

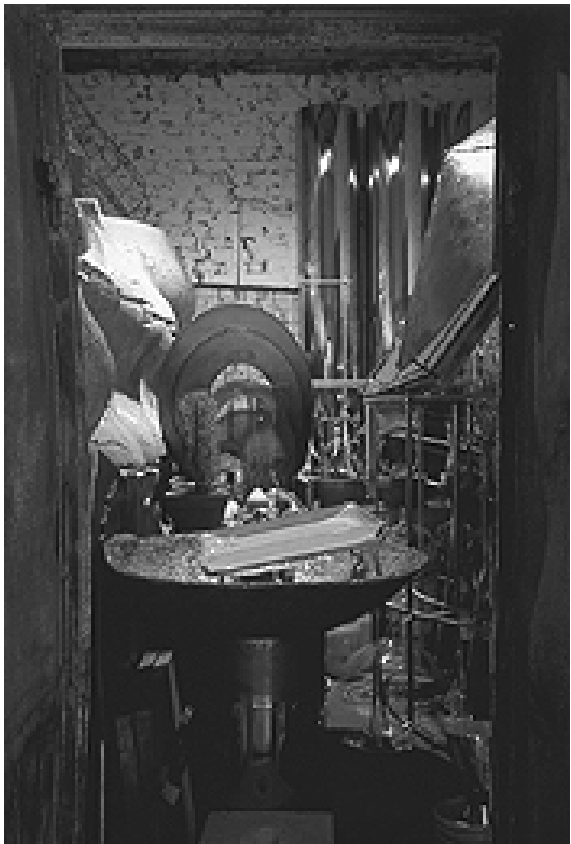
mouthtomouth

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features:

franceswhitehead

interviewed by kristen brooke schleifer



Center: Frances Whitehead, *antechamber*, installation detail of vault, Tough Gallery, Chicago, 1998. Courtesy the artist.

franceswhitehead

Ultimately, I'm interested in what I think of as deep practice. The art gallery, the museum, art in the public sphere, "design" work—all of these things have reasons for being, and audiences and opportunities for communication inherent to them. I think any one of them for me, at this time, is too circumscribed.

I'm really interested in playing out different ideas in different arenas, and at this point, I refuse to choose.

interview by kristen brooke schleifer

caption info



The last time you and I had an extended conversation about your work was more than a decade ago, so we have some catching up to do! But let's begin at the beginning.

I'm from Richmond, Virginia; I went to school in North Carolina, and in DeKalb, Illinois—no hero schools—straight through, when I was really young. I came to Chicago in 1985 to teach in the Sculpture Department of the School of the Art Institute. But I never studied sculpture; I studied printmaking.

Why printmaking?

I think the reason it was printmaking, and not painting, was because I liked paper, and I liked linearity. That orientation toward the schematic, and then the object that the schematic relates to or represents, continues in my work—it's just the way I think about the world. On top of that, there was the appeal of the multiple, the production aspects, and all the chemistry. But I was also attracted to printmaking as much because of the personalities of the instructors, which is something that happens that has nothing to do with media.

By the early 1990s, though, you were more focused on making large-scale, singular objects, many of which were based on the symbols and mechanics

of proto-chemistry or alchemy. When did that transition into three-dimensional work take place?

In the early 1980s, I had, like most people, been interested in the conceptualism of the '70s and the general dematerialization of art that came along with that—although all I started with were works on paper, so I didn't have too much to dematerialize. When that seemed to be a dead end, I realized I was much more interested in materiality than I'd had an opportunity to explore. At the time, I was only 26; I just started messing around with materials. I didn't really have an intellectual context for what I was doing, but I found "sculpture" was the easiest thing to call it, because the work became more and more three-dimensional, even though it was always conceptually driven. I think of these works now as "meta-objects"—they were objects about objects. I didn't have that language then, but that's clearly what they were. And I was asking questions about what objects look like, what makes them different from other kinds of things. That sounds so obvious on the one hand, but it really isn't!

I remember when we first met, you had this incredible closet—or what you referred to as your archive—in which you collected all kinds of funky objects. You would make numerous schematic drawings of them, which seemed to uncover unexpected formal equivalences between things of very disparate origins—say, an African bracelet, which is a cultural expression, and then an engine fragment, which is a mechanical expression, and then the mathematical archetype of the torus. In some cases, these forms were then blown up to become large-scale sculptures, which propelled them one step further, into the realm of high art. It was almost as if you were tracing the evolution of these shapes through all these different filters, and finding some sort of common denominator, as a way of perhaps reconnecting these more intuitive forms with these rational forms. That schematizing process, to me, seemed a conscious attempt to find the bottom line of shapes.

The schematic has remained a way of thinking I'm inclined toward, and I've brought that inclination to bear on a lot of different things. I do think there's always an observational element in my work, and an analytical element—going after something, looking at it, taking it apart, trying to understand it—and then re-presenting that in some way for contemplation by the viewer, as a way to understand the morphology of the physical aspects of what's at hand. But I don't know if there's any greater meaning to that schematization process, beyond my use of it as a tool.

