

Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum



# A Memorial to Nature I

an installation by

# ELIZABETH TURK

February 24 - April 14, 2001

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Elizabeth Turk and the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum have undertaken the Herculean task of presenting

# A MEMORIAL TO NATURE I

This installation represents six years of intense labor on the artist's part and six years of my effort to premiere the work on the West Coast. Projects like this have their own schedules and ultimately the timing and location is perfect. What better place than Santa Barbara to discuss the beauty and fragility of nature and its limited resources?

Santa Barbara is known both for its progressive, conservative views toward land development and its commitment to preserving and protecting the environment. This is to the frustration of many commercial and housing developers, but also a significant part of the reason so many people want to be here. Turk was raised in Southern California and from her experiences of watching all the orange groves, wetlands and beaches be consumed by mass produced housing developments with white stucco homes and tiled roofs or strip malls or hotels, she began to examine the rapid development and exponential population growth taking place, not only in her hometown, but in Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico-places with limited natural resources (no water or electricity) for supporting these burgeoning communities.

From her original proposal for this exhibition, Turk explains Santa Barbara is uniquely situated where East meets the West along the Pacific and the surbanization of the American West fulfills long held concepts of Manifest Destiny. It is the place where the nation's wilderness ended and is now disappearing. For an artist who is inspired by what the natural world has to offer, she asks the question, "What will happen when the original references no longer exist?"

Turk has created inside the CAF galleries an exquisite and dramatic environment more akin to an ancient garden than a single work of art. There is a very loose narrative to the installation and it reads more like a poem by William Carlos Williams or e.e. cummings. The marble wings stir up images of fallen angels, Icarus or a decimated species of some kind, while the marble water ponds and the cast resin water bottles reveal the significance of this necessary and basic element. Water is life and we are attempting to even master the art of creating water. The photographic essays of the clouds possibly speak to the heavens above or our dependence on these billowy forms for our sustenance, or perhaps mankind's place in the atmosphere. This is a beautiful, thoughtful, and powerful collection of images, ideas, and forms and it requires people to complete it.

There are many people who have made this project possible. Tony Podesta is responsible for the publication of this exquisite catalog designed by The Lily Guild Temple of Design. Olga Viso from the Hirshhorn Museum and theoretical physicist Lee Smolin have written insightful essays about the work. The following individuals and organizations assisted in funding all the necessary nitty-gritty, behind-the-scene details that make exhibitions happen: L. Robert Johnson, Steven Sumberg, Donald & Ann Brown, Michael & Lorie Porter, the Andrea Lang Fund, the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission, Catherine Docter, Geof & Laura Wyatt, Bill McVicar, and the Lady Dasher Sojo Fund. The artist would like to especially thank those who helped in the studio and on the installation: Gorzad Poposki, Clau Cortes, Mark Gulezian, Al Johnson, Kelly Malone, Dominique Reboul, Todd Anderson, David Wu, Robin Metz and the CAF staff and volunteers. It has been an honor to work with Elizabeth Turk on realizing this installation, and I would like to thank her for sharing her talent and vision with us.

Meg Linton - Executive Director of the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum and Curator of the Exhibition





# FRAGILE REALITIES

Elizabeth Turk creates sculptures that seem to defy their own materiality. Coaxing exquisite, ethereal forms out of materials as permanent as marble and bronze, she delights in the artistic process and maintains a direct physical relationship

with her work. Exploring a variety of media since the late 1980s, she has molded forms in wax and clay, cast objects in bronze, carved intractable marbles, and worked with fragile materials such as porcelain, glass, and rubber. She has virtually mastered every medium and technique her able hands and inquisitive mind have considered. The intensive labor of her practice is

evident to the viewer, who is often awed by the lightness and transparency of her sculptures. Yet the artist never allows the creative authority of her work to be subsumed by her consummate skills as a technician. Her art retains its subtlety and poetry and reveals itself quietly and slowly.

