



Patricia Johanson, sculpture in Fair Park Lagoon, Dallas, 1986.

Creature From the Brown Lagoon

Patricia Johanson's Environmental Sculpture, Dallas

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PATRICIA JOHANSON'S environmental sculpture for the lagoon in Fair Park, Dallas, takes one by surprise. Comprising two segments at the north and south ends of the lagoon, its curling forms are glimpsed first through the drooping foliage of the cypresses that line the water's edge. As one draws nearer, it also becomes apparent that the sculpture is not simply contained within the banks but crawls up onto land, divaricating into tendrilled benches upon which people and birds can perch.

The appearance of Johanson's amphibious sculpture coincided with an \$18 million renovation of the fairgrounds for which bonds were approved by Dallas voters in 1982, and which was to provide, as part of a general program of landscaping, new stone edging and a bridge for the lagoon. Although some funds designated for the bridge were diverted to Johanson's sculpture, the principal cost of her work was underwritten privately. The lagoon, built with WPA funds in 1936 as a flood-control measure for the site of the Texas Centennial Exposition, had by the 1970s become choked with algae fed by fertilizer runoff and with silt from the erosion of its banks. Its food chain was unbalanced because of a dearth of emergent vegetation – the aquatic plants that project above the water line and provide food and shelter for a variety of animal and insect life.

As the project for rehabilitation of the lagoon evolved, its elements were expanded to include public education, environmental art, habitat enhancement, and biological restoration. The impetus for the biological restoration of the lagoon came in the form of an ecological awareness event called

"Inherit the Earth," organized in 1981 by For the People, Inc., "a small non-profit organization... dedicated to public information and education, especially in the area of ecological concerns."¹ For the People, Inc., was led by Bobette Higgins, whose zeal "pushed us all to the limit to get that project going," according to one curator involved in the planning process. In order to receive funding from the Dallas-based Meadows Foundation for her consciousness-raising initiative, Higgins was required to enlist the cooperation of all four museums situated in Fair Park at the time: the Dallas Museum of Natural History, the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the Texas Hall of State, and the Science Place, each of which was to host an exhibition related to the environmental theme and participate in a joint symposium. The Dallas Museum of Natural History was responsible for creating an exhibition that would explore "aesthetically satisfactory alternatives to rare and beautiful natural areas,"² a point of departure suggested to Higgins by Martin Krieger's article in *Science* magazine titled "What's Wrong With Plastic Trees?," which had speculated that in the future, artists might be called upon to create artificial environments utilizing a combination of engineering, environmental, and aesthetic skills.³

The then director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Harry Parker, proposed commissioning a site-specific environmental sculpture and submitted the name of Johanson as a prospective artist, having seen a recent exhibition of her *Plant Drawings for Projects* at the Rosa Esman

Gallery in New York. The DMFA agreed to pay for Johanson's conceptual drawings, using Meadows Foundation grant money, and also attempted to give fundraising a boost by displaying Johanson's project drawings during the symposium, which took place in fall 1982. At the time, the DMFA was planning its own departure from Fair Park for a new museum building to be constructed in the arts district downtown. Johanson's sculpture was intended as something it could leave behind in addition to its vintage WPA Moderne building, which was to be occupied thereafter by the Science Place. As former DMFA curator of contemporary art Sue Graze put it, the museum's hope was that "this ecological yet aesthetic and functional landscape will extend the space of the [Natural History] Museum out-of-doors, providing a living natural history exhibit as well as contemporary sculpture garden."⁴

With Parker's guidance, Johanson selected the lagoon as the site for her project and immediately sought advice on its biological restoration from the curators at the Museum of Natural History. She was given neither program nor budget, but Parker assured her: "This is Dallas. If they like it, they'll build it."⁵ Her initial impression of the lagoon was that "it is beautiful... though badly neglected, but it's not a magical place." She felt it lacked human scale, that "from a designer's point of view there is no middle ground to mediate the shift in scale between you and it, and there is a conventional sameness throughout, so it becomes a very passive and visual environment." And so Johanson

set out to "turn this into an environment to be experienced and explored, rather than something that one just drives past. I also thought it would be wonderful to have a complex, ecological landscape in the middle of a big dynamic city like Dallas, and so a major part of the 'environmental art' became to create a functioning aquatic community. And I think symbols are very important for cities – something that is unique and totally identified with the place – so I tried to make it as little like a 'public art' project as I could."⁶