Really? Because I was fascinated by how it seemed to reveal connectivity among these seemingly disparate things—a kind of string theory of objecthood.

Well, you know, there are these crazy theories out there right now—the Theory of Everything, for example—and there's certainly been an interest in the "encyclopedic" floating through my work. Clearly my work is epistemological; it's about knowledge—how we know what we know, and how we give that a shape, or present it in a way that becomes a mechanism for knowledge and understanding. My use of schematics *is* related to that; perhaps it's just such a

huge part of my work that I forget to think about it! One thing I would say has operated throughout my work is the dynamic between the explicit and the implicit. The relationship we have to these discrete things, their spheres of operation, their context, and the role that context plays in how we understand what they are, is always shifting back and forth.

Did those concerns affect your treatment of scale and material? Because I've always been very impressed with the scope and ambition of your fabrications, and your juxtaposition of the sublime and mundane. For example, you began developing these expansive multi-component installations, where you'd have a giant curtain made out of pine rosin hanging alongside potted plants.

Well, in terms of those large pieces, I think I felt that that was the scale things *must* be. This was also related to my concept—which eventually became a conflict—that I was both utilizing and critiquing heroicness. So the range of scale within a given suite of work frequently contained a large "set-piece" that would establish a theatrical tone, and deliver a certain kind of visual and emotional punch to draw in the viewer. Then there would be other elements that were specifically scaled to the everyday, like the plants and the plant stands. I was engaging in a dialogue about design and functionality, and public and private spheres. I think I was trying to make a model of how we experience the world.

There was also an allegorical component, because you were leveraging the symbolic associations of some of these organic materials, such as belladonna and rosemary. I tended to see that as a way of recovering poetics, or reinvesting these mundane materials with their pre-rational, metaphysical or mythic power.

I was interested in exploring the nature of nature—the nature of the American psyche, and our view of nature through language and the naming of plants—what I now know is a sort of "ethnobotany" What those two endeavors—the work from the '80s and the work from the '90s—turned out to have in common was that I was participating in the dismantling of modernist classification systems. So it was operating on two fronts: one had to do with artifice, and one had to do with nature. I was exploring plants, insects, and ultimately virus taxonomy, and how naming and other constructs revealed the presuppositions that inform those classifications. Ultimately, I came to understand that, in a funny way, I was doing the same thing with objects. I was making my own found objects or artifacts, and exploring certain aspects of "thingness" that had to do with the divisions between art objects, utilitarian objects, decorative objects, and scientific apparatus and equipment, and the nuances of how we understand them.

Many of those plants had a home in your own garden, which I know has been very influential in your work. How did the garden start?

I believe it was 1987; I'd lived here on the West Side of Chicago for a couple of years, and was able to buy the derelict, uninhabited building next to mine, which I tore down to start a garden. I didn't know what I was doing—I'd never had a garden, I didn't know anything about plants—but I was really compelled to do it. I think it was the pastoral response of living in the city and wanting to have a



piece of nature. It was, some would say, a completely intuitive move. I thought I was just going to have a hobby, and of course it *completely* took over my life! Many years later, I understand that it was the beginning of what I now think of as a full-blown environmental politic in my work and in my life. I was making a paradise garden, but it was also a reclamation project, and I was *acting out* in a public way. And it became a big laboratory, because I grew a number of exhibitions out there.

But you didn't set out with the thought of incorporating it into your work.

Not at all. It was just meant to be a backyard, with the Weber grill in it. But it became a laboratory. I was thinking about this today as I was sitting out there, that it has finally, just now, settled into being a backyard. And in these 15 years I've gone from knowing nothing about plants to knowing a considerable amount about plants, and horticulture, and the history of both. That garden has taught me an incredible respect for the land. I never thought of backyards as "the land," but now I know they are, because I've seen how we disturb these pieces of dirt with the buildings we put on them. I learned all sorts of different things that were invisible to me about our impact on the land, and then also the land's ability to right itself—through all its creatures that are attracted to it—without any help from us. It has been amazing to watch what's shown up out there, once it was possible.

One thing that has characterized your work, to me, is its inherent quality of intellectual inquiry. Your work always involves a great deal of research into diverse disciplines, from math and biology to chemistry and botany. You have an overarching interest in dealing with the natural world, and the history of our relationship to it. What was the genesis of these interests?

