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Spirit of Place

Kathryn Lipke, *Spirit of Place*, Art Museum of Rovaniemi, Finland. August 16th to October 13th 1996

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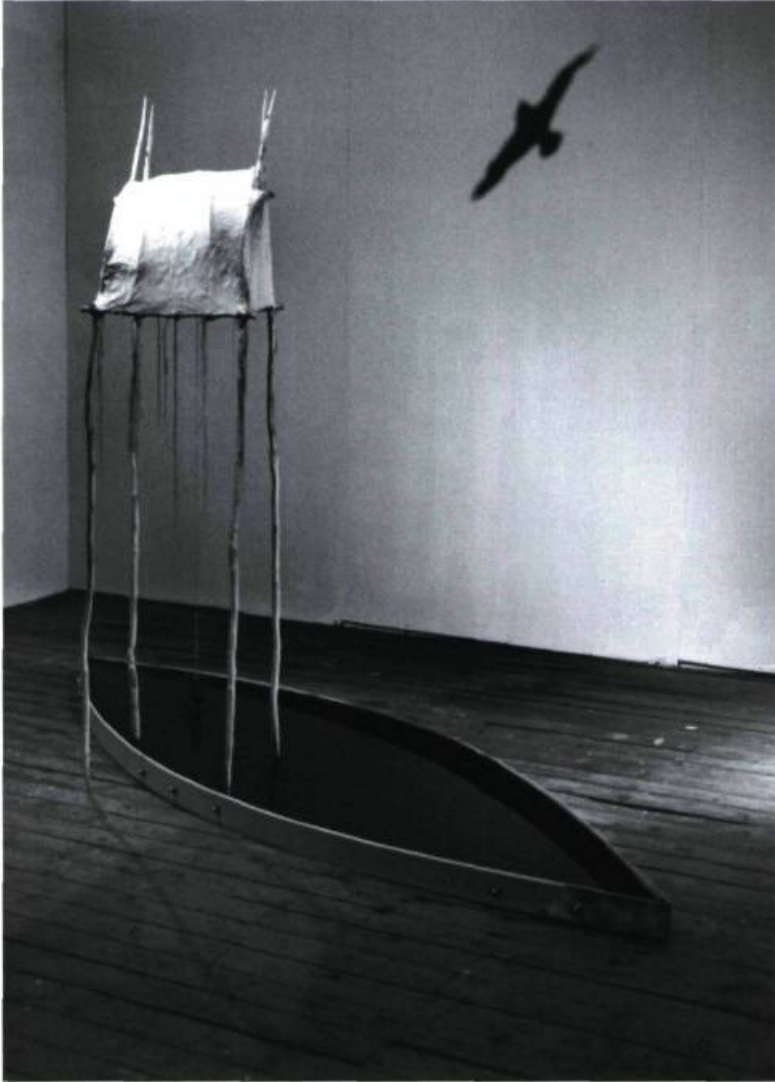
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ROVANIEMI SPIRIT OF PLACE

Kathryn Lipke, *Spirit of Place*, Art Museum of Rovaniemi, Finland. August 16th to October 13th 1996



Kathryn Lipke, *Silence*, 1995.

Kathryn Lipke's art is part of an ongoing search for meaning that involves interactions with nature in sites and places where no lines have as yet been drawn between human culture and the culture of nature. In the process she builds structures, forms and environments out of ephemeral and locally available materials that derive from nature and reflect this integral relation. Her assemblages allude to our own brief journey through life as part of a more universal, seemingly illusory context and continuum of life. The layering of elements in each piece is instinctual rather than ideational and reflects

a basic sensitivity to place. Transforming materials into such simple yet eloquent expressions of our own tentative and finite place on this earth such as vessels, dwellings, and environments, Lipke reminds us that water, earth, air, in effect all the primary resources we depend upon for life are endangered as is our spiritual sense of well-being. Economies of scale have placed humanity in a perilous position by effectively deteriorating and devastating the scale and variety of lifeforms. Even the permacultural and ecologically bound contexts out of which our culture specific identities evolved are now disappearing.



