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## EIGHTY BUNDLES OF STICKS IN A MEADOW

INSTALLATIONS INCORPORATE  
SOUND, LIGHT, FORM AND  
CONTEXT, BLURRING THE OLD  
BOUNDARIES OF "ART"

BY DEBORAH KRUGER

**E**ighty bundles of sticks in a meadow. Fifty-four feet of canvas draped over a staircase. A fabricated village of huts. Cornstalk sculptures set afire. What, if anything, holds these seemingly different configurations together? They are all work of installation artists, a new breed of artmaker. In the past two decades, the definition of art and art materials has expanded to a point where 19th-century artists probably would not recognize their late 20th-century counterparts. These new artists are creating a new context within which to work.

The feminist art movement of the 1970s popularized the use of domestic materials in artmaking, which quickly spread to other segments of the art community. Artists in droves put down their brushes and tubes of paints and began experimenting with wallpaper, fake fur and lace. A rekindled interest in spirituality and religion inspired artists to use ritualistic materials like shells, stones, fire and feathers. A new generation of artists rediscovered Marcel Duchamps' *ready-mades* (everyday objects declared art when placed in an exhibition context) and Robert Rauschenberg's unorthodox use of found objects.

This resurgence of interest in manufactured goods followed the growing availability of ever newer technological processes, like color Xerox and holography. It was only natural that artists who grew up in the '60s watching war on television would in this decade turn to video and other handy media—advertising, billboards, printed matter—to express their attitudes about issues in the news.

Emboldened by the credo "the personal is political," many artists turned to their own lives as the subject of their work, and then

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# Eighty Bundles of Sticks in a Meadow

*Installations incorporate sound, light, form and context, blurring the old boundaries of "art."*

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an explosion of work documenting artists' concerns about the arms race, U.S. intervention in Central America, apartheid, the status of women, threats to our environment, and countless other local and global issues. Although non-white, non-male artists are still often denied exhibition opportunities, the voices and concerns of Black, Asian, Latin, Hispanic, Jewish, Native American and other ethnic groups are increasingly being heard.

To synthesize this spectrum of options in form and content, artists began to use the gallery in a new way. Galleries were transformed into interiors of houses and dreams. Installations incorporated sound and light and by so doing, blurred the boundaries separating art, music and theatre. Natural materials like rocks, trees and sand were brought indoors. Eventually the endless possibilities of the natural world drew artists outdoors, and installation works are now sited in forests and city streets, on lakes and beaches, in canyons and on mountains, and even in the air.

Susan Boss can do installations anywhere. While she is most widely known for numerous public art projects in the Springfield area, Boss recently collaborated with her artist-husband, Mark Brown, in creating a two-story environment at Real Art Ways in the Hartford Arts Library.

In a statement that accompanied "Ladder Movement," the artists wrote, "This work is a visual testimony to a potential contemporary Armageddon that the human mind conceived and made possible." Boss and Brown have brought nature indoors. For them the horseshoe crabs and starfish which creep through the sea of industrial debris on the gallery floor are a symbol of the endurance and resiliency of the natural world.

Rather than limit herself to a flat canvas, painter Dana Salisbury continues to enjoy the seduction of paint only now she reshapes her canvas into forests that she sews, glues and stuffs. Her love of landscape and concern for the environment has led her to create indoor woodlands.

Salisbury's installation, "Slide," exhibited not long ago at Real Art Ways, cascaded down from a balcony to the gallery floor 17 feet below. The Northampton artist's "trees" toppled across the unstretched canvas ambiguously, allowing the viewer to speculate whether their fall was natural or through human intervention. In an earlier work commissioned by the New England Artist Festival in 1983, Salisbury brought a canvas outside and painted a river of red Sockeye Salmon swimming upstream to spawn. The 54-foot work was draped over the stairs of the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts. At

the top of the stairs, another canvas of a painted waterfall rose up another 12 feet, presumably presenting the oncoming salmon with the ultimate procreative challenge.

Cambridge environmental artist Mariangnese Cattaneo uses materials that nature yields. But she works with them outside creating new figurations that comment on the relationship between people and nature. In "80 Bundles," Cattaneo wrapped bundles of branches with hand-dyed red twine and arranged them in a 78-foot meandering path through the center of a meadow. Viewers, enticed to follow the bundles of sticks, are apt to wonder about this reordering of nature. In her native Switzerland, Cattaneo said, it is customary to burn bundles of wood. "For me, this piece is about connection and separation. The meadow is separated by the



Part of Karin Guisti's 1986 solo installation on the Quad, Museum of Fine Art in Springfield, Mass.

the evolution of architectural styles.

Helena Negrette also creates homes, but on a more intimate scale. Instead of using conventional paint on canvas to convey a portrait, Negrette's three-dimensional interiors evoke her subject's most personal thoughts and dreams. In 1981, Negrette joined with four other artists for a collaborative project portraying five well-known Western Mass. women. Her portrait of Ann Hastings, a successful real estate agent, took the form of an environmental installation. The result resembles part of a theatrical set, complete with a desk arranged with symbolic jewelry, toiletries, and photos of home

the art world continues to depend on works of a lasting nature. Artists are constantly reminded of the importance of creating art objects that can withstand the test of time. Art schools, dealers and supply houses all insist that canvas and paper be prepared with gesso, that archival papers be used for artwork and framing and that artists use the "best" (most long-lasting) materials. The very nature of most installation art, however, flies in the face of this urge for permanence.

