

## INTRODUCTION

by Bill Jeffries

*Arbora Versa* was an exhibition about nature, language and perception.

The *arbres* referred to in the title are not simply calendar conifers or deciduous shade providers. No, the tree of *Arbora Versa* takes a pseudo-Latin variant of the word for tree to represent nature in its entirety. *Versa*, on the other hand, may be taken in the context of this exhibition to refer to any of the following: the other side of the tree or the unknown; the left hand page of the tree or the page on which, in traditional publishing, there is never a picture; the language of the tree or the tree as a model for the idea of a network; being against the tree or anti-nature; or the idea of being well-versed or familiar with the tree. Also, by implying an inversion of the image of the tree, it also refers to the brachial trees of set theory and linguistic analysis. Another way of saying this would be to refer to the tree of the title as a tree that is not only quite versatile in terms of its metaphoric abilities, but as one that is also capable of a certain reversibility, allowing it to oscillate between competing meanings without having to overwork itself. It is an extremely generalized and universal tree, as it represents ideas about our relation to the natural world as much as it does any particular organic object.

In the exhibition each of the five artists — Sylvie Bouchard, Lorraine Gilbert, Rodney Graham, Jerry Pethick and Rhoda Rosenfeld — was represented by one work. The five works were as stylistically different from each other as they were similar in their relation to the subject of nature. They were chosen as examples of the idea of the work of art as an *enclosure for nature* and each was taken as an instance of *nature contained*, just as an organism could be thought of in such terms.

It is easy to see that nature is the ostensive subject of these works but it is not so easy to define what nature means — or whether it is the word ‘nature’ or the phenomenal world that is referred to — or both — and if it is the phenomenal world of which we speak, then we must identify the aspects of that world to be included in this inquiry. So, I will begin with the generalisation that nature, in the full range of possible meanings of that word, is the raw material

for these works and that the differences between them derive from the *types* of transformations to which they have been subjected as well as the particular relations between nature and perceptual reality that the artist chose to analyse. These transformations range from the simple to the complex, but in each case they propose a possible similarity between natural processes and the process by which a work of art may generate itself. In each of these five works there can be seen, or detected, a self-reflexivity used to mirror the state of the subject. Hence, in the view of art represented here, art may be said to exist in order to refine our understanding of the world, while at the same time it uses images drawn from the natural world and treats nature as the central axis around which everything else must perforce revolve.

At one level it was the purpose of the *Arbora Versa* exhibition to bring together works of art that analysed current approaches to the representation of nature as a subject in art. At another, it was to build an exhibition that attempted to deal with the idea of nature, in terms of itself, by selecting works that would reveal themselves to be the subject of an ontological inversion while presenting an inversion of nature as their subject matter. And although these works rely on self-reflexivity, they also go slightly beyond self-referentiality and into a practice where the ontogeny of the work of art recapitulates the phylogeny of its materials and subject matter.

A detailed description of some of these mechanisms will follow in the sections on the work of each artist, but some examples of these transformations will clarify what is meant by self-referentiality as it is used in this context: Tree planters are portrayed carrying the seedlings that will grow to produce the photographic paper used to make portraits of tree planters (Gilbert); a firewood pile ‘outside’ a cabin is partially formed by glass cylinders arranged in the shape of a wheelbarrow — one of the implements used to construct a firewood pile (Pethick); an inverted tree is frozen in space in the exact position that it held when registered on the photographic film in the camera (Graham); a beach image has disintegrated as a result of a chemical interaction on the negative by some of the elements ‘captured’ in the picture (Rosenfeld); and paintings of

trees and their root systems in the landscape are made on a support of wood planks salvaged from derelict buildings, recycled and sanded to provide a substitute for canvas (Bouchard).

