

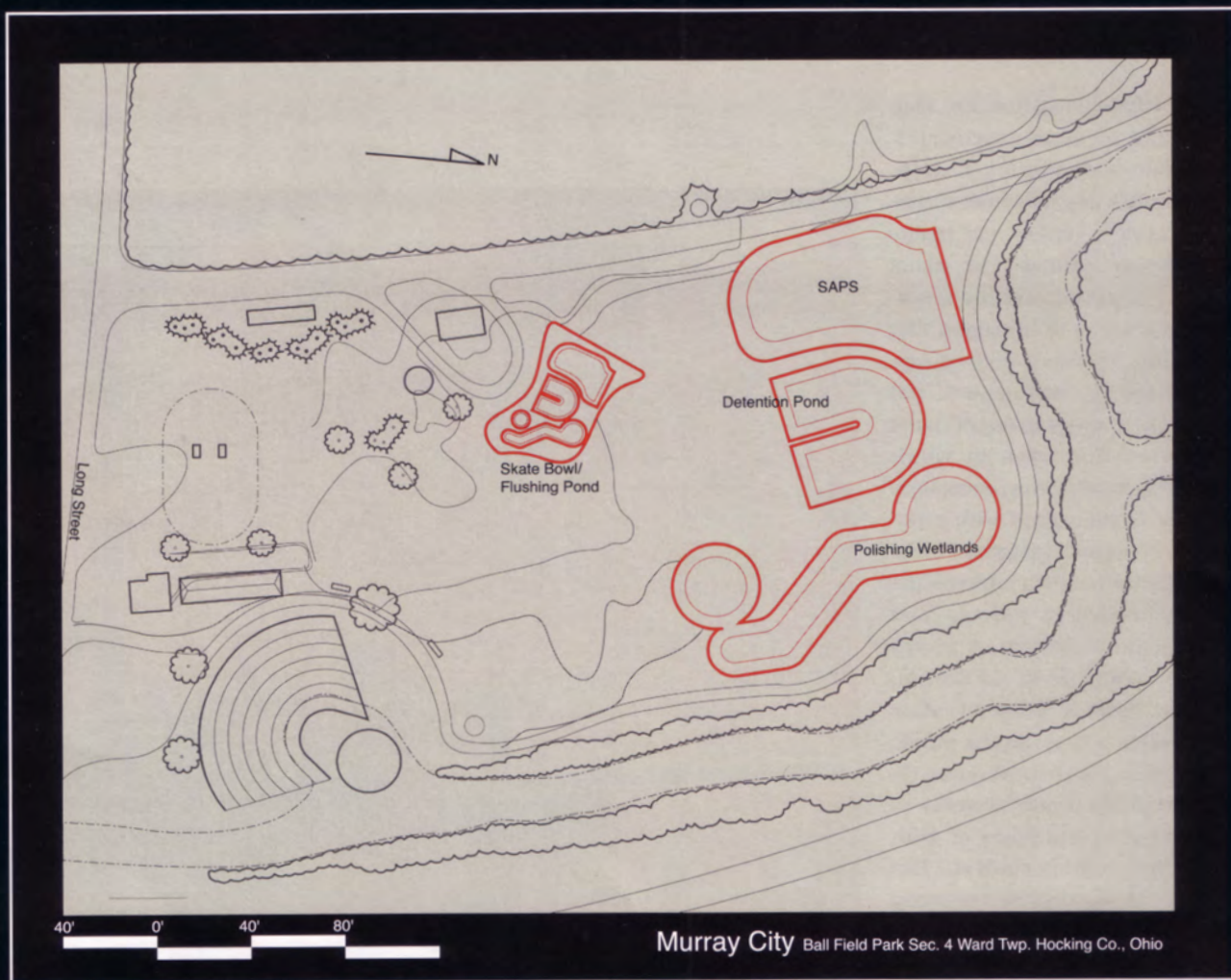


DESTROY & RECLAIM:

ARTISTS AND DISASTER SITES

by Jeffrey Hughes

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Top:
FRANCES WHITEHEAD
 Images from Murray City Proposal,
 Ball Diamond Project, 2000.

THE CREATION OF ART OFTEN HAS BEEN CLOSELY TIED TO AN IMPULSE BOTH TO DESTROY AND TO RECLAIM.

Chicago-based artist **Frances Whitehead** is similarly concerned with attempts to reposition the artist as environmental activist, expanding the subject matter of disaster to include art as a means of reclaiming disaster sites. For several years, Whitehead has created intricate conceptual works addressing the imposition of authority, often critiquing the visuality and implicit scientific legitimization of the museum exhibition. For example, her recent work *Strange Attractors* replicates and enlarges to human scale the traditional spreading board for mounting insects, replete with display case, giant pins, and instructions for creating specimens.

As many of Whitehead's works have been predicated on language and science, it seems a logical progression for the artist to turn her attention to environmentally based public projects. The environmental destruction and economic impact of surface mining in Appalachia and certain parts of the Midwest is an often-overlooked remnant of an earlier, pre-regulatory period. There remain pockets of mining culture, essentially small relics of the mentality and abuses of company towns like the notorious coal-mining town of Herrin, Illinois of the 1920s, in several rural communities today. Whitehead has been working in collaboration with engineers and planners on the *Ball Diamond Project* for Murray City, Ohio. In this pilot project of the Arts and Appalachian Clean Streams Program, supported by the National Endowment for

the Arts and the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Surface Mining, the design team has sought to conceptualize a technologically safe, aesthetically satisfying, and utilitarian reclamation of an acid mine drainage pollution site. The Murray City site is intended to provide recreation, community awareness, and interaction. Whitehead's in-depth proposal, which will be used by the local community to raise funding to build the project, includes the writings of local children and various vernacular words and phrases as visual reminders of the indigenous coal-mining culture, prominently and iconically imbedded as part of the sculpted park setting. Since underground mine drainage is the greatest cause of pollution at the site, the collaborative team of artist, historian, landscape architect, and engineers has sought to include aspects of recreational water usage in the overall plan. Sculpted concrete ponds that purify the acid-tainted water will double as wading areas, skating rinks, and (when dry) skate bowls, while a creek-side amphitheater will function as both a performance space and a flood gauge.

Whitehead envisions a place where cultural events, recreation, education, and environmental reclamation will coexist within an overall sculptural environment.

Whitehead's attempt to move reclamation to the forefront of creation is an important direction both as it narrows the distance between art and life, and defines the former as a meaningful force for social change. Taking different conceptual approaches, Whitehead, Frelin, and Draeger have all framed the disaster site, despite its magnitude, within the politics of the universal-as-local. ♦

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