Turk's exhibition at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum brings together a

by Olga M. Viso

variety of sculptures made between 1995 and the present and represents the culmination of nearly six years of labor. Titled "Memorial to Nature I," the room-sized installation includes marble and resin forms, a long central

sculpture fashioned from a wood shipping crate and soil, and a series of photographic essays. Related conceptually to each other, the art works coalesce to define different elements of a natural landscape set within the limits of the gallery. The installation takes shape as a kind of journey for the spectator, who is invited to project him or herself physically

and mentally within the space. Walking amid the marble wings on the floor, imagining flight above the cloud formations documented on the wall, and "adjusting" the "moveable" horizon line (the trough-like form filled with soil that traverses the gallery), the observer joins Turk as an artistic partner. Indeed, the creative potential of the viewer is one of the central themes of the installation.



The audience's position of authority in this environment is underscored by the aerial perspective that dominates the room. The fallen wings rest on the ground below and the photographs suggest views shot from high above the clouds. Hundreds of images clipped together comprise the miniature "flip-books." As participants we are at liberty to temporarily remove the photographic volumes and leaf through the tiny pages. At our leisure we may ponder the many options the artist has provided. Turk intentionally puts us in this key role to distance herself from the artistic process and assume, as she explains, "the role of recorder or questioner rather than creator."

As we find a comfortable perspective in which to view the installation, we are captivated by the white, curvaceous marbles nestled on the floor. Just slightly under human scale, the exquisitely hand-carved wings appear strikingly otherworldly. Turk's use of the wing as a sculptural motif was inspired by her own studies after an old master drawing at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Previously attributed to Albrecht Dürer, the Wing of the Blue Roller, 1524, had a strong resonance for the young artist, who spent her formative years studying art in the Washington metropolitan area. The wing form was also informed by a passage from the Dialogues of Plato in which the ancient philosopher described the condition of mortality:

The soul in her totality has the care of inanimate beings everywhere, and traverses the whole heaven in diverse forms appearing—when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and orders the whole world; whereas the imperfect soul, losing her wings and drooping in flight at last settles on the solid ground—there, finding a home...this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature.

In this context, Turk's wings evoke the presence of melancholic beings caught between states of heavenly and earthly existence. The single vertical wing, which stands upright amid the others, seems to struggle to awaken from sleep, and is perhaps not yet aware of its new level of consciousness. The anthropological associations inscribed in these forms are clear. The artist endowed the marbles with individual "personalities" inspired by members of her own family.

In the "water pond" sculptures Turk similarly used marble to record the transience and impermanence of an ephemeral experience – in this case a moment of splashing rainwater. For the artist, to memorialize such an instance seems interesting and absurd, as well as necessary. She argues:

Western culture has utilized marble to mark time and the passing of human life for many centuries. It is a traditional sculptural material associated with monuments and the commemoration of human activity. Yet the same culture has failed to record the passage of natural life with the same conviction.

It is thus especially poignant to note that Turk recuperated sections of marble left over from the erection of major monuments in the capital city (including the Lincoln and Iwo Jima Memorials), to create her poetic, contemporary memorial to nature. Quarried in Colorado, the rejected stones had remained in Washington, D.C., for a number of decades in the hope that artists might find use for the discarded materials.

The remaining sculptures in the exhibition are among the smallest yet most poetic. Cast in transparent resin and mounted on simple shelves that protrude from the wall, the glistening cylindrical forms record the spaces inside plastic water bottles. Liberated from their containers, the negative impressions appear to have the palpability of water that has held its "shape" despite the removal of the packaging. Turk's reminiscence on water suggests how the commodification of this natural substance has essentially "changed the shape of water" in contemporary culture. More than a comment on the environment, her reflection invites one to ponder current perceptions of reality and consider humanity's ability to shape and reconstitute something as basic and essential to existence as water. She asks:

What does this all mean? If we can shape something as fundamental and constant as water, how can an artist draw or paint reality without it already having been informed by this collective human memory?

Artists have been inspired by the natural landscape throughout the history of art. Some have preferred to transcribe its details directly while others have focused on certain aspects of its beauty. Many have retreated in awe before its wonders while others have expressed disdain for humanity's depletion of vital resources. Turk's investigation encompasses the totality of these varied concerns. Yet her installation is not an indictment of humanity. As we sit on the edge of the artist's imaginary horizon line contemplating the issues her work considers, she joins us. Together we gasp at nature's awesome power as well as the earth's unending generosity. While we may feel insignificant within this larger continuum, we realize that as individuals we do have substantial roles in shaping essential forms and values that impinge on our realities. The magnitude of this creative potential and the responsibility this ability engenders are what her work eloquently broaches.