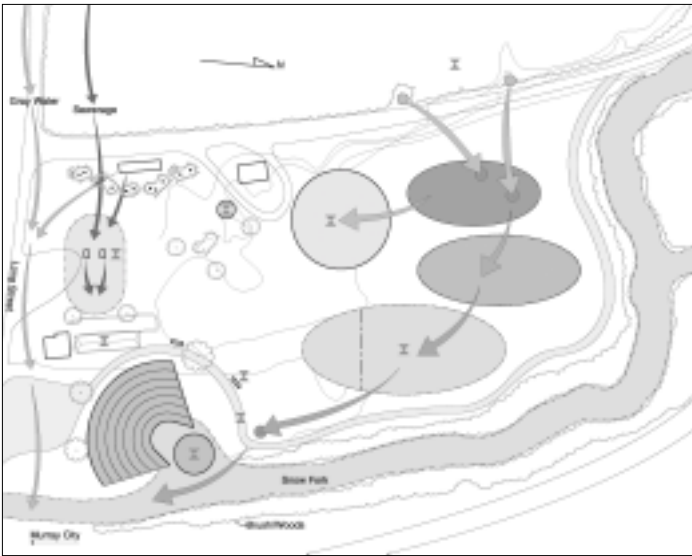
On the one hand, I could explain it developmentally through the language of art. Once I started asking the question, "What do objects look like?" part of that

became, "What are they made of? What have they been made of, historically, and in what ways can I recapitulate and transform that?" Another way to look at it is more psychological: I was using scientific material and research as a way of getting "out of self." When I went to school, I was studying with a lot of aging Abstract Expressionists, and we were always told to express ourselves. And I didn't know what that meant! The context for that didn't exist. Yet somehow, we were told we should be able to do this. So I went looking for a way to infuse my apparently empty self with information (*laughs*), for something to work with. I began to observe the natural world, and do research into its properties, as a way of escaping what I now see as the unreasonable burden placed upon me by this mandate! I *am* naturally curious, so I do poke around—and that has led me to discover a lot of things. But the real motivation had to do with trying to find a way to make work that was bigger than myself, and this was the way that seemed possible, given my biography and circumstance. Which is to say: I had a well-rounded education that included science and math, I'm preoccupied with history, and I have a good memory. I leveraged all those interests other people might reject—like science—together with cultural factors, and made this mÉlange. Ultimately, I was looking for more things to work with than had been delivered to me through the mechanism of art education. The history of art was not enough. And I have never made art about art. My art is *informed* by art, and I'm very versed in the history of art, but I've never really made art that was just about that.

Just as you've never made art that's just about yourself.

At least not overtly.

Let's talk a bit about the installations you were doing at the end of the 1990s, like *Antechamber at Tough*, and *Arguably Alive*, at Northern Illinois University Art Gallery. In retrospect, it seemed like the end of a certain



stage in your work.

Well, as you've said, the last time you were here, we talked a lot about my closet. I can't remember if I had the concept at the time, but one of the things I became obsessed with was figuring out how to exhibit that closet. That turned into the *Antechamber* installation at Tough in 1998, except instead of just using the models and fragmentary studies that inhabited my "archive," as I called it, I ended up carting everything I'd ever made and still owned, over to the gallery, and stuffing it into this little vault. I then made a light projection in the main gallery that was the same shape as the vault. So I presented this nothingness alongside all of that artwork, which was stored or entombed. That work was a direct reference to King Tut's tomb, and it was my way of taking the concept of the artifact full circle. I had taken my inspiration so often from the artifacts in museums, and then pulled them out of context to explore them through scale and manufacture. So in this case I was putting those artifacts back into context, to make it clear that the context was in fact what they were about. As it happened, I was simultaneously involved in two other projects that dealt, in different ways, with museums and classification. I had initiated, in collaboration with Lisa Wainwright and Lisa Norton, a show at the School of the Art Institute called *At Home in the Museum*, which invited three artists to select items from the museum's Decorative Arts collection and bring them into the school. At the same moment, I was holding an endowed chair at a small school in Clarkesville, Tennessee, where I taught a liberal arts class about artifacts, museums, and the politics of collecting and display—basically exploring the underlying premises of how modernism turned into postmodernism. As part of this class, the students curated an exhibition called *Close at Hand* at the local historical museum. So in May of 1998, all three of these shows were happening at once. I didn't realize until years later that this, in itself, was a kind of conceptual, public art project—I'd explored the same issues within the vocabulary of the art gallery, the fine arts museum, and the local American History museum. In a sense, it was the end of one phase of my work, but it was also the beginning of another.

Well, entombing your work certainly suggested a transition to come.

It did. And at the same time, I was working on *Arguably Alive*, which was an

exploration of virus taxonomy, using the forms of Egyptian canopic jars. I was very much interested in things that were neither here nor there. I'd discovered that viruses are not considered "living"—they're non-living infectious particles. I was trying to pull together some of my scientific interests in what constitutes "life" with my metaphysical interest in material culture. It was also right at the turn of the millennium, and I wanted to deal with the notion of duration. So I took this very ancient form and juxtaposed it with something we've only been able to see in the last 50 years—through the development of the electron microscope—as a means of collapsing this huge period of time.

Which brings us back to your interest in history. Much of your work has seemed interested in accessing lost or forgotten modes of knowledge, like alchemy or herbal symbolism, and juxtaposing these ancient or arcane systems of human understanding with those of modern science. In a sense, your garden was also about memory, because you were reclaiming land, or reclaiming nature. Were you using these notions of memory to create a tension between, or to critique, the relationship of past and present?

