

THE 90 DAY LAWN ORNAMENT

Art Ephemera, Art Permanence, Art Evolution

About Site Specific Assemblage Sculpture
GRESL

by GARY JOHN

"She had learned, in her life that time lived inside you. You 'are' time, you 'breathe' time. When she had been young, she'd had an insatiable hunger for more of it, though she hadn't understood why. Now she held inside her a cacophony of times and lately it drowned out the world." pg. 461, hardcover edition, said about Almondine, a dog, a friend, a protector..."The Story of Edgar Sawtelle" by David Wroblewski. (Her death as described in the book is one of the most moving and strange passages I have ever read.)

We Humans are the MIND OF THE UNIVERSE. Our brains think for the Universe. While there are other thinking creatures on Earth besides us...apes and dogs and dolphins and whales, humans are the only beings, so far as we know, who have attempted to measure existence...to measure Time. Despite the author, David Wroblewski, writing about Almondine as if she understood what Time might be, animals do not appear to discuss Time, do not philosophize about the length and size of a Universe...or multiple universes. And despite reports of Alien craft in our atmosphere, we have yet to discover any off world entities that would improve or extend the size of this Earth brain...this localized mind. (*Considering the size of the Universe, there must be other living creatures with what we would call brains and minds, so we are but one part of the Cosmic Mind.*)

In quantum mechanics, in sub atomic regions, objects exist for milliseconds, ultraextremely brief moments. According to some scientists those brief lives are described as having great importance to understanding how the Universe was born and how it continues to evolve. Compare the duration of their existence/lives to ours, then ours to geologic time. In the scope of Universal Time, how insignificant and ephemeral are we?

Our lives are like ***"breath on glass"***. We are exhaled to form a damp foggy surface on the Cosmic surface of Time, and we gradually evaporate into the Ether. To combat that condition of *"temporariness"* humans attempt to make a deep and lasting impression marking their presence, for example thru art making. Many artists and supporters hope that an art work will remain as long as possible and provide them a longer place on the *"immortality scale"*. Bronze and steel, oil on canvas, mediums of various kinds are expected to last a long time. The *"Success Equation"* is influenced by what material an art work is made from, and how long it exists.

That expectation is one reason why art forms which are "intended" to be ephemeral might not gain much public attention. The piece is created, and then it is lost quickly. The *"Success equation"* is largely altered by this brevity, this limited life time of the art object. One part of determining what is "ideal" in art, and what lasts in our collective memories, requires that the respected iconic object will be cared for and attended to by society/culture over a very long period. The Mona Lisa would be worm food by now, and ancient Greek statues would still be

buried if not for Humanity's interest in and dedication to art.

In their lifetimes, most art objects...a huge percentage...might gain some small local/regional attention, OR unfortunately, in reality, be almost entirely ignored by all but the artist. These millions of objects disappear into storage, they are cannibalized or reused, they are lost to abuse and neglect, or they are destroyed outright. A very small percentage of art objects will remain accessible for decades or centuries in collections, public or private.

Temporary or ephemeral works, those which come and go relatively quickly due to intended or unintended reasons, serve at least to satisfy the artists drive to “make” something, to satisfy the creative drive, to explore intellectual and visual ideas...and perhaps to derive some small amount of attention while the temporary work exists. This might be a length of time ranging from seconds to days...or weeks, months...maybe even a few years. Then, these objects are dismantled by the artists or by others, or they are reduced to elemental bits by natural forces. If the objects remain long enough for natural forces to have an effect they can evolve, they weather, they are affected by the forces of wind, water, sun...and perhaps by life forms such as insects and mammals. Over the years I have had co-creators of sculpture which have been moths and mammals. These creatures may have aided me by their actions, or they have reduced my works to those aforementioned elemental bits. Much art lives beyond its physical state only in memory and documented in photographs.