For the *Silentium* show held at the Rovaniemi Museum in northern Finland this summer in conjunction with the artist Leena Ikonen, Lipke produced a multi-part installation titled *Silence* (1996) whose central element is a rickety house on stilts assembled out of found tree branches and held in place with linen threads. Three of its legs stand in a pool of water, while the fourth is on land. The skin Lipke has applied to this house is made of Kozo paper which suggests the surface of the earth. The shape of the roof and walls of the structure is irregular and arched, like a birth canal, and recalls the moment of passage from the protective womb into life. Not only is this structure a place of habitation, but on another level it represents our own bodily presence. The pointed ends of the vertical supports that project from the top however, are threatening and evoke feelings of danger. The reflection in the pool beneath mirrors the actual structure, as if this state of reflection were the mirror of reality we experience unconsciously in the chaotic and abstract reality of nature.

Lipke herself has suggested that *Silence* is in part a metaphor for the violation and rape of women in Bosnia which goes unchecked for the most part, and parallels humanity's rape of the earth. A reddish iron oxide colour applied to the interior of the house falls in drops and merges with the water below. Is this the blood of life or the bloody residue after its destruction? Visually, the sensation is of the pain experienced within during childbirth or as a result of violence perpetrated from without. It challenges our standard associations with the home, even of the earth, as a safe haven: it could also be a constricting and containing place scarred by the residue of a quiescent, unspoken violence.

The cone-like structures on tripodal supports constructed out of found tree limbs, Kozo paper and beeswax that stand apart from the main piece, some nearly touching the gallery floor, have the same reddish pigments exuding from them into the pools beneath them. Somehow these forms seem more solitary in their collective isolation, as if



Kathryn Lipke, *Silence*, 1995.

they were mirroring the same experience from a male perspective. We never actually see the bird whose shadow is cast on an adjacent wall in the gallery. It is an evanescent witness to the experiences that life provides us, a shadowy afterimage of our unconscious, as illusory and intangible as life itself. By integrating natural elements essential to all life, such as water and earth and presenting these as the sites over which her assemblages hang or are placed, Lipke ultimately provides us with an environmental context that symbolizes our own dependence on nature for cultural survival. An environmental backdrop to *Silence* comprises a wall of handmade layered paper and clay with iron oxide and graphite added to build the colours. Its undulating forms are less characteristic in texture and coloration to paper than of the earth in its primeval, original state. The wall piece provides a counterpoint to the more literal elements and embodies a private sense of permanence and quietude, of a cathartic healing and spiritual presence.

Phantom Vessel (1994), a primitive-looking structure

that resembles a vehicle of transport or a seed pod — the vessel that carries one on life's journey or an embodiment of life's potential — is assembled out of irregular branches and limbs of trees Lipke gathered near Kemijärvi in northern Finland. Bound with gut and linen and layered over with a skin of Kozo paper, the piece hangs suspended in mid-air above a floor of parched clay whose permacultural presence engenders a feeling of catharsis and reifies the vessel's purpose in relation to the earth itself.

Lipke's *Phantom Vessel* suggests that life's journey, the objects and forms of transport we use, even the structures, cities and environments we inhabit, are all integrally linked to and derive from the earth. While the structure recalls the passage through life the light yet structurally strong materials it is composed of are themselves in a state of passage and endless transformation. The materials used are layered integrally as elements within the sculpture and in reference to the layer of parched earth beneath. Lipke's construction draws parallels with the earth's multiform

layers, variety and strata of life that have long played a role in human design and engineering of vessels, habitats and implements and sustained a fragile balance with the ecologies we lived in and depended upon. As the eco-dependent origins of bioregional cultures are increasingly overtaken by the dogmas of the new internationalism in the form of imported products, materials and design imperatives, the context and origins of the materials we use, and our own sense of permanence and connectedness to place and the natural cycle of life is estranged.

The boat-like structure *Spirit of Place* (1996) from which this show derives its title, is similar to *Phantom Vessel* but is denuded — it has no protective skin or outer layer — and hangs suspended in mid-air apart from the former piece. Slide images of specific sacred sites Lipke has visited in northern Scandinavia are projected onto a backdrop of translucent silk fabric. We are not immediately aware that these images are indeed sacred but merely that they are specific places and sites. They waver and ripple ever so slightly as natural air currents move through the gallery, bringing the human culture/nature metaphor into a sharper, if less material focus. The specific origins of each regional culture and civilization in general are now, like the boat structure, exposed, vulnerable and unprotected against the changes and disruption taking place even in the most remote regions of the earth. There is no skin to contain the seeds of the pod or carry the boat further on its journey through life.

