



SUSAN SHANTZ

hibernaculum

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Sticks...ashes... remnants—themselves, yet, like archaeological remains, traces of something else. Poplar sticks, found objects, local organic matter. Carried, piled, broken and finally relocated within the repository of the gallery's walls. A transformation of sites, functions, purpose. A year and a half of preparation... collecting, stacking into repeating patterns and ordered sections. Repetitive rhythms, laboriously engaged, invoking images of cultivated furrows in rich dark soil, intricately stitched hand-made quilts and old stone fences outlining a well trodden countryside.

Ritualistic and meditative acts, rooted in everyday processes, cycles and transformations. Old poplar trees fall, sticks break, new trees take root—a forty-year cycle. The ashes, remnants of crackling, mesmerizing physical warmth, now more ephemeral in substance—like memory, fallen petals or soft powdery sand. Organic materials with affinities to life outside the gallery's reach, pronouncing allegiance to systems of meaning more difficult to trans- pose or make tangible.

The Wall

Broken twigs. Thousands upon thousands of broken twigs. A long curvilinear wall like an extended sweep of the hand, but more expansive—where the body has been, what the hand has touched. This is a wall with two distinct sides—a constructed brightly-lit glass front and an open unprotected back. The glass like skin or a protective veneer—transparent and vulnerable but maintaining the illusion of boundaries. One can see in but not through. The ends of the broken twigs press flush against the glass wall, producing a surprising uniformity... an orderly monochromatic patterning. Is this a controlled façade or a reassuring regularity? Twigs or pattern? Twigs or a detached surface? Twigs that cannot be accessed except through visual or cerebral scrutiny. Twigs twice removed.

In stark contrast the “other” side of the wall, with its jagged protrusions and strong poplar scent, is more unkept, untamed, sensual. A visceral, more physical presence—an excess with energy and pulse. The space surrounding the “wrong” side of the wall is more intimate, discreet and softly lit... more like a secret meeting or hiding place. Yet this side is “backed up” against the gallery wall and the space compresses and narrows at one end. A corridor, a passageway... stretching in two directions but blocked at one end. Something exciting, slightly mysterious looms in the air. Perhaps it is the scale of the wall, how it dwarfs my adult body and temporarily dislocates me but I feel enveloped by a timelessness... this could be a more primordial site, an ancient stone or mud wall. These organic materials could as easily be animal or human remains, like the

piles of buffalo bones and skulls found on the prairies or the walls of human bones buried in the crypts in Roman monasteries.

In both elements of this installation (the wall and the glass cabinets), cycles of natural systems are superimposed upon the traces of the artist's labor as if to both acknowledge and challenge the boundaries between processes belonging to nature, daily existence and art. The situations of preparation, the passage of time and the processes and activities the artist has engaged in in the making of the art are as evident as the installation itself. Like the title *hibernaculum* suggests, winter shelter for dormant animals requires a great deal of preparation and care. This is not the first time Susan Shantz has addressed issues of hibernation and survival. In a previous installation she constructed a temporary dwelling (shelter) within the sterile institutional environment which housed her studio. The dark space was gradually domesticated and re-made—mushrooms thrive in the dark and soon a studio garden emerged. In *hibernaculum* notions of dormancy continue but become more expansive in their implications—an exploration of what beyond mere survival constitutes meaningful existence, and how beyond natural processes of cyclical transformation, dormancy may exist.

Labor And Art

Susan Shantz's cathartic performative engagement with everyday rituals, labor and natural systems resembles work by artists Ann Hamilton and Aganetha Dyck.¹ In the non-conventional art forms produced by these three artists we see signs of an embodied criticality where one can dare to "enact" new configurations of analysis and politics, incorporating but remaking the ruins of the old.² For example, Aganetha Dyck's exploration of systems of knowledge and non-conventional libraries includes domestic processes such as canning and ironing as well as collaborations with live bee colonies. Similarly Ann Hamilton frequently uses organic substances such as turkey carcasses, beeswax and beetles (often live) and bodily functions and natural processes such as chew-

ing, wringing, unravelling, growth and decay. All three artists' ambitious fabrications are as committed to (extra)ordinary labor as to the richly sensorial non-orthodox effects. In each case they insist on their physical proximity to labor and the making of their own work—as if exploring the boundaries of the body's limits while acknowledging the significance of learning that comes to us through our skin.

But what else resides within this disciplined commitment to process and labor? How do we describe this powerful but inaudible form of language—the poetics surrounding these physical performances that insist on being heard in the museum context and on their own terms? Acts of making, re-making, connecting art production to a more expansive duration—a search, perhaps, for a more ethical and invested positioning in the larger arena of social (cultural) exchange.

Dormancy: Emerging From Hibernation

In *hibernaculum* we are placed inside the context of remaking some form of dormancy or darkness. The wall suggests two distinct states of being—one more remote and controlled, the other more alive and vibrant. But within its formal gallery context, a side that appears more acceptably "professional" and a side more "home-made" and out-of-place—the front side echoing more institutionalized art expectations, the back or "other" side like the unorthodoxy of a self-trained perspective. But as the "wrong" or back side fans out, making its presence more pronounced, the front side curves inward as if the wall is turning itself "inside-out",³ expelling the limits of its own boundaries.

