Once Was, 2012. Old estate pool, pool house, and adjoining grounds, soil, roots, vines, stone, poplar bark, deadfall, and plants; approx. 0.5-acre site. View of project at the Abington Art Center, Jenkintown, PA.
Place as a Condition of Time

A Conversation with
Winifred Lutz
Winifred Lutz’s work crosses the boundaries of seemingly divergent disciplines and encompasses many angles of thinking. In this interview, we knew that we could only touch on one aspect of her work, so we chose to look through the lens of the garden since we share a deep interest in the dynamic processes of the living landscape. Lutz’s outdoor, site-integrated works have offered new perspectives on the natural world to the countless people who have walked through and spent time in them. Once Was, a new work created at the Abington Art Center in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, for her recent retrospective, was maintained for the duration of the show and has now been left to nature. Lutz’s projects continually open eyes and minds to new possibilities, just like her teaching, for which she recently received the ISC’s Outstanding Educator Award.

Stacy Levy: When did you first feel a resonance from the landscape?
Winifred Lutz: When I was seven, I saw a purple line on the horizon become a wall as we drove across Colorado toward the Rocky Mountains. Our family was moving from Detroit to Denver by driving across the Great Plains. Later, from the mountains, I saw clouds floating and casting shadows on the plains. These shifts in perspective were a revelation. During later trips through Colorado and Utah, I would look out at passing rock formations and imagine how I might build structures in them. In a way, I wanted to make mountains. From the age of five, I knew that I wanted to be a sculptor, but I didn’t have any clear sense of what that meant other than making things. Throughout my formal art training, I thought that the only way I could achieve such spaces was through metaphorical fabrications that might call these experiences to mind. I didn’t know then about Japanese garden theory and practice or about landscape architecture.

SL: How do you approach a site?
WL: All of my site-integrated work springs from the conviction that there is no such thing as a bad place—only factors and how we perceive them. By factors, I mean everything: not only things as simple as the physical dimensions of a site, but also its various histories in time (social, cultural, botanical, geological, meteorological, and archaeological), the daily and seasonal aspects of its present use, and the variety of its users. The time that I spend in a place to be in it and to work in it, as well as how long I assume my interference will last (in all different senses of what that means), are profoundly crucial factors. I need to be in a place and to feel it through without preconception. But I also need to be informed by as many sources as possible, because you never know what it is or can be. Invisibility is the poker face of a place—we do not see things because we don’t know we are distracted. Our presence is always an interference. And I always wonder how and to what extent this both confuses and clarifies things.

Anywhere we go to do something, a choice exists between an action that stands out and is easily recognized as an intervention and one that collaborates with the situation so that it might not be clear that anything was done at all. I am interested in that difference and how that choice influences subsequent experience of the place.
SL: You talk about starting a reaction, an interference, that continues and changes—is never still. I remember that you wrote a poem with the lines, “Tickle the edges, if you will, / the aftermath is never still.”

WL: I wrote that in 1988 in an attempt to describe what I do in words that evoke the process. We know that landscape is a cultural concept, so it is defined by its constituencies. But it is also true that all interferences in a site are simultaneously both permanent and ephemeral. What degree of interference in a situation tips the balance of attention? How do we come to see what is there? How is it that we choose to pay attention? What allows the understanding that distinguishes one thing from another in the midst of the avalanche of stimuli that we encounter every moment?

SL: Your work crosses several boundaries of practice. How did you develop a way to bind them together?

WL: It’s more how one creative practice yields different outcomes depending on the boundaries. In 1979, I traveled to Japan and Korea on a Ford Foundation grant. This trip allowed me to study Japanese and Korean papermaking, as well as Japanese gardens. Some of the best gardens were designed by itinerant monks. Walking in the uncultivated mountains allowed me to observe how experience of these places may have influenced the garden designers. I saw how the gardens developed out of an active experience of seeing while walking in the mountain landscape. Reciprocally, in the gardens, I saw the economy in the full use of very limited space—like the Chinese saying about packing 100 miles into a foot. They affirmed both pragmatic and spiritual aims as they created spaciousness irrespective of size.

In this regard, not only the gardens, but also the very small studios that I visited—of paper craftsmen, tool makers, and a basketmaker—revealed a focus and clarity of organization, an economy and precision of movement, that has had a profound influence on how I study and design my spaces and make my objects. Both the gardens and the studios affirmed the importance of still time and regular maintenance as necessities in both creation and appreciation. I felt then, and still do, that a link in the approach to practice connects the gardens and the papermaking. I call it the engagement of the structure of necessity. Quite simply, it is working with what you have.

SL: You have maintained full-time teaching while doing some rather arduous projects. How do you view the relationship between your teaching and your work?

WL: Teaching is part of my creative practice. It requires the same in-depth observation and response without bias to situations. In a way, I consider each a practice for the other, because in both I have to be aware in the present and to collaborate with all of the conditions of which I am aware in order to facilitate an outcome that allows a different form of understanding.

SL: You activate spaces with very subtle changes to the site. For Interruption, your piece at Haystack on Deer Isle, Maine, you found a situation that you translated so viewers could see it. How did that work?