Well, we do inherit our place on the planet from the cultures that went before us, so I was working—albeit in a rather unexamined, and some might say nostalgic, way—with those issues. I've had some time to reevaluate that, and in retrospect, I agree with a wonderful thing Tim Porges wrote about my past work: that I was "reverse-engineering the Enlightenment through accidents of language." A lot of my explorations of the museum, artifacts, and classification had to do with the Enlightenment—basically, the failure of the Enlightenment to fully account for the complexities of human experience. By deconstructing or dismantling Enlightenment principles—as well as certain aspects of American life that are founded on those principles, such as our ideas about nature—you might say I was playing out an extended *lament*. Now, at some point, I realized that the conflicts set up by living in the city and trying to reclaim this piece of dirt in a changing neighborhood did not jibe with poetic references to *Hamlet* and the symbolic meaning of rosemary—the cultural history had really nothing to do with the living experience. I had been looking *backward* as a way of understanding being in the *now*, and so I consciously decided to pivot and look forward—which led to a real break in my work.



Would you elaborate on that?

Well, a lot of people feel that modernism flattened reality out into an overly simplistic worldview, and I think one of the overall things I'd been doing was looking for a model for complexity. Meanwhile, over the years, my politics had been getting greener and greener, but it was difficult to find a way to launch that in my work without being didactic. At some point, I met Stanley Tigerman—on an airplane—and wound up working at Archeworks, which is his school for socially conscious design here in Chicago. At that same time, SAIC launched its design initiative, and I started working with some of those faculty in an effort to understand what design means to our culture. As a result of all this, I was really fast-forwarded intellectually in a lot of ways—I ended up learning a lot about contemporary issues in design, as well as in architecture. I also learned a great deal about sustainability, which is the grown-up, much more sophisticated version of environmentalism. It's a more complex model than the old-fashioned ecology; it's really about the integration of the cultural sphere and the biosphere. And this was good for what ailed me, because I had all these pieces but I didn't have a system that would help me assemble them into a whole—or into a *complex*, which is a better word. So in the last five years, I've gone through this massive reeducation. In the midst of all of that, I got the opportunity to do a reclamation project in Ohio. So you might say I had been preparing myself for that without knowing it.

Let's talk a bit about that Ohio project, because it really marked a new chapter in the work you're making, and how you're making it.

In 2000, Mary Jane Jacob invited me to be part of a team she was organizing, under the auspices of the NEA, to help develop a water pollution remediation project in Murray City, Ohio. I spent two years doing it, although the project was not built. One of our main challenges was to find an opportunity for the site to be multifunctional, because the apparent choice the community had to make, in deciding how to develop this site, was between recreation and clean water. So we created some artificial wetlands that cleaned up the water sequentially, and designed one of the cleanup cells to double as a giant skatebowl. And in the process, I had to learn about myriad issues—not just water chemistry, but

community development, community processes, and invisible community and cultural assets. That project really changed everything for me, and I've dealt with a lot with public issues, and specifically water issues, ever since.

It's an interesting development; one could argue it's moving out of the realm of art.

Well, I'm continuing to play out all of my own themes, but through the language of design. When one thinks about issues such as recombinant DNA, and the impact we're having on the environment, there's no longer such a clear line between nature and artifice. That thinking extends to the line between art and design, and public and private spheres—all of which has become very interesting to me. So when I did the project for the NEA, I really functioned as *what*? I'm not sure. I do think my work has moved very much into a dialogue with design—which is the ultimate artifice, perhaps, in the built world. I'm interested in what I think of as *deep practice*. All these things—the art gallery, the museum, art in the public sphere, “design” work—have reasons for being, and audiences and opportunities for communication inherent to them. I think any one of them for me, at this time, is too circumscribed. I'm really interested in playing out different ideas in different arenas, and at this point, I refuse to choose.

You also started traveling quite a bit.

Yeah, I got wanderlust. I was looking for a global context for some of the observations and perceptions I had been formulating independently, hanging out here on the home front, tending a garden. Because you can't travel when you have a garden! I'd been stuck for a long time pollinating and trimming and clipping and weeding, and finally I decided I needed to go out and see the world. For whatever reasons, the cosmos delivered up a number of readymade opportunities to go abroad, which I've pursued—I've gone to Austria, the Netherlands, Estonia, and St. Petersburg, and it has been very interesting to see what's going on there.

Have you been influenced at all by how Europe is dealing with some of these issues?

One thing I saw in Vienna was an incredible ability to merge the new and the old. Of course, they've got their share of old architecture. Perhaps, for that reason, the Viennese seem quite interested in anything new. And the two coexist quite well together there—better than we're able to manage. While I was in Estonia, I had the opportunity to visit the Vavilov Institute, which is the world's oldest seed bank, in St. Petersburg, Russia. That trip really radicalized me toward environmental issues. And as for Holland, the whole country is about *water*, so even though it's a really hot moment in design there, with Rem Koolhaas and all the rest, the thing that hit me most was the manipulation of the landscape. They move the water around on the surface of the land, so the river is on the left side of the road this week, and the next week it's on the right. Observing that really brought home the artificiality of the division between a natural landscape and a manmade landscape.