Sue Graze recalled that neither she nor the artist had much hope that the design would actually be realized. But Bobette Higgins's determination to see it built found a responsive and enthusiastic supporter in Sally Lancaster, executive vice-president of the Meadows Foundation, whom Johanson describes as "a very key person." Ultimately the Communities Foundation of Texas (which stipulated that the lagoon be dedicated to the memory of philanthropist Dorothea Leonhardt), the Texas Commission on the Arts, the Charles B. and Florence E. King Foundation, the American Petrofina Foundation, the Eugene McDermott Foundation, the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department, and individual donors contributed funds toward the construction of the project, the cost of which was initially projected at \$200,000 but ultimately reached \$1 million.

The sculptures, completed in 1986, are built of gunite, a type of concrete sprayed over a steel armature. Crushed firebrick was mixed with the concrete to create its



vivid terra-cotta color. The two discrete sections of the sculpture are patterned, at least in plan, after two Texas aquatic plants. The superstructure at the north end derives from *Sagittaria patyphylla*, commonly known as the “delta duckpotato” because ducks like to eat its fleshy roots, and measures 235 by 175 feet; that at the south end traces the outline of *Pteris multifida*, a fern, and measures 225 by 112 feet. The sides of several of its “leaves” curl upward and undulate in an expressionistic manner, at one point forming an arch to accommodate a pedestrian bridge.

The Fair Park sculpture was Johanson’s first opportunity to realize a long-harbored desire to create a water garden, a prospect she had earlier explored in a series of designs and a manuscript commissioned by *House and Garden* in 1969, interspersing garden plans with images of endangered environments – a conjunction the magazine had not anticipated and declined to use. (The *H&G* drawings were eventually published elsewhere.) The *H&G* commission piqued Johanson’s interest in botanical subjects, which nearly a decade later, in 1978, produced an exhibition of plant drawings at the Esman Gallery. Johanson’s intention was to explore “meaningful” form by translating the structure and organization of plants into “art.”⁸ Several of these drawings anticipate the plant forms adapted for the Fair Park Lagoon project: the sculpture’s arching “stems” are prefigured by her

depiction of a *Pine Suspensor/Bridge*, while leaves and stems are used to span a body of water in her studies for a *Slender Cliff-Brake Fern/Stepping-Stone Path Across Water* and *Lakeshore With Walking Fern Bridge*. To extend this line of development, the artist says she has only recently noticed how closely two sculptures in her *Landscapes, 1969–1980* exhibition at the Esman Gallery – the 1979 *Urban Landscape (Cliff-Brake Fern)* and the 1980 *Drowned Fern* – resemble the Fair Park sculpture.⁹

Several aspects of the sculpture have contributed directly to the biological restoration of the lagoon. The bulbous trunk and intertwining branches of the “delta duckpotato” were deployed to prevent further erosion of the north bank by breaking up surface wave action. The openings between the interlaced arms of both sculptures provide sheltered microhabitats for invertebrates, waterlilies, and frothy clumps of algae, besides trapping soggy newspapers and other detritus left behind by park visitors. While turtles and birds previously had to compete with humans for space along the banks of the lagoon, the sculpture was designed with arching segments of “stems” that dip in and out of the water, extending to leaf-shaped islands just beyond the reach of marauding schoolchildren, so that birds and turtles can disport themselves out of harm’s way.

The most critical element of the biological restoration of the lagoon proved to be the planting scheme, which introduced an assortment of emergent vegetation orchestrated by the curators of the Dallas Museum of Natural History and their consultants. Since Dallas has few native aquatic species, most of the specimens were gathered in East Texas by consultant Rosa Finsley with the assistance of project adviser Charles E. Finsley. Dr. Richard F. Fullington provided the artist with basic recommendations for biological restoration and information on Texas flora, and also drew up a plan illustrating recommended groupings of plants, including cattails, bulrushes, waterlilies, pickerelweed, and phalia. The artist prepared her own planting scheme, but in the end neither was rigidly followed. The planting scheme takes advantage of the filtration benefits of water hyacinths, whose roots absorb heavy metals from the lagoon. Although parks department employees have been asked to refrain from fertilizing the grass around the lagoon, the rich soup into which the plants were introduced has caused them to be overly abundant, especially the cattails. According to Finsley, even though the cattails have a tendency to “take over” the lagoon and require an annual thinning by corporate volunteers from LTV, they have attracted new birds to the lagoon. As a result, project coordinator Walter Davis found little need to populate the lagoon and characterizes the essentially self-stocking