Waking Up: The Glass Cabinets

In the glass cabinets a metamorphosis appears to be in-process. The rather ascetic or minimalist sensibility established in the wall continues, but the cabinets are more like caricatures of art than convincing permanent structures. The sombre, lifeless mounds of ashes, full of associations of reverence and loss, rest comfortably within over-scale, top-heavy, glass vessels—and here the reverence ends. The cabinets are

buoyantly supported by frail, ever-so-animated, slightly risqué, curvaceous legs, marked by the same vitality experienced in the wrong side of the wall.

Something appears to be waking up—about to unleash some reserve energy. It appears the disproportionately “frail” legs are more than capable of supporting their full weight. In fact these legs suggest a confidence, a competency associated with physical assurance, stability, optimum conditions. Energized, alert sculptural forms... poised... as if about to embark on a significant mission. Watch these cabinets closely—a rather fearless presence presides. Like large wind-up toys or animated objects in children’s stories, some “dormant” force is about to break free.

In the glass cabinets one can see in and through the structural components—there is no inside/outside, no front/back dilemma... instead we are offered fully present, self-contained articulations, comfortably themselves but in the context of similar others. In the wall a breaking down of barriers, restraints, illusions... the difference between the sides acknowledged, reversed and then dissolved as the materials themselves overpower. The structural devices incidental in the charged presence of live materials. In the cabinets the opposite occurs—the ashes, once living materials, now ephemeral remnants... but the upright figurative containers are wide awake, full of purpose, making their presence known.

Reconsidering Dormancy

As Elaine Scary has written in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, our ability to act, to refuse and to move forward is intricately connected to the levels and degrees of anxiety, fear and pain that resides in our bodies and surrounding world. If one is to overpower their disabling effects, we must see concrete signs of our own agency. To move out of darkness or dormancy one must in some way rejuvenate, regenerate—unmake and remake the world on our own terms.

More a continuum than an isolated installation or art event, Susan Shantz’s *hibernaculum* positions us within a

re-valuing of the conceptual and political life of everyday (ordinary) materials and resources. In her questioning of structures that institutionalize dormancy and her insistence on being heard within the context of an official branch of culture, she is in the company of artists like Joseph Beuys who frequently used organic materials and healing gestures as indexes of autobiographical relic; Bill Woodrow, Edward Allington and Kate Blacker whose sculptural forms frequently claim and resurrect the cultural life of used and abandoned found materials; Krzysztof Wodiczko who worked with New York’s homeless residents to redesign the found shopping cart to better serve everyday survival; and Rita McKeough whose installations and operatic productions stage and expell darkness and fear in a search for a more intimate and ethical form of political agency.

In *hibernaculum* Susan Shantz’s wall and cabinets appear to be both anchored and breaking away... as if permanently in-progress, always able to reconfigure—a strategy that allows levels of instability, variance, to unsettle and rechart overly determined expectations. As the security of demarcated boundaries disintegrates, as the transformations from one material to another, from one state of being to another, from one location to another, from one way of knowing to another unfold we are left in that uninhabited space which lives between polarized positions—a space of multiples, of overlays, of resonance... a space that insists there is an “other” side of meaning.

Joan Borsa

April 17, 1995

Endnotes

1. American artist, Ann Hamilton and Canadian artist Aganetha Dyck have both produced complex, labor intensive installations which address the implied divisions between natural and cultural systems.
2. See Annette Hurtig’s discussion of a “politics of intimacy” in Rita McKeough: exhibition catalogue, the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1993.
3. I would like to thank Patrick Traer for these insights.



hibernaculum (wall), 1994

Exhibition Dates

4 November, 1994 - 8 January, 1995
Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon

Catalogue of the Exhibition

All measurements are in centimetres; height precedes width. All works are the collection of the artist.

hibernaculum (wall), 1994.
wood, glass, twigs
234 x 1068 x 20

hibernaculum (ash cabinets), 1994.
wood, glass, ash
188 x 52 x 52

Biography

Susan Shantz lives and works in Saskatoon. She received an MA in Religion and Culture from Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo (1985) and an MFA in Sculpture and Interdisciplinary Studies from York University, Toronto (1989). She has taught at York University and Wilfrid Laurier University and is currently an Associate Professor in the department of art and art history at the University of Saskatchewan. Solo shows of Shantz's work include exhibitions at Nancy Poole Studio, Toronto (1986,87,88); Ace Art, Winnipeg (1991); AKA Artist Centre, Saskatoon (1992); Mutart Public Gallery, Calgary (1993); UNB Arts Centre, Fredericton (1993); and Article, Montreal (forthcoming, 1995). Invitational group exhibitions include *The Language of Paradise*, London Regional Art Gallery, Toronto (1985); *Celebration of the Human Spirit*, Macintosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario (1988); *Gathering*, Cambridge Art Gallery, Cambridge (1991); *Re(dis)covering*, Eastern Edge, St. John's (1992); and *Natured*, Mercer Union, Toronto (forthcoming, 1995). In addition to exhibitions of her work Shantz has collaborated with other artists on multi-media performance and video pieces.

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