I'm curious about how this notion of nature and artifice plays into another new development in your work, which is the use of digital technology.

Well, part of getting myself into the now was realizing I needed to contend with that technology. As part of the Ohio project, I had to produce a CD-ROM as a fundraising tool, which I needed help to do. That convinced me I had to learn digital modeling and CAD programs, because these are the *lingua franca* of design. So I went on this residency program to Austria to focus on learning a 3-D modeling program, and decided I would find a plant to model when I got there. As it happened, I wound up living in an area right outside Vienna where they grow breadseed poppies; there were fields and fields of *Papaver somniferum*—which is the same species as the opium poppy. That inspired a series of two- and three-dimensional works called *metamöhns*—*möhn* being the German word for poppy—which are now traveling in a show called *Unnaturally*. I decided I wanted to present them as if they were products of a design studio, so I created a logo and basically invented my own *rhetorical* studio. It was kind of a lark, but it stuck. I've changed the name a couple of times—at first it was the Atelier Paradiso, but then I decided that was too backward-looking. And I still don't like what I've come up with instead—it's a bit too clever—but right now I'm using Atelier Ætopia. That “Æ” is a really odd letter—it has one foot in the past, and it keeps the name from being “e-topia,” so it creates this ambivalent moment between art and design, and between the past and the future.

We should talk a bit more about how you generated those digital objects, because it's pretty incredible.

I used a process known as Rapid Prototyping, which is 100% digitally rendered and produced. The 3-D models are done in FormZ. For the drawings, the files are imported into Illustrator as images, and printed on an Epson 10000 printer. The 3-D objects themselves are printed in epoxy resin—and yes, they call it “printing”—by a service bureau. It's wild—you e-mail the file to the company, give them your credit card and FedEx numbers, and two days later your sculpture arrives in a box! It's completely hands-off. Of course, given the whole history of found objects in sculpture, as well as in my own work, there are a lot of issues about authorship floating around in there.

It's sort of a weird, computer-readymade.

Right—it's another aspect of making your own found object. It has a lot to do with looking at what it is to “make,” and the role of the mind and the hand. And I like to say, I have my own design studio now, and “we are *making* nature!”

That's a provocative thought, when one considers the tensions between the synthetic and the natural. Isn't our “making” nature, at least potentially, a danger to nature? Similarly, we hear all the time how the virtual world is impacting our ability to relate to, or conduct ourselves, in the “real,” or sensate, world. How do you view the role technology now plays in mediating between man and nature? Is it friend or foe?

This is a huge issue, and precisely the point. That work embraces technology, yet ironically questions it at the same time. I'm content at this juncture to be provocative, because clearly things are not so simple as friend or foe. The complexity of what faces us in the future requires complex responses.

You're also working with digital mapping systems.

Yes. Issues about maps and how we understand them—for example, as flat two-dimensional representations of curved three-dimensional things—have been coming up a lot in the water work I've been doing. This past July, I had made plans to do some work at the College of the Atlantic in Maine, which has a great GIS lab—

What does GIS stand for?

Geographic Information Systems. It's a form of digital, visual modeling for spatial data that allows you to map multiple criteria—census results, for example—and observe coincidences that might otherwise be difficult to see. Much to my surprise, just as I was getting ready to go to Maine, I was offered this fabulous opportunity to work with the garden at the Lincoln Park Conservatory, as part of an ambitious project the City of Chicago is doing this summer called “Art in the Gardens.” They call the Lincoln Park garden the “Great Garden,” and it's an *enormous* site—it has 12 beds and takes 50,000 plants! There were some restrictions I needed to deal with; for example, I had to preserve the four-part symmetry of the site and the shapes of the beds, which are highly articulated. And since the plantings needed to be color, and look good all summer long, I had to use hybrid annual bedding plants, which I've never really focused on. Anyway, I'd done some research into the Great Lakes as part of another work-in-progress, and I had this one beautiful, color bathymetry map of Lake Michigan, which I took with me to Maine. And with the considerable assistance of Tora Johnson, a geographer at the College of the Atlantic lab, the idea of making this garden a form of data-mapping of Lake Michigan was born. To correspond to the four-part symmetry of the garden, I decided to focus on four types of data about the lake: its physical characteristics, its biota, water-use issues, and water-quality issues. While I was at the College of the Atlantic, we developed the GIS maps for the four central beds, which represent, respectively, the lake's bathymetry or depth; the incidence and density of zebra mussels, which are an Aquatic Nuisance Species; surface temperature; and tributary loadings of principal toxins. Inside the perimeter beds will be pie charts and bar graphs representing specific data related to those qualities. Some of the data will be also presented on didactic panels at

the site. My hope is that this garden will deliver some environmental consciousness about the lake, but beyond that, I think it's asking the rhetorical question: "What is the proper subject matter to use as a schema for colorful plantings in a public place?"