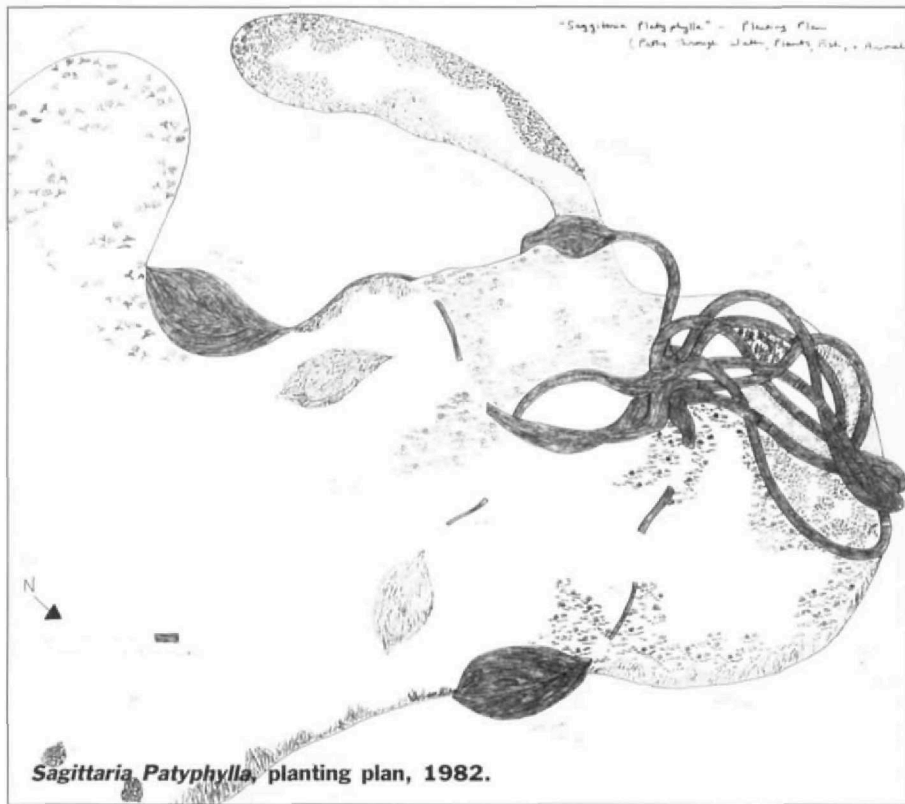
process as a matter of “build it and they will come.” The curators and area birdwatchers have been particularly excited about the nesting of a pair of rare least bitterns in the refuge provided by the cattails. Another sign of improved habitat is the appearance of kingfishers, which require clear water so they can see their prey.

At first, Dallas city officials insisted that handrails would have to be installed along the sculpture’s walkways, but they later relented. Another safety issue concerned water depth beneath the sculpture, and whether stainless steel “nets” should be hung underneath it. This notion was eventually scuttled too, but dirt was dumped back into the lagoon so that the water under the sculpture is only 18 inches deep. The retrofilling, while it undid the dredging of the lagoon prescribed by the curators, was a surprisingly unintrusive (and, as it happened, ecologically acceptable) compromise. At this point, the city appears to be covering any residual liability issue with a single sign posted at the north end of the lagoon: “Notice: Adult supervision of children is recommended.”

As the DMFA became increasingly preoccupied with its move from Fair Park, the task of coordinating the project fell to Bobette Higgins, and relations between Higgins and Johanson became strained. After construction began, Johanson made only a few visits to Dallas to select the color for the concrete and to attempt to correct mistakes made in interpreting her drawings; funds were evidently not available to allow her to remain on site to supervise construction. As the artist relates, “We were both at an impasse,” since Higgins controlled the funds and Johanson had the plans. Yet both wanted to see the sculpture built, and finally an unusual deal was struck: “I sold her the right to build the sculpture,” says Johanson. “That was the contract. I don’t think that any artist ever made a contract like that before or since. I don’t think I