The iconic environmental earthwork, Spiral Jetty of the 60's, by Robert Smithson is an enduring example for discussion. It is a famous work in which the artist used land forms, rocks and water, with a bulldozer as his chisel. What he created was monumental in size requiring heavy machinery in a remote part of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. Over Time the work has been affected by the changing water table, by weathering and human activity. But it remains, evolved...and there are interested persons, art historians and supporters, who attempt to maintain it as close to its first state as possible. Without human intervention, eventually it would be weathered and all that would remain in thousands of years would be mere traces, artifacts...left overs as clues to its once prominent position in the panoply of art history.

The sculptor Andy Goldsworthy of Great Britain has elevated discussion of the ephemeral to greater heights thanks to his published photographs of his outdoor work...his outstallations. He has used mud, thorns and leaves, stones and ice, to build sculptures large and small, then captured images of their brief lives on film, the images all that remains of his efforts, of his dedicated time, his real physical products. He has created art objects installed in museums and galleries that were also temporary, sometimes made of drying mud which change and deteriorate until they are removed...but they are documented again in photography.

Then there are all sorts of more brief outdoor art works that have become iconic. Christo and Jeanne Claude are immediately selected as examples here. Their wrapped islands, running fences and Central Park Gates are all gone now, save for the images of them in film and books, reports in art history, and in our memories.

When I was a kid under 10 years old my parents moved us into their second home in Manitowoc, WI. During the spring and summer my father, a factory worker, would use some of his free time by cutting out wooden lawn ornaments on his jig saw. He formed rabbits and skunks, squirrels, Little Bo Peep and her sheep, birds and whatnot, and I was called upon to paint them as best I could. I had established a family reputation for being an artist who loved to copy images from comic books, and in my school classroom art proved to be one of the few areas in which I could do well...and truly enjoy. So...there we were the Gresl family of Lawn Ornament Smiths.

Over the decades it has occurred to me that the iron and bronze sculptures that grace our public and private outdoor places are forms of lawn ornaments... True, they are often large and elaborate ornaments created by skilled technicians, artists and fabricators. In our culture we have accepted them as fine art, and we elevate them to a status setting them apart from wooden rabbits, skunks and Little Bo Peeps. Big metal objects on the lawn of a Fine Arts Buildings, museums and sculpture parks, are thought to be special places with special objects. Sculptures in those places are of course more glorified than a simple wooden lawn creature. They are objects selected by the knowledgeable, the learned and the taste makers. *But, I ask...just how far removed from merely decorating the neighborhood lawns are they?*

The object that I had built on the grounds of Cardinal Stritch University in 2010 was not expected to last in its physical state for long. It was frail, made of wood, delicately joined, and it would soon succumb to natural forces. It existed because I have been interested in sculpture more-so than 2D objects, and because I have studied sculptures from many cultures and epochs. I have been frustrated by the cost to construct large sculpture, and sometimes constrained by the physical effort required to create, move, store and exhibit large objects. My 90 Day Lawn ornament came into reality because at least one person (the Director of the Northwestern Art Gallery at Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee) had seen my sculptures and found them useful to her objectives.

I chose to place it in a small grove of trees because of thoughts concerning our unity with the life forces that continue without us...without Humankind's manipulation and grooming of Nature. The outdoor sculpture came into being because of the chance occurrences in my life in which I have had little or no control but which have wrought personal changes...conscious and subconscious. The 90 Day Lawn Ornament existed, though briefly, because of the gradual evolution in thought about what art can be, about the variety of its manifestations, about its endurance and the variety of work by other artists, and because I once helped make small wooden lawn ornaments.

Eventually we all will go back to Earth, back to the stars, becoming unrecognizable as the ephemeral beings we actually were. That outdoor sculpture and me, and all the strokes humans make on the canvases of their lives, will be obliterated and redistributed. We are Ephemera. We are but brief ornaments whose significance is yet to be determined. We are part of the Life Force, and for the while...some portion of the Mind of the Universe.