So once again, you're taking an object—Lake Michigan, in this case—subjecting it to this now digital schematizing process, and translating it into a different material form.

Right, although in this project, the plants themselves have absolutely zero allegorical role. There's no ethnobotany in it at all; the plants are purely formal. I was talking to somebody about community-based art projects, and I made the comment that if you were trying to be of service and then somehow move that toward art, the first requirement is to perform that service. So to create a successful piece of art that happens in a garden, you must first make a horticulturally successful garden. Only then does it have the chance to become a garden, *plus* something else. In light of that, I could not have done this project without the collaboration of Steve Meyer who's the Horticulturist at Lincoln Park Conservatory. I gave him the color scheme, but all the actual plant choices are his, because he knows what's reliable on that site. And even then, a lot of the project's success will hinge on environmental factors one can't control—like whether it's a good summer for petunias.

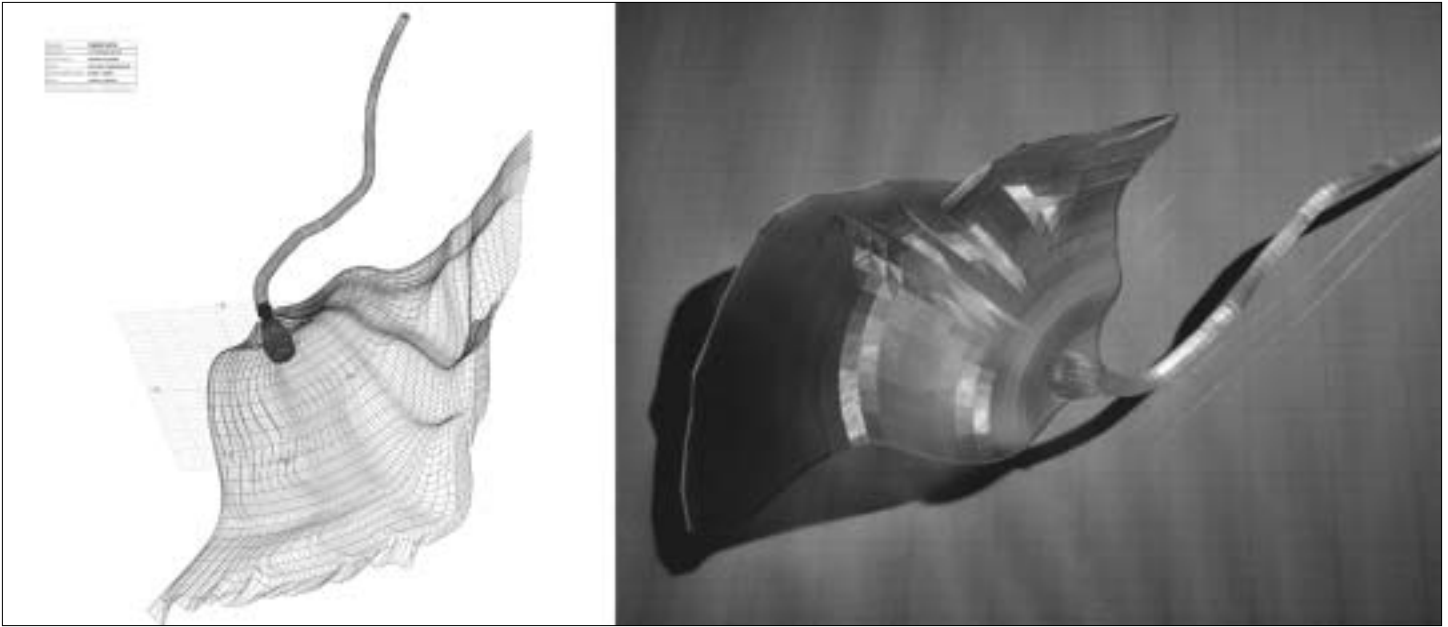
It's an interesting bit of humility for an artist to face, bending to the real-world demands of real-world materials.

But that's the lesson I learned in my own garden—the limits of my will. Sculpture is so much about will—you're pushing materials around and making them do stuff. And I do have this almost pathological urge to make things everyone says you can't make. I was lucky to work with someone like Steve, who was so respectful of my vision, but ultimately, it's *his* plant list that will determine, to a great extent, how this thing will look. Personally, I think pie charts made of plants are just going to be hysterical. You might not know what they mean, but there's something about the way digital information has invaded our lives that will be understood—even if no one ever asks, "Do those pink coleus *really* represent zebra mussels?"

That raises an interesting point: to what extent do you want your message to be received? I know that in my past encounters with your work, I've felt compelled to do my own research in order to access the wealth of information behind it. Do you need the work to perform a didactic or rhetorical function? Or is simply an aesthetic appreciation, on the part of the viewer, a successful response?