Barbara Koverlie

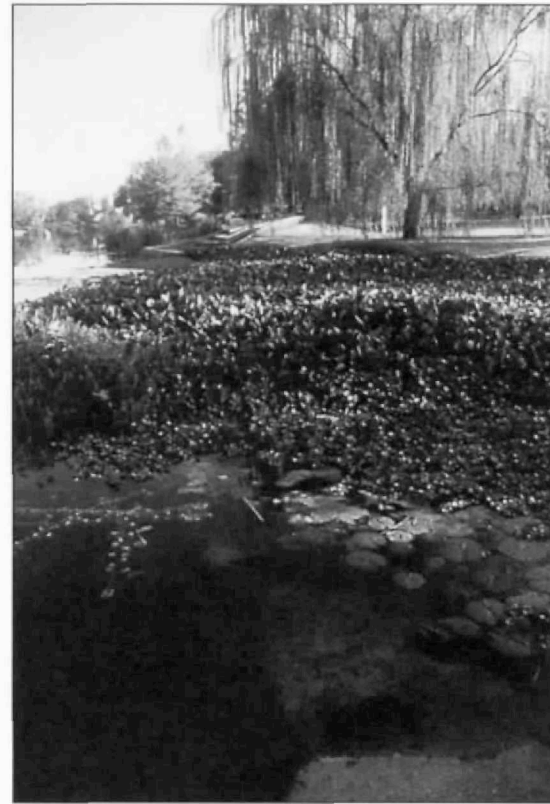


Patricia Johanson

surroundings” and “about to devour the site.” Janet Kutner echoed his appraisal when she compared the massiveness of its “tentacle-like appendages” to a “prehistoric animal that could devour anything in sight,” and she described its color as “garish.” Even the Friends of Fair Park conceded that the sculpture’s bright orange-pink color had “startled many at first but has taken on a patina over the past seasons and is further softened by the reeds, water lilies and bald cypress growing around and through the mysterious arms.” Bill Marvell also recalled his initial “shock” in seeing “yards of concrete sprawling all over the north and south ends of the lagoon like a bloated python,” and voiced

inhabitants – has proven to be the basis of its broadest appeal, and, pink snake or no, the sculptural elements are a more than usually adventuresome viewing platform: hordes of schoolchildren have clambered onto the sculpture’s spreading gunite leaves to peer into the pond’s shallow depths. Pleased with this acceptance, the Museum of Natural History is now completing construction of a nature trail around the lagoon (funded by the Meadows Foundation) and installing a new second-floor exhibit that will interpret the pond ecology.

Johanson’s forms (or the approximation of her intended forms), hyperextended in yards and yards of concrete, are still perhaps more assertive than even the project’s admirers might wish, although, as the artist says “all... are taken verbatim from nature,”¹² in a manner consistent with her earlier work and well within 20th-century procedures of enlargement and direct translation. Although time has darkened it, the sculpture’s color still stands out, an effect unanticipated by the artist, who recalls: “I think it knocked people’s eyeballs out at first. ... It is shocking when you first see it. Once the shock value wears off, I think we kind of accommodate things, and at some point, I don’t think it’s a major issue.” She chose terra-cotta in hopes of achieving bright reflections in the water. “If it had been more naturalistic – green, for example – the reflected shapes wouldn’t have been really clear.”



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would do it again either, because you really give that person carte blanche.”

Her virtual exclusion from the construction process, Johanson believes, had an adverse though not fatal effect on the aesthetics of the piece. She says: “I think it could have been a better work of art than it is. ... I would have preferred to see both works as genuine [three-dimensional] pieces of sculpture, which they’re not. Right now, they’re much more like paths over water.” She views the fern, *Pteris Multifida*, as the “biggest disaster.” Budget constraints precluded the use of long-span arches for a network of bridges and causeways, and in the end the work was constructed “as though it was a pancake.” She speculates that the city of Dallas may have required alterations to make the sculpture safer to walk on. Another problem was control of

the color of the gunite. Johanson says that she chose a brick-colored terra-cotta for the sculpture, not the “brassy” color that resulted when a sealant was applied over the concrete. She adds that the mixing of pigment with huge batches of concrete is “not an exact science.”