> Olga M. Viso is Curator of Contemporary Art at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



# ART, SCIENCE AND DEMOCRACY

The myth of Galileo identifies Science with the stance of the rebel, who ignores the teaching of authority and sees for himself what the truth is. This myth was popularized in the twentieth century by Bertold Brecht, for whom Galileo may have served as a vehicle for

making sense of his own tangle of rebellions and commitments. But in our own period in which, as Brian Eno says, the most valuable currency is attention, "the stance of the rebel is easy." The currency of attention does not distinguish between art and advertising or argument and propaganda. As a result we live in a world in which the stance of the rebel is adopted as easily by

those who seek to deny rights to others as it is by those who are protecting their own freedoms. The natural result is that criticism is often reduced to irony and irony itself is degraded to the point that it can be invoked merely by the reproduction of familiar images. But the trajectory of postmodernism tells us that irony and even protest are not enough: Damien Hirst may claim he is a brand, but indeed is the White Cube Gallery anything

but a boutique for expensive collectibles? No, at this time when we have no lack of well educated and well off rebels, when Marxism is so deservedly repudiated it is hard to even imagine the conviction of our grandparents, and no one seems

to mind very much that in some parts of the United States a fair proportion of the vote hasn't been counted for years, some new thinking is needed. In this situation the interesting question is not what we should be against, but what should we be for?

Many years ago I read the following in a book review: "Science is that human activity in which we

aim to show towards nature the respect that in a democracy we endeavor to show towards each other." I must confess that I have never been able to find its source, but I have been thinking a lot about this quote recently. I hope I may be excused for using it unattributed. The stance of respect seems to me the necessary companion to the stance of the rebel, for respect signifies that we live out our lives inside an intricately structured



and enormously complicated world, containing among myriads of other living creatures, many individuals like ourselves. For we human beings, the world we find ourselves in is comprised of nature, imagination and society. Science, art and politics are the ancient crafts by which we seek to understand and define our situation in these worlds. The stance of the rebel comes from the discovery that there is much in these worlds which is unacceptable. The stance of respect arises from another discovery, that to change the world requires that we acknowledge that each of our lives is but a brief moment in the vastly complicated networks of relationships that comprise our shared worlds.

Respect for each other is necessary because none of us, even the most powerful, can make any part of our human world better, for any but the briefest span of time, without gaining the agreement of those others who are effected by the changes we seek. And over the long run, this agreement must be freely given. It may be won by argument, it may be the result of negotiations between people or groups with competing or conflicting goals, but it cannot be coerced.

Respect for nature is necessary because however beautiful we may find the constructions of our imagination, if they are meant to be representations of the natural world we must take those constructions humbly to nature and seek its consent. We do this by observation and experiment. It is this act of giving primacy to nature over our imaginations that empowered Galileo's rebellion from human authority. And those who define their relationship to nature in this way form a community bound together by this ethic of respect. For there is no scientific method. As Feyerabend and Einstein both tell us, scientists are opportunists who will use any method that helps them answer the questions they ask. Science works because generations of such opportunists have learned that they will not get very far unless they adopt a shared ethic. This ethic requires each to report honestly the results of their observations and reasoning at the same time that they are required to work as hard as they can to formulate and advocate their own ideas. It requires us each to act freely, but never to forget that those who will come after us, and neither ourselves nor our colleagues, will be the ultimate judges of the worth of our efforts. This ethic demands respect for each other, as in a democracy, and respect for nature. What makes it work is that the stance of respect empowers each individual who follows it, by giving them the ethical basis needed to adopt the stance of the rebel, while at the same time requiring them to take seriously the others in their community.

I am not a sculptor, so I hesitate to speak too loudly about a craft I have never tried to practice. I can only imagine what it is like to seek every day to discover form out of marble and plaster.

