSE PLATFORM

GERARD COX



FIG. 34.

SPIRIT DWELLING

GERARD COX

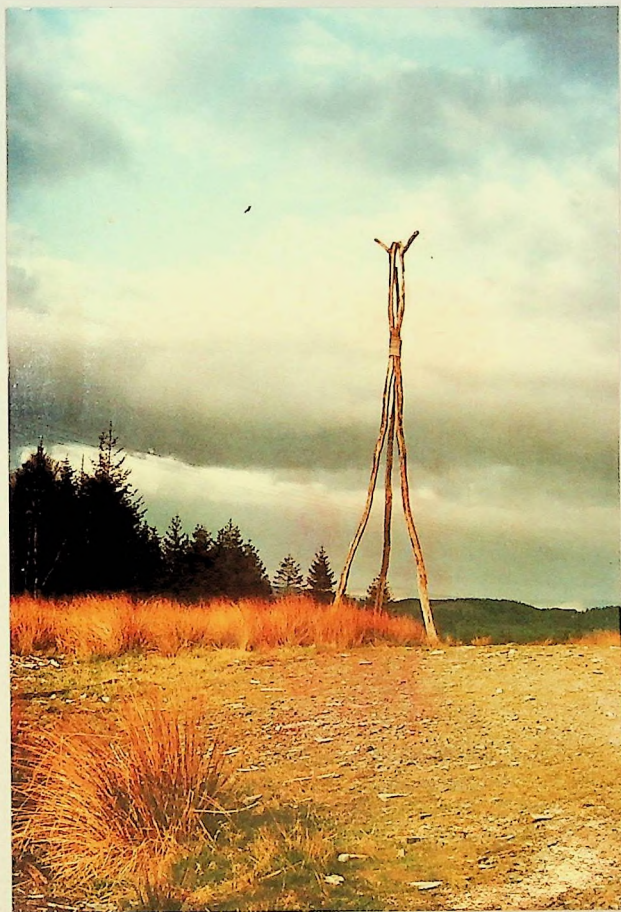


FIG. 35.

HORNED TRIPOD

DAVID NASH

CONCLUSION

Downthrough Irish history both poets and writers such as Patrick Kavanagh saw the bog as a burden, even though their rural origins affected and influenced their work. They used *"the Irish bog in their effort to liberate themselves from what they saw as a personal persecution"*¹ This confrontation between the poet and bog helped them deal with their own personal development.

Just as the poets and the early twentieth century Irish painters have returned to the landscape to form closer contacts with nature, the Irish sculptor is now adventuring into these environments through the symposium movement. They are beginning to form closer links with nature by working closer to their source. The 1970's earth artists also looked to the landscape as a source, without trying to possess it, these artists have worked with it and so learned from nature. Through their interactive response they have used the environment as a medium where they can revert back into time.

As Ireland is a close knit community with a strong cultural tradition the Irish sculptor is naturally closer to his origins. This fact I feel has not been fully exploited by the Irish sculptor. The symposium movement has gone a small way toward this, especially so in the Bog Symposium. For the Irish sculptor to fully experience the landscape they must work continually with it as a source.

It is only by doing this that we will fully reflect our environment and origins and learn to communicate with our lost history. In this fast moving world, if Irish people are to retain their individuality they must not simply become a land of second hand values. The artist must look towards the landscape and its resources for his inspiration just as the Irish writers and poets learned to confront and come to terms with their rural origins so must Irish sculptors.

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