When the lagoon sculptures were completed, Dallas critics were generally unenthusiastic, particularly those who evaluated it primarily on aesthetic grounds. David Dillon thought the concept for turning the lagoon into a “miniature nature sanctuary” with the sculpture as an “aquatic promenade” was “downright goofy.” His apprehension was heightened by an early encounter with the sculpture when it was beached in the drained lagoon, so that it seemed to him to be “out of scale and character with its

his reservations about the “too vivid” color of the sculpture, although he was clearly sympathetic to the participatory qualities of the piece. Marvell observed, “The work really only comes into its own when it is experienced, when the viewer becomes an explorer and travels its many paths or finds a sunny spot to simply sit and think.”¹⁰

Bobette Higgins defended the work against Dillon’s criticism by enumerating its ecological, educational, and contemplative purposes as an “unobtrusive reminder that all life forms share a beneficent, but finite, earth,” and later elaborated on the project in an article for the Friends of Fair Park newsletter titled “No, It Is Not a Pink Snake.”¹¹ The animal life now abundantly evident in the lagoon – the torpid turtles, wading herons, paddling ducks, and other unseen but audible

Johanson’s sculpture has received more sympathetic national and international attention, generally articles discussing ecological art.¹³ It is also represented in a currently circulating exhibition, *Fragile Ecologies*, organized by the Queens Museum of Art and accompanied by a catalogue written by the curator, Barbara Matilsky, who identifies the lagoon sculpture as “one the most important ecological artworks executed to this date.”¹⁴ Eleanor Munro once characterized Johanson’s work as drawing an “uncomprehending but willing audience into the recesses of her imagination,”¹⁵ and this seems to hold true for her lagoon apparatus – people may not have the slightest idea what these strange forms are intended to evoke but instinctively realize that they are vehicles for exploration. In fact, as forms, they may be best apprehended from above, even accorded a helicopter view on the evening

news, as happened with Johanson's 1,600-foot Stephen Long outdoor installation in 1968. For Johanson, this is not a major concern: "I don't think that it's important that they do see the form. What I want them to see is the structure, ... how it's built, how it moves, and how the parts relate to each other." Other works since the lagoon piece have also been configured for bird's-eye effect, including her unbuilt *Tidal Color Garden* (based on a butterfly's wing) and her *Endangered Garden*, nearing completion in San Francisco. The latter is revealed in plan to be a snakelike object a third of a mile long. Peter Blake addressed this aspect of Johanson's oeuvre in 1978:

I am reminded of those huge, pre-historic "earth-works" that people keep discovering in aerial photographs. Those things – if they did, indeed, exist – sometimes seem insensitive to their natural settings. Johanson's most recent projects are so "organic," so Art Nouveau in their allusions, that one senses a great love for the natural environment, almost a hesitancy to intrude.¹⁶

Blake was referring to Johanson's earlier built works, such as *Cyrus Field*, and the unbuilt projects suggested in her plant drawings. Once the unbuilt work was realized in the Fair Park sculpture, it was obvious that this is hardly hesitant or non-intrusive work. Johanson's contention that "the principles of art could be used to forge links between the built world and the natural world" does not ring true in Fair Park if one looks beyond the confines of the lagoon itself.¹⁷ Even though Johan-

son's degree in architecture (B. Arch., City College of New York) is frequently touted in her biographies, sensitivity to the historic architectural setting of Fair Park is scarcely apparent in the lagoon commission. The labored interlacings of the piece have no connection with the rigid geometry of the Art Deco architecture surrounding the lagoon. While the sinuous curves of the lagoon itself may indeed have been intended as a foil to the formality of the overall park plan, the sculpture's heavy-handed organic gigantism, juxtaposed with the adjacent buildings, throws this subtle interplay out of balance, turning a civilized conversation into a shouting match. Johanson's only concession might be the terra-cotta color of the sculpture, since blue and terra-cotta are colors used elsewhere in the park. Yet again, the dominance of the sculpture's color throws off the aesthetic balance when contrasted with the pale limestone of the museum buildings. Another oddity is the contrast between the concurrent lagoon renovation projects – the uninhibited Johanson sculpture, partially overgrown with untidy clumps of cattails, versus the officially instigated park landscaping, with its neat row of park benches and symmetrical masses of flowering plants.

Johanson's development as an artist has been slow, no doubt in part due to the scarcity of opportunities and the time required to realize large-scale commissions. The proposal for the Fair Park Lagoon sculpture was the first in which she incorporated biological restoration; since its completion in 1986 she has been

commissioned to do only one other work, the *Endangered Garden* in San Francisco, now nearing completion.