In each instance the goal of works *about nature*—about the longing for both innocence and natural beauty—is explored only to discover that there are complications in paradise, and that the nature of those complications may be reflected in the relations between the image, its material support and its connections to the history of other landscape work. Yet, there was no attempt on the part of any of the artists involved to make a blatant statement about the politics of environmental issues. Lorraine Gilbert's work comes the closest, but her pictures are a gentle documentation rather than an attack on the custodians of our forests. The works assembled under the *Arbora Versa* rubric are contemplative objects designed to operate as part of a poetics of the landscape. They are also part of several larger undertakings, including the post-Thoreauian project of creating an ongoing description of nature, and our part in it, that acts as *a kind of journal*. In this view, the accumulated documentation of nature in art will be not only a record of, but also a testament to, the condition of the world. The artist is not just an observer but a witness, and not just a witness, but truly a third party to the litigation between humanity and the rest of nature.

Although there are differences in the particular methods used, each artist has chosen a procedure or subject that reflects both organic and inorganic processes in nature, ranging from optics (Graham and Pethick) to chemistry (Rosenfeld). But in each case the work of art has been approached as a teleological project. Indeed, without teleology, there can be no idea of a *project*. The important thing in the visual arts is the possibility that there can be aesthetic objects that take the general laws of nature and apply them to human thought. In so doing the work of art, and the artist, posit that there is a case to be made for the design of an aesthetic phenomenon to take the form of its subject as a way of proposing a teleological relation between the phenomenon under consideration and the work of art itself. When we look into

these works, with their somewhat commonplace subjects, it is the degree of congruency between the work and the subject that becomes the primary source of their elegance.

The works in *Arbora Versa* treat nature as if it were real, as if it mattered. There are no references to the idea of the natural world as simulacral, or to nature as some product invented by the media. Nature is here taken as contained knowledge—as a purely historical phenomenon in which knowledge has been acquired and stored with the passage of time. These works propose that we must accept that nature is itself not scientific, although they imply that we must become scientific in order to disentangle its activities from its meaning.

These works are connected to the pastoral tradition in art and literature, but because they by-pass the analysis of the relations between the city and the country, they are not truly part of that tradition. It is important though that they extend the gesture of inversion, from its earlier role as a practical device in musical counterpoint and harmony, and literary composition, into contemporary visual art. Here the object submitted to an inversion, differing, for example, from the inversions of Baselitz, proposes a thesis/antithesis relation for substances, space and organic processes.

The positions taken here are certainly not cynical, and they are perhaps even positivistic, but that is not to say that there is no hint of pessimism. Pessimism is virtually intrinsic to the contemplation of nature at this historical juncture, but as it is with any journal, all of our reports on the condition of nature and our role in it, must be seen as interim. Unless, that is, we subscribe to the even more pessimistic view that the system of nature cannot hold up much longer under humanity's assault. In that case the present, interim report, being prepared and presented by artists in many countries, will also be part of the *final* report on the subject.

## SOURCES:

In addition to Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* and *The Writings of Robert Smithson* which are quoted in the section on Rodney Graham, the following books were consulted during the preparation of this exhibition and catalogue.

Serge Bérard's *Paysage*, an exhibition catalogue from Dazibao, Montréal, 1987.

Sharon Cameron's *Writing Nature*, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1981.

R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford University Press, 1945.

Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*, 1970, English translation, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1971.

F.W.J. Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 1797, English translation, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Francis Ponge's poem/text *The Notebook of the Pine Woods*, dating from 1940, is published here in Cid Corman's translation. The thinking of Ponge resonates with the thinking behind this exhibition. I am very grateful to Cid Corman for his permission to use his translation. Thanks are also due to Lary Bremner for allowing his text on Lorraine Gilbert's work to be used here. It was originally written for an exhibition of her work at the Or Gallery, in Vancouver, and is published here in a slightly edited form. Finally, I wish to thank the five artists who were part of this exhibition, not only for their work, but also for their patience with the delays in completing this book. Their supportiveness has gone far beyond what one would expect, and for that I am extremely grateful.