In the *Occurence* (1996) series, tiny fragile elements of life : a bird's wings, a bird's egg held in a cup of thorns, symbols of nature's basic vulnerability, are wall mounted in frames. These natural elements *within* the framed structures are juxtaposed with man-made instruments, functional objects and agricultural instruments from an earlier, less mechanized era that hang *outside* the frames yet have a practical, specifically human connection to the earth. The former are ontological, have a place and purpose in nature, while the latter refers to humanity's more formal and historical relation to the land. Camouflaged colour and thorns may be effective as protective devices in a wholly natural environment but when placed in direct relation to the blunt, pointed instruments used to farm the earth in

earlier colonial times they seem all the more vulnerable and threatened. The *Occurence* series emphasizes the many degrees our role and place on earth have passed through from primitive matriarchal (earth elements) to patriarchal (functional objects) to the present.

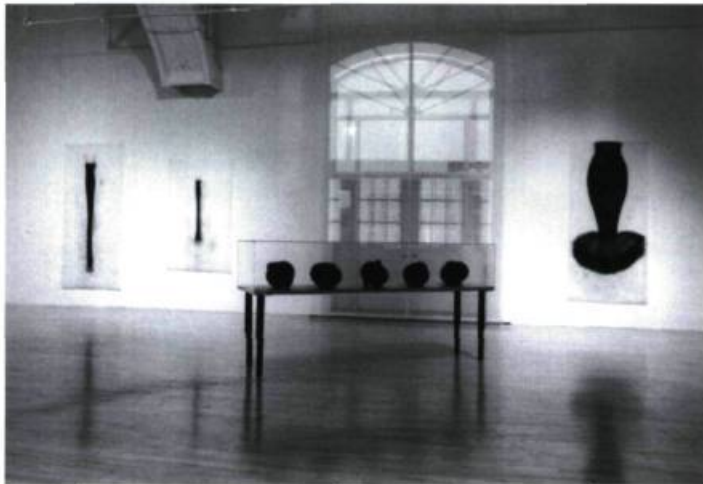
The most significant impression one has in viewing Kathryn Lipke's *Spirit of Place* is of the simultaneous sensation of protection amid devastation, of violence amid domesticity. In protecting ourselves, by building the structures and manufacturing the objects deemed necessary for our survival, we have ironically abandoned any sense of the natural, human scale we see in Lipke's works.

Our economic system continues to rationalize the earth's resources, and inevitably contributes to the devastation of our ecosystem. The media reinforces this vision of nature as a passive and violated subject, but nature is actually volatile, procreative and vital. Lipke presents us with this duplicitous misreading of nature and our place therein, of humanity's passive complicity to the consumer *ethos* and the inevitable subjugation of other cultures, peoples and species that result from this. Through a heightened awareness of the finite resources and materials we all share, and a knowledge that everything that surrounds us ultimately derives from nature we can discover, as we do in Kathryn Lipke's latest works, a sense of the universal and a renewed spirit of place.

JOHN K. GRANDE

N.D.L.R.

John Grande's latest book *Balance: Art and Nature* will be appearing in a French edition with Éditions Écosociété, Montréal, in January 1997.



ERRATA

Au n° 35 de ETC, p. 5, dans l'article de Marie-Josée Dauphinais intitulé « La possibilité ou l'impossibilité du discours esthétique en région », nous avons omis de publier en légende que Dominique Blain est l'auteur de la sculpture de cette photographie.



Nos excuses auprès de l'artiste.

Au n° 35, l'article de Elisabeth Recurt, intitulé « Sarla Voyer : Lieux remémorés : ce qu'ils évoquent, ce qu'ils appellent », pp. 35-38, n'informait pas de dates et lieu d'exposition. Ainsi, l'exposition de Sarla Voyer a été présentée au Centre des arts contemporain du Québec, à Montréal, en mars-avril 1996.