I do have some experience in the craft of finding form in mathematics, and perhaps this can serve as an analogy of sorts. In each case we have our tools and our materials. In the case of mathematics the materials are nothing but the logic of systems of relationships defined by some simple postulates or assumptions. We work, as artists must, with hope, for we never can be completely sure we will find what we seek. We are often not even completely sure that the system of relations we are studying is consistent. As a consequence we work every day with the knowledge that we fall easily into error, that any step in an argument or a calculation could contain a fault. The tools we use consist of methods that long experience has shown are reliable for detecting error in our own work. These tools allow us to find and work at an edge where the most dizzying flights of imagination coexist with the most careful logical arguments.

So what we mathematicians and physicists do is perhaps like sculpture in that we learn to work at an edge where we are balanced between our imaginations and our materials, using tools passed down from a long tradition of discovery and practice. We work hard to be at that edge, because when we are there we learn, both from our materials and our imaginations. And when the surprises come equally from each side, from ourselves and from what happens in front of us when we apply our tools to our materials, and

when we can no longer tell the difference, this is when we are about to do something really wonderful.

It is also at these moments that we understand the reason our traditions teach respect for nature, for our materials and our tools. For we see that a byproduct is respect for ourselves, and for what is produced by our own imaginations. And, this, in turn, leads to a greater appreciation and respect for others with the same capability, which is to say for all other human beings.

So I would like to claim that this is one thing that art and science are for. Beyond the beauty and use of their products, art and science are important for the training they give each practitioner in an ethic grounded on joining the stance of the rebel with the stance of respect. When one has learned to do this, one can participate meaningfully in a community founded on a shared ethic. In this community each individual is truly free, but each is bound to the community by the respect we feel for those others who are willing to put everything at risk in every working day, in the knowledge that this is the only way to create something worth preserving. That is, art and science are worth doing because they teach us what is necessary to live in a democracy.

Lee Smolin is a theoretical physicist, who is the author of Life of the Cosmos, (Oxford University Press, 1997) and Three Roads to Quantum Gravity, (Basic Books, 2000).

### ELIZABETH TURK

In 1983, Turk received a Bachelors of Fine Art in International Relations from Scripps College, Claremont, CA and in 1994, a Master of Fine Arts from Rinehart School of Sculpture. She has exhibited her work in Virginia at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia; in Baltimore at Maryland Art Place, School 33 and Grimaldis Gallery; and in Washington, DC, at the Washington Projects for the Arts, Hemphill Gallery and Baumgartner Gallery. In 2000, she was Artist in Residence at Kohler Industries, Kohler, WI and she received the 2000 Painters & Sculptors Award from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Her work has received reviews in the *New York Times, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Chronicle* and *Sculpture Magazine*. In 1999, she moved her studio from Washington, DC, to Chelsea in New York City, where her work is currently represented at Hirschl & Adler.



The Changing Shape of Water, 2001

## THE SANTA BARBARA CONTEMPORARY ARTS FORUM

CAF provides an arena for the presentation, documentation and support of a broad variety of visual, media and performing arts representing a wide range of attitudes. Committed to encouraging the creation and showing of new work of the highest quality, CAF promotes the work of local, regional, national and international artists. CAF also aims to expand and educate the audience for contemporary art and to involve a diverse constituency. It seeks to promote critical awareness and stimulate challenging dialogue about aesthetic and social issues relevant to our time.

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# ELIZABETH TURK

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All measurements are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth; all works lent by the artist.

Wing #2

Marble, 15 x 65.5 x 9

Wing #3

Marble, 24 x 52 x 13

Wing #4

Marble, 24 x 55 x 13

Wing #5 2001

Marble, 60 x 24 x 21

Water Pond I

2000

Marble, 8 x 36 x 60

Water Pond II

2000

Marble, 8 x 36 x 96

Water Pond III/IV/V

1998

Marble, 5 x 20 x 36

The Changing Shape of Water

2001

Water bottles, resin

Variable Dimensions

Book of Skies

2001

Photography

Variable Dimensions

Moveable Horizon Line

2001

Wood crate, soil, grass

20 x 360 x 12