Well, I squirm at the notion of the didactic, and even though it's a word I now say freely, I don't think I mean it in a one-dimensional way. In the case of the Lincoln Park project, I'm not sure if it's really teaching people anything about water. It is in its most overt way, and that will be one level of entering into the work—but let's face it: this is not the best way to find out how many zebra mussels are in the lake! I think the real meaning of the work is: can I speak the language I've been required to speak—the language of the Victorian garden—while inserting





a contemporary, forward-looking, and complex public issue into the realm of civic space? If there's something didactic in that work, I hope that's what might be taught. Now, can you teach a question? I don't know. This piece is really about knowledge, technology, and environmental issues, brought together with a very playful touch. I think it'll be very kid-friendly, and I hope it will be colorful and beautiful—even though there's some dark information in there about mercury poisoning!

So at baseline, it still functions as a sculpture.

Right. Robert Smithson commented that when art degenerates, it turns into gardening. I always think of that as the last gasp of modernist heroicism—even from a guy as cool as Smithson—because it's absolutely not the case. It's really the squirrely line between the modest intervention and the heroic intervention.

I'm interested in the position this work places you in, in terms of bringing these non-art disciplines to bear on a collaborative concept of artistic practice. How well do these two worlds—art and science—work together?

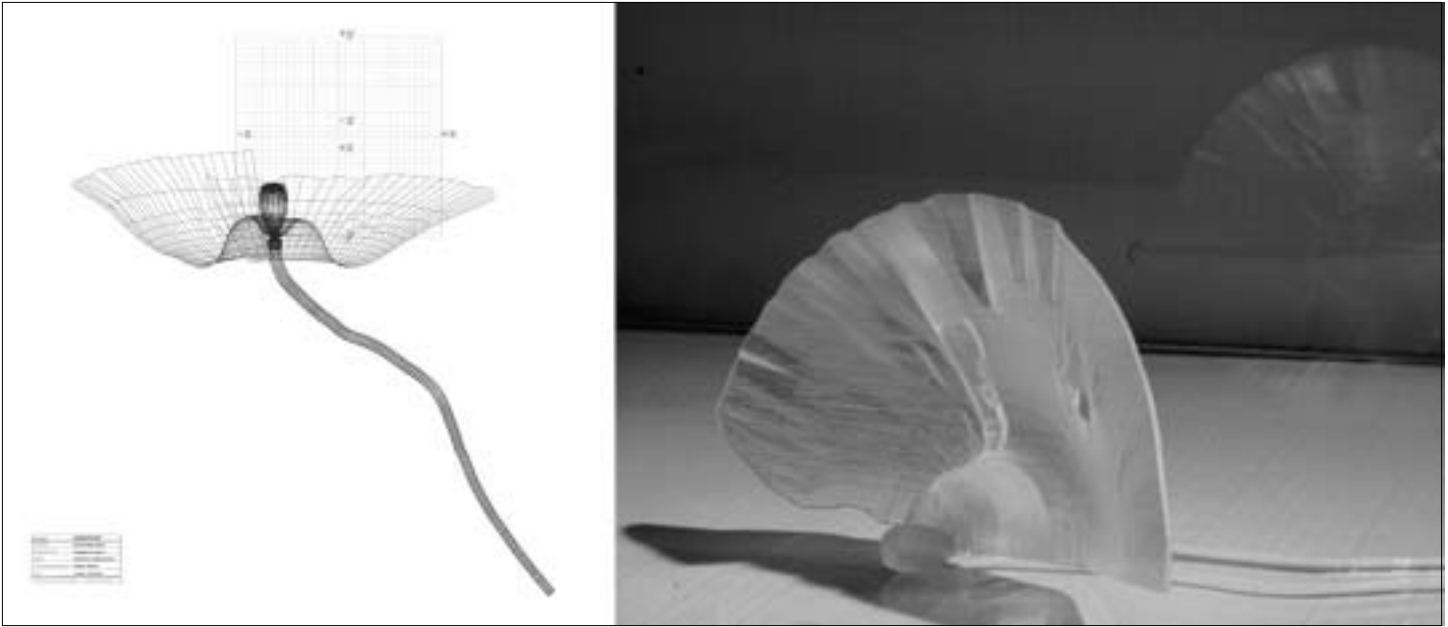
I've been making work *about* art and science for a long time, but now I'm really making work *with* art and science. I think sometimes people worry whether the artist will get lost working with science, but by habit of mind, training, and inclination, there's really almost no way I can do anything *but* make art. It just takes care of itself. Some people will say, "Is what you're doing art, or design?" I've really never felt for a minute that it's any different from anything else that I'm doing, in terms of what it draws out of me. The process is different—it's more dialogical, it's not so individualistic—but it's fully using all of my training and experience. So it really is remarkably similar, in some ways. Now, the collaboration is different. It's been a thrill, frankly, to work with people of other disciplines. It's the ultimate "getting out of self" that I mentioned earlier, because now I don't just do that by zooming into a book about something, but by working with these fabulous people like Tora and Steve—

And working with dynamic, evolving information.

