

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Book review

### Slow-change artists

#### Art nature dialogues: interviews with environmental artists

John K. Grande

Foreword by Edward Lucie-Smith

Albany, NY: SUNY Press; 2004

251 pp. 80 b/w photographs

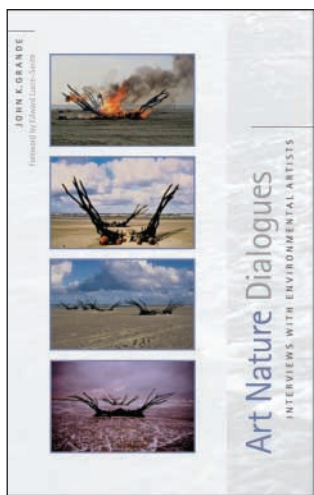
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Author, poet and art historian John K. Grande is one of Canada's most widely published art critics. His essays have appeared in various art periodicals and gallery publications and are often concerned with postmodern attitudes toward nature, global health and well-being, and the environment. In *Art Nature Dialogues* Grande provides a forum for environmental artists from Europe and North America to discuss their work in a casual yet polemical style.

The interviews collected here explore art practices, ecological issues and aesthetic and societal values as they relate to both ephemeral and permanent public art. The role of the viewer, social attitudes toward ecological (biodegradable or ephemeral) art, and the nature of monuments are some of the topics Grande pursues in conversation. How the works are situated, the use of materials and the ethics of artistic production come under discussion along with other issues of art practice. His correspondents include Hamish Fulton, David Nash, Bob Verschueren, Herman de Vries, Alan Sonfist, Nils-Udo, Michael Singer, Patrick Dougherty, Ursula von Rydingsvard and other established and emerging artists at the vanguard of environmental art.



Although Grande's correspondents represent a range of generations and trends, they generally work to a smaller scale than, say, Smithson or Christo and produce works that are expected to self-destruct or decay naturally over time. Glen Harper, in *Sculpture* magazine, describes these interviews "with some of the most important environmental artists on both sides of the Atlantic" as addressing "the borderline between art and what is perhaps the most pressing global concern in the new millennium — the quality and sustainability of the environment."

Environmental art, as a movement, includes earth works, large- and small-scale manipulations of the landscape and installations meant to stress issues of ecological sustainability, biological diversity and survival. Postmodernism opened the door to the deconstruction of the heroic male authority figure and of meta-narratives of colonialism. Masculine entitlement to rulership over the earth (and all her dependants) had remained largely unchallenged by Mod-

ernism, in which the heroic male genius figure (or artist) as godlike creator persisted. Post-modern pop art, minimalism, intentional kitsch, faux-naive styles and other "low art" tactics took turns knocking Fine Art off its pedestal, although "art stars" and elitism continued to proliferate within these new discourses. Artists such as Smithson and Christo gained fame with their massive drapings of landscape features and supremely impractical earth works. In his introduction, Grande distinguishes his correspondents' work from this earlier era of environmental art: "This is no longer the age of Land Art [in which] vast earth-moving projects ... remained an imposition on the landscape."

The artists in Grande's book enjoy more modest reputations and generally work on a smaller scale, in an elusive discipline located somewhere between fine art, architectural design, found art and landscaping. Their creations are multimedia, interdisciplinary feats executed in collaboration with the least predictable (but fundamentally awe-inspiring) elements available, such as decomposition, oxidation, weather, growth patterns and fertility cycles. Their materials are usually humble and often disreputable; Jerilea Zempel, for example, deploys "bricks" of horse dung for her ephemeral creations and "mock monuments." She defends her idiosyncratic choices with blithe anti-Romantic irreverence: "I thought it was time to make a reclining female nude out of horse manure." By and large, the artists do not idealize their subject matter. They don't seek to beautify a site so much as to interact with local elements. In this respect, as Lucie-Smith points out in his foreword, they do approach Ro-

manticism, apprehending the Sublime with reverence and near-religious awe before Nature.