WL: While walking the trails, I saw a dark, tilted silhouette among the trees toward the shore. Two spruce trees had fallen over intact. Their paired root fans formed a broad wall about 15 feet wide, but barely a foot and a half thick. The two trunks straddled a third, massive, older spruce that had been snapped by winds many years previously. The uprooting had lifted an entire section of the forest floor. The root fan’s upper surface was surprisingly intact. The underside was a tangled mass of loose earth, root trailers, and assorted limbs broken from surrounding growth as the trees came down. The curves of the bared granite outcrop where the trees had grown revealed the resistance that had impeded the roots’ downward growth and channeled their interlace. It was as if a history book had been opened. If I cleared the pages, anyone could read it.

All I did was clean it. I spent two days cleaning the bottom of the root fan and sweeping the footprint it had left on the granite. I also cleared various branches that had been broken from adjacent trees by the fall. About a cubic yard of soil came away...
from the roots. I displaced this to a point down the slope and near the water where two spruces grew in a similar situation, with perhaps a similar fate in store. The soil is there now, shaped into a conical mound, a marker made from the debris of one interruption to foreshadow an anticipated recurrence. Eventually it will settle and be grown over or dispersed. Easily visible downhill from the root fan, the mound has become, in position and content, an enigmatic footnote to the primary event.

SL: *There is an active interplay of time and place in your work. Could you talk about the different sorts of time that you capture?*

WL: Time and place are always a coming together of the sublime and the mundane, like the massive split boulder that I encountered while hiking up Stone Mountain in Georgia: the path went between the halves. On each half were richly patterned surfaces that turned out to be wads of chewing gum deposited by hikers as they walked to the top. Gum and stone are accumulations that register the past and continuing processes of the place. Focused on getting to the top, the gum chewers didn’t see the stone. They left a register of their passing that was more evident to subsequent hikers than the actual history in the split boulder. Was this because it is closer to the pace of their lives? I like to work with that range.

SL: *Is this what you mean by “fluidity of a site across time?”*

WL: All spaces and places are fluid. We don’t know most of the time what we are standing on or in. There are many wheres and whens in a site. Awareness of the assumed boundaries and of the contingencies in the field of our view can lead to a more integrated approach to working in any place. I try to intensify awareness of the different aspects of time that allow us to experience a place.

My recent project, *Once Was*, is an example. I was working with a site built in the early 1930s. The title reflects the changes: once was an estate, once was a farm, once was a forest. A 30-by-60-foot swimming pool with an adjacent pool house had been built into a hillside. When the estate was given to Abington Township in the mid-’60s, they filled the pool with broken concrete to prevent people falling into it and boarded up the building. Then nature took over. By the mid-’90s, you could no longer tell that a pool had been there because of tree and shrub growth and the soil built up by leaf duff. I wanted to reveal this natural takeover by clearing the accumulated soil from the remains of the paving around the pool so that the activity of the roots would become visible and frame the trees’ transformation of the “pool” from its former flat emptiness to a green and growing vertical woodland. The removed earth is piled in three places at the periphery to register its accumulation in proportion to our clearing. On one mound, various plants have begun to grow, but only on the side exposed to sun by our clearing, so the process of covering is re-establishing itself.

SL: This does not sound like fast work.
WL: The clearing was very labor- and time-intensive (March through July), but the duration helped me to understand and use other aspects of the site. I gradually realized there were other things I could uncover or recover, which led to the poplar bark doors and to the clearing of part of the original bluestone path from the road to the pavilion that overlooks the pool. The poplar bark for the pool house doors came from a dead tree that was probably a sapling when the pool was built. An interesting byproduct of the work was that my assistants and I found that we had difficulty remembering the site before our interference. Fortunately, I documented the process.

SL: Your projects get history, geology, landscape, and the viewer all vibrating at once. What do you need to put into a site to get information back from it?
WL: Time—spending prolonged time on the site is essential. If you don’t know the site in all its seasonal cycles, then you don’t really know it. Since 1992, I have done three projects at the Abington Art Center. Each project has informed the next as I have become more immersed in the site.

The pace at which you work on something also alters the outcome. Before our clearing of the bluestone path, a contractor who works for the AAC said, “Oh, I have a man you can hire with a bobcat, and in one day he can clear it all out.” But that kind of speed loses many parts of the site and sacrifices attention. Our team at Abington removed a mammoth amount of soil overburden and plant growth over a period of about five days. If this had been done with a bobcat, we would never have been able to show the effects of plant growth and decay on the path pavers because the method of removal would have destroyed the evidence, even prevented seeing that there was evidence.

SL: Does spending weeks and even seasons on the site give you a particular insight into the place?
WL: If you have a long familiarity with the site, you see how dust will always come, weeds will always come, moss will be attacked by robins. Over the years, I’ve learned that decline and collapse can become opportunity and structure. It is true of all sites that nothing ever gets done. My mother used to say, “A garden is a job forever.” There is no stasis in nature. Things either require cyclical repetition (like weeding) or they get undone by the forces of larger systems (like the weather). No garden can ever be completed. No garden can continue without attentive tending. I think the intrinsic beauty and pathos of care and experience of the site comes from that.

SL: In a way, this all deals with erosion.
WL: Yes, place is a condition of time. It may not be whether our work leaves a mark, because that cannot be avoided, but how aware we are of how that happens and what it changes. A deer walks by once in the woods and only another deer or a predator finds the trail. A few deer repeat the journey, and there is a path because the plants are inhibited by the repetition. A creek no longer flows above ground because a city filled it with waste. Erosion could be said to be the consequence of too much familiarity.

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