Right. So I think that it's *reinforced* the extent to which I'm an artist—whatever that means.

You're on an interesting frontier for artmaking, though, and the role art can potentially play in society. It's one thing to make public art as it has historically been known. All too frequently, the art winds up coming off adversarial—at the least, the public dislikes it, and at worst, you get fiascos like Serra's *Tilted Arc*. To have artists collaborating on public works—which at the outset necessarily involves working *with* government bureaucracy, as well as architects, scientists, engineers, developers, and the local populace—would seem to be a different notion of public art entirely.

But it's not that new, actually. There are some historic examples of what we've been calling "public practice." Michael Singer for example, worked with the Phoenix Art Commission on a water reclamation facility for that city—this has got to be 10 years ago, now—and radically changed the program and outcome of that endeavor. So he didn't just make the art; he became completely integrated into the project. I've learned an awful lot about this in the last years by working with Mary Jane Jacob. She has been a persuasive force in my life, beginning with that Ohio project, and we're getting ready to collaborate—hopefully—on another reclamation and development project in Charleston, South Carolina. But this business of hybrid practice—of being not quite an artist, and yet not at all *not* being an artist—is cropping up all over the place. The NEA launched that project in Ohio as part of a concerted effort to test what happens when you put artists and designers on the teams of projects the government is paying to build anyway. The notion is you'll get more bang for your buck, while exerting a new and positive influence on the quality of the built environment. Right now, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts is running a design competition for the city park of the future, and they quote Francis Bacon, who says: "It would be an unsound fancy and self-contradictory to expect that things which have never yet been done can be done except by means which have never yet been tried." And one of their proposal criteria is that at least one member of the team *not* be an architect. So I think that it's not just artists who are looking



for hybrid collaborations and hybrid practice, but also architects and designers. Some of the most well known architects now—Diller & Scofidio and Rem Koolhaas—are definitely way over on the art side. Frank Gehry's buildings are like the biggest sculptures being made! So I think there are models for doing it this way, and more and more public art commissions are trying to move toward this. That said, it *is* sometimes vexed because of the history, and my experience was that it can be *considerably* vexed because of the history of disciplinary expertise—including the legacy of the self-indulgent artist, who may not know how to work so well on a team.

When I think of the role artists might be asked to play in these situations, I wonder if they're being primarily, or at least initially, viewed as the spiritual caretakers—you know, the ones who will come up with the emotionally eloquent gesture. I'm curious if, in the back of your head, you've mused at all on the efforts to redevelop Lower Manhattan. That's a different sort of project, in that it's not principally bound up in environmental concerns, and it has to navigate some very specific and sensitive psychological terrain. But it does raise these issues of how one addresses the past, present, and future in envisioning a built environment, and there's been at least a nominal push to integrate these various disciplines you're speaking of in that effort. I should say that my favorite response—and I'm speaking as a native New Yorker—was Ellsworth Kelly's. I don't know if you saw his piece, but it was basically a green trapezoid collaged onto Ground Zero, and it seemed to suggest the entire site should be transformed into a grass-covered burial mound.

I follow geopolitics rather carefully, and I've given a lot of thought to those events, but the question of what to build at Ground Zero has not personally captured my imagination. The dialogue about the public process has been interesting, but the proposals themselves haven't been compelling. As it happens, I *did* see, and was taken by, Ellsworth Kelly's gesture. It's interesting how the current critical context makes it impossible to see his idea as formalist—Kelly's own history notwithstanding. Instead, his idea now reads like a pointed *refusal* of the heroic

gesture. At the same time, it also bears odd resemblance to current ideas about the inclusion of urban agriculture and urban forests in the built landscape. So beyond the question of the monument, this idea reflects other dialogues about the future city and future urbanism. I don't know whether that was Kelly's intent, but you could see it that way. From the standpoint of a memorial, replacing the buildings with a greenspace could prove both environmentally and geopolitically sustainable, and thus would hold the greatest capacity to endure. Sometimes—and this is not a new thought, philosophically—the best thing to do is to do nothing.

Although it seems important, now, that your work “does something”—that it has a tangible impact beyond the art world.

I was in self-imposed exile in the studio, and I *had* to get into the world. I had to quit lamenting the loss of the pristine natural world and try to become more activist, which included coming to a profound understanding of what it is to be a practitioner, and to practice what you preach. I've realized that ethical core is important, and it has always driven my work, even though I was not previously aware of it. It was time for me to engage that, and through a series of events, I had to the opportunity “go public.” I don't know if it's art or not, anymore, but it has been satisfying on that level like nothing I've done before.

Have we seen the end of your work in a gallery space?

Well, my design studio has work to do, and of course, I've got this whole series of drawings and other projects in mind. So I would say no—if only I could go on a 48-hour day!