Grande begins each artist's chapter with a brief synopsis of the artist's oeuvre. He then launches into the interview by setting out the ideas he wants to discuss. One gets a mental picture of the pair discussing big ideas and practical details at the kitchen table, as when Grande discusses spiritual archetypes and the use of natural found materials and man-made forms with British sculptor David Nash:

JG — Your step and ladder pieces are unusual metaphors that maintain the integrity of wood, the natural undulations of tree forms, while integrating manmade forms. *Through the Trunk, Up the Branch* (1985), in Ireland, demonstrates this quite dramatically, offsetting a tree's base with a series of steps ... In this case the tree is supporting the structure that symbolises an ascent or descent.

DN — I was presented with a huge dead elm tree in Ireland that had been dearly loved by the owner. With an Irish woodsman, instead of cutting it at the root, we decided to cut it above the first big limb. I made about ten sculptures from the top and then I was left with this huge trunk and big branch. So it remained rooted and the steps had a gesture that was upward. A neighbouring farmer said he'd like to go up those steps and have a Guinness with God!

An idea that emerges from the alternating voices and viewpoints featured in the book is that environmental art is a potent antidote to artistic hubris. Water, wind, vegetal growth and the effects of time can only be set, framed, "staged" or guided. The "performances" of nature may be courted or cajoled, but not coerced or compelled. As Grande describes it in his introduction, there can only be a "working in tandem." The conditional, reciprocal nature of these artists' dealings with nature might be described as a kind of humility, a word whose spiritual overtones are not misplaced; respect and reciprocity are the fundamental moral precepts of environmentalism and ecological awareness. The idea of man as "the measure of all things" or "the crown of creation," awarded stewardship over the earth is attenuated by the pluralistic and decidedly nonauthoritarian dialogues presented here. There are "solo performances" but no privileged views by any one "art star," elite expert or

external authority. Grande himself avoids the role of objective (and therefore authoritative) commentator by being more of an involved documentarist, or environmental co-conspirator, engaging the artists in a lively, discursive approach to their art and the issues they address. Grande's respondents assume a co-operative stance in which old, Eurocentric models of colonization and control are abandoned. When Grande asks David Nash, "Is it an exchange process?" Nash replies "It has to be for it to work."

Weaknesses of the book include the failure of Lucie-Smith's foreword to address the revolutionary approach of both the featured artists and of Grande's format. Another, perhaps unavoidable, weakness is the unevenness in the clarity

of the artists' responses. Some are eloquent; others are not. I occasionally wished Grande would just paraphrase his respondents' answers and render them both readable and illuminating, as is typical of his own critical prose. But then, the artists' visual creations are eloquent, as 80 black-and-white photos of their works attest. If you can't wade through the artists' sometimes-murky descriptions of their art and intent, just look at the pictures. They speak. And Grande does do a good job of eliciting valuable insights as to why these artists do what they do.

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## Lifeworks

### Pnina Granirer: a dancing line

The soft body versus the hard world: perhaps this is the human predicament. Vancouver-based artist Pnina Granirer has been exploring this dichotomy for the past six years. The works included in her exhibit, *Synchronicity*, mounted

earlier this year at the Zack Gallery in Vancouver, evoke the complex relationships between humans and their contemporary settings. Her imagery features dancers and celebrates the inherent directness of their discipline.

Although Granirer initially worked from photos she had taken of dance rehearsals, the final versions are active responses rather than copies. Her translation of the dynamic presence of dance does not rest simply in the imagery, but in the innovative presentation of the pieces. Each of her figures, whether on canvas, Mylar or paper, are energized. They leap, stretch, fall, collapse. The images' defining lines have been erased, etched, scratched, blurred and overlapped, reflecting the way the body carries the traces of life's (mis)adventures. Her marks are made with values from the most ephemeral chalk lines to light-denying black paint. Granirer is one of Canada's veteran artists, classically trained in Israel and Europe, with over 40 years of work behind her, including many international exhibitions. Her interest in the human figure has been evident throughout her career, but in the past six years she has focused on the figure exclusively.



Pnina Granirer. *Leap* (2005). Monoprint on paper, 40" × 30".

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Pnina Granirer