One question the Dallas sculpture raises is whether we should have the same aesthetic expectations of art when it serves an environmental agenda. The sculptor herself proposes a different set of expectations altogether, taking the view that "art just mediates between people and everything else.... I think, in the process, I've done something that no one else is doing – so I've ended up with a pretty unique [sic] image. But that wasn't the goal at all. I think the best role for the artist is to bring issues to the attention of the general public in a way that everybody can understand.... The most basic way that everything is connected is that we are all matter.... Developing a sacred view of matter is a great leveler, because at that point the worm and the person are on equal footing. I think that's very hard for most people to imagine without seeing an environment like Fair Park Lagoon."¹⁸ ■

The author wishes to thank Patricia Johanson, Walt Davis, Sally Lancaster, the library staff of the Dallas Museum of Art, and the staff of the Dallas Public Library for their assistance.

- 1 [Sally Lancaster], "Remarks to Parks and Recreation Board," 3 December 1981, p. 1; text provided to author by Walter R. Davis II, former assistant director for long-range planning, project coordinator, Dallas Museum of Natural History.
- 2 Dallas Museum of Natural History, Leonhardt Lagoon fact sheet, p. 1. For a review of the symposium proceedings, see Bill Marvel, "Earth Works: Exploring Environments at the Fair Park Museums," *Dallas Times Herald*, 12 October 1982, pp. 1, 8C.

3 Marvel, "Earth Works"; Higgins, p. 1C.

4 Sue Graze, "Patricia Johanson: A Project for the Fair Park Lagoon," *Dallas Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin*, Fall 1982, n.p.

5 Author's interview with Patricia Johanson, 29 October 1992.

6 Patricia Johanson, "Revisioning the Fair Park Lagoon," in Pete A. Y. Gunter and Bobette Higgins, eds., *Present, Tense, Future, Perfect?: A Symposium on Widening Choices for the Visual Environmental Resource* (Dallas: Landmark Program, For the People, Incorporated, 1984), p. 78. Individual components of the sculpture are described in *Patricia Johanson: Fair Park Lagoon Dallas and Color-Gardens* (New York: Rosa Esman Gallery), 1983.

7 See *Patricia Johanson: Public Landscapes* (Philadelphia: Painted Bride Art Center, 1991); and Patricia Johanson, *Art and Survival, Gallerie: Women Artists' Monographs*, no. 8 (North Vancouver, B.C., March 1992).

8 In Patricia Johanson and Peter Blake, *Patricia Johanson: Plant Drawings for Projects*, (New York: Rosa Esman Gallery, 1978), n.p.

9 Ibid.; see figs. 13, 8, and 6, n.p. Author's interview with artist, 29 October 1992. See also *Patricia Johanson: Landscapes, 1969–1980* (New York: Rosa Esman Gallery, 1981).

10 David Dillon, "Fair Park: Renovation Aims to Return Vibrancy to City's Art Deco Social Melting Pot," *Dallas Morning News*, 23 September 1984, p. 8C; Dillon, "Reviving a Cultural Paean to Dallas," *Dallas Morning News*, 9 April 1986, p. 2F; Janet Kutner, "Symposium Adds Little on Topic," *Dallas Morning News*, 13 September 1986, p. 2F; "Flowers, Fountains, and Lights Transform Fair Park," *Friends of Fair Park*, Summer 1988, p. 4; Bill Marvel, "Fair Park: '30s Gem Glistens Again," *Dallas Morning News*, 24 September 1986, p. 2F.

11 See Bobette Higgins, Letter to the Editor, "Lagoon Project," *Dallas Morning News*, 6 October 1984, p. 30A; and Higgins, "No, It Is Not a Pink Snake; No, It Is Not 'The Lady,'" *Friends of Fair Park*, Fall 1986, p. 7.

12 Johanson, *Art and Survival*, p. 34.

13 Patricia Johanson, "Architecture as Landscape," *Princeton Journal* 2 (1985), pp. 110–13; Patricia Johanson, "Civic-Minded Landscaping," *Heresies* 6, no. 22 (1987), pp. 94–95; Patricia Johanson, "From the Other Side: Public Artists on Public Art," *Art Journal* 48 (Winter 1989), pp. 337–39; Laurie Garris, "The Changing Landscape," *Arts + Architecture* 3, no. 4 (1985), p. 59; Robin Cembalest, "The Ecological Art Explosion," *Artnews* (Summer 1991), pp. 96, 99.

14 Barbara C. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), p. 47. A portion of Matilsky's essay is reprinted in "Art and Ecology," *Museum News*, April 1992, pp. 46–49.

15 Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 468.

16 In Johanson and Blake, *Johanson*, n.p.

17 Johanson, "From the Other Side," p. 337.

18 Johanson, *Art & Survival*, p. 35.



Dallas Museum of Natural History