

Shirley J.-R. Madill

Deep Reserve

Ecology, in its widest sense, involves the mutual relations between culture and nature in their entirety. The delicate relationship between humans and nature is becoming increasingly distant. The sociologist Ulrich Beck has crystallized his ideas of the social consequences of this distance in the term “risk society”. Nature today is unknown and full of danger – radioactivity, acid rain, poisons – things we cannot record with our senses. Beck links this situation with the trend of ever-increasing individualization in modern society. We are living in an age when the security of the individual is anchored in a community that is breaking up, as the confidence in an unbounded material progress vanishes. In the risk society, situated in a global greenhouse of poisonous gas, we have to ask, how is it possible to live?

Environmental crisis is a social problem. The cultural concept of nature is a multilevel entwinement of internal and external nature. We are dependent upon nature absolutely, completely and ultimately, but at the same time, nature external to ourselves, conditioning our activities, disappears from our sight. This is our present dilemma.

George Steinmann sees the possibility of searching for a utopian dimension in nature, constructed from the unity of internal and external nature. He searches for nature’s own potential for growth, which is united in us as well as outside of us and is divided into thousands and thousands of living segments.

Steinmann does not consider his work as minimal or conceptualist, but rather a perceptual process that is reductionist and holistic. The installation *Deep Reserve* consists of 14 multimedia works that combine photographs, notes and pigments drawn from lichens and mineral water. The title of each piece serves as a metaphor that exhibits a new paradigm shift from structure to process. As we perceive reality as a network of relationships, descriptions form an interconnected network representing the observed phenomena. *Deep Reserve* denies the notion that systems are never more than the sum of their parts. Rather, this work is the product of the paradigm thinking where the process involves “finding the invisible in the visible and the visible in the invisible.”¹ Steinmann is interested in revealing the deep energy of nature, and in doing so slows down the artistic process, bringing it to the level of nature. The nature of geology and nature implies timelessness, and Steinmann pays respect to this by painting with extracted pigments and essence of mineral water. Through this epistemological approach, Steinmann emphasizes perception, the understanding of the process of knowledge as a network of elements coming together as one.

On another level, Steinmann’s work continues the elaboration of the “spiritual dimensions” of art that allowed the great reformers at the turn of the century- Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich and Mondrian – to find new ways of expression. Steinmann’s work on the surface exhibits formalist and geometric characteristics akin to spiritual abstraction.

What is art about the environment supposed to do? Can such art just sit there, surrounded by nature, or should it hang in galleries and simply refer to ecological issues? Does environmental art have to be ecological? If so, what does that mean? By what standards should it be said to have accomplished or not accomplished its purpose? And by whom?

Steinmann will make no claims to answer these questions or to fit into any established categories of art and environment or to fulfill any standards but his own. His work, at its core, creates fundamental shifts in human perception and calls an observer to participate in

recreating a dynamic healing balance between nature and people. Steinmann rediscovers and recreates physical, social, philosophical and mythic environments with artistry, originality and exemplary integrity.

In this manner, his work participates in an optimistic transformation of the environment and human consciousness. His work calls for the contributions of scientists to be reevaluated. Steinmann's critique of the absoluteness of the science profession leads him to work with biologists, geologists and philosophers. By working with them, he believes that art and science can combine forces into an intrinsically dynamic relationship. In such a method, there is no hierarchy.

Deep Reserve is the product of Steinmann's research in the Pre Cambrian forest region of Manitoba. He worked with Dr. Richard Staniforth, a biologist from the University of Winnipeg. The result is a work related to the Manitoba environment as well as connected to Steinmann's work globally. He suggests an alternative paradigm that tempers the catastrophic contemporary consequences of the long- running machine age and allows humans and nature to survive and thrive.

While the three-dimensional world and the image world are distinct physically, there is a kind of conceptual osmosis, a reciprocity of meaning which is addressed by Steinmann. We are approaching a completely different state of culture. Steinmann attempts to uncover this new conceptual structure. It is not only a metaphysical frontier, but a political and social border as well. It is almost as if culture itself has become abstracted to the point where it is extremely difficult for a person to even conceive of the way in which he exists in it. We live in a transcultural state, where culture itself has become self-conscious of itself as culture.

Steinmann's method is that of no method. There are no absolutes and his position is not to find them, only to understand and accept their absence. To return to the things themselves is to return to the world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand, what a forest, a prairie or a river is. This is the specificity of place.

*Essay by Shirley J.-R. Madill, Chief Curator, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
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