Installation artists are faced with the formidable task of constructing and disassembling their work, as well as storage problems their more conventional colleagues probably never have to

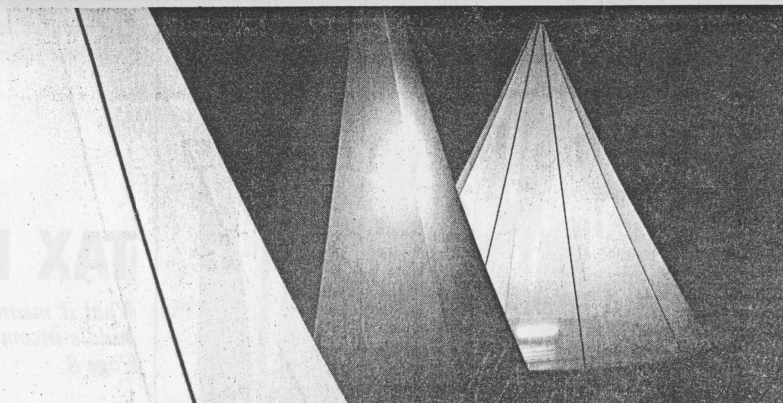
book which would contain more than 30 photographs of her piece, "Autumn Ritual." All phases of the project were photographed and since the piece was completely returned to the earth or otherwise dismantled, the photos are all that remain of the installation. Working with soil and gauze in a cornfield, Hewitt created an installation which accommodated the changing seasons, daytime and moonlight. Her sensitivity led her to the inevitable conclusion that if her work was truly in synch with the cycles of life, she would have to sacrifice part of her work. Indeed, she invited other Yaddo residents to participate in a performance/ritual during which they torched one of her goddess pieces.

Although some of her colleagues are discouraged by the problems inherent in installation art, Judy Sirota Rosenthal of Hamden, Conn., says she remains excited by the challenges of this form. She sees each installation as a short story, a collection of her thoughts which she shares with an audience, "I am a soul searcher," she says, "and I want to share that part of me in a way that touches other people."

At her recent exhibit at Erector Square Gallery in New Haven, Sirota Rosenthal created an environment called "Persimmon." The work, based on excerpts from the Jewish High Holy Day prayer books, was constructed from branches, pebbles, potshards, fine soil and bittersweet vine. Purple and persimmons gave off a fragrance that intensified during the exhibit. The artist's decision to pile some of the materials in the corner of the room grew out of her meditations about the kinds of things people leave in the corners of their lives and how, if ever, they get sorted out.

Judy Sirota Rosenthal uses soil and vines to breathe new life into ancient liturgy. Marsha Hewitt follows the cycles of nature, light and crops. Mariangnese Cattaneo accepts the inevitable decomposition of her sitework. Gone are the days when artists have to choose among painting, sculpture and drawing. They can combine a multitude of techniques and media and create new environments for their work. Installation artists share a love for the challenge of creating a unique form for their art. They are pioneers, taking art historians, gallery dealers and their audience out to the frontier with them.

*Deborah Kruger is an installation artist and lecturer represented by the Ceres Gallery of New York City.*



Beth Galston's "Tepee", Kingston Gallery September 1986

snaking path of bundles and the branches of the bundles are intertwined." Like the ashes left from burning bundles of wood, nature will take its course and eventually decompose this installation reaffirming the inevitable cycle of life.

Although it is experienced differently by each of us, home is the most familiar environment we know. It is not surprising then that many installation artists look homeward to create the settings for their work. In a recent installation sponsored by the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Karin Guisti constructed six huts on the Quadrangle green in front of the museum. Her homey structures, were open for exploration, children and adults alike delighting in wandering through them. Each hut is different, from a mock tipi to Florida kitsch to McDonald's vintage Cape. Guisti's physical presence is apparent in the gestures created by her hand-smudged latex on the 10-foot high huts. The installation spoke to the potential for different peoples to peacefully co-exist, although the artist suggested that the work addressed her concern with

and family, the private space where Hastings revitalized herself physically and psychically. This faceless portrait is filled with the subject's presence.

Beth Galston's work, a synthesis of the concerns of both Guisti and Negrette, are indoor environments with imagery that evoke outdoor architecture. In her recent exhibition at Kingston Gallery in Boston, the Somerville-based artist built seven tipis of gauze and aluminum roofs.

Galston is a master of manipulating light, and arranged "Tepee" in a darkened gallery space lit only by a haunting glow from within each structure. Galston says that while it might be tempting for the audience to associate these images with Native American architecture, her influence comes from a conical turret she reclaimed as living space in a Victorian house. The piece is part of a trilogy of installations where she explores space, objects in space, light and the interaction of the audience within her fiber work.

Although we live in a culture where disposables are the rule,

for artists like Marsha Hewitt and Mariangnese Cattaneo, decomposition is the most natural means for their environments to be "stored." To document the process, they turn to photography, adding yet another media to their mixed-media works. Other artists like Boss, Salisbury and Guisti, have to cope with the physical problems of dismantling and storing their huge environments only to face re-assembling them in different exhibition space. Gathering the soil, water, stones and other materials are regular installation problems to be solved at and after each exhibit. Needless to say, the opportunities for selling these unique environments are practically non-existent. At best, artists are occasionally commissioned by museums, or receive grants to create or complete their work.

Marsha Hewitt's creative solution to this problem was two-fold. During a residency at Yaddo, the artist retreat in Saratoga Springs, NY, she constructed and photographed an outdoor installation. Now she is in the process of interesting a publisher in an artist