

John Roloff, *Metabolism Study/ 51 Million BTUs, C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>8</sub>, e-NaCl (original depositional environment)*, 1992, unique salt crystal projection surface (6' x 8'), sound and 40-min. video, in *A Sense of Place*, at the Richmond Art Center.

## A conversation with John Roloff

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

**J**ohn Roloff, whose work is included in *A Sense of Place*, came to art from a background in geology, which he left because it was "too much paperwork." Translating his experience of geologic spaces and processes into art, which could include an emotional component, became more important to him than filling out data sheets. Beginning in the late seventies, he made a series of outdoor furnaces which were transformed through firing to recall volcanic and geologic processes. Their large scale drew Roloff into public art, with the public participating both in their construction and as an audience to the spectacle of the firing. Although he continues to work with the transformation of landscape, in recent projects he has dealt with other natural systems such as botany or chemistry.

**Artweek** *You came to public art through a development in the physical requirements of your work, not from a desire to reach a particular audience. What assumptions do you bring to the process of making public art?*

**John Roloff** I see public art as a problem-solving situation, akin to the work of a design team, perhaps. When artists get involved in a certain type of public art, in particular working with architects, it's about problem solving. Stating the problem clearly is the initial point. You find out what's going on and the team just starts to go at it. The same model could be applied to people working in communities.

**AW** *What are the problems such a team would work with?*

**JR** The problems of human existence. How people can have meaningful experience, what the past is, what the future will be. Those are the things that artists work with—to ask what life could be by asking what art could be. It's about creativity rather than making art. Because 'art' is already known. When you say the word 'art,' it presupposes something that already exists. In science, the idea of investigation is inherent. There's an interesting idea that the nature of the questions you ask determines the way you see the world. The most critical thing that art can offer is to look at the nature of our questions.

**AW** *A problem which frequently surfaces in discussions of public art is the difficulty of making meaningful art for an audience which may regard 'art' as something distant from their own lives.*

**JR** It seems to me there is a gap because of cultural learning and positioning. There are artists who, through training or time spent working in the visual world, develop visual vocabularies. There are members of the public who have spent their time doing other things. Between these two positions is the place where creativity can operate.

I'm cautious about the idea of instant gratification. There's a tendency in art to use the mode of popular culture because people understand it quickly. I'm more interested in investment. The artist makes an investment of learning and of making work in order to develop a visual vocabulary. Why couldn't the public recognize that investment, in the same way they go to a doctor and understand that when he

or she talks about medicine there's something behind that discussion? It doesn't mean the doctor doesn't listen to the patient. But I think one can sense when something is invested with thought and experience.

**AW** *You've chosen to show a work called Abandoned Apple Orchard (in progress) at an early stage of that investment. It's represented in A Sense of Place by four black-and-white photographs of the site and a text describing your interest in it.*

**JR** Funding was curtailed on that project, but I thought it was valuable to introduce the idea of the orchard as a site, a place that embodies many layers that interest me and that I have a personal connection with. The photographs are working shots and they're sitting on the floor because the work is unfinished. I also wanted to present the idea that a lot of public art exists as a process that doesn't reach fruition.

Growing up, I worked in my family's orchards in northeastern Oregon for quite a few summers.

My family has several generations of farmers, so there's some autobiographical aspects to it. But an orchard is a very interesting place because it embodies many different layers of logic. The selection of species, the space between the trees, the irrigation systems, all those things are orchestrated.

There're a lot of ways to think about that efficiency and organization.

You could make a case for it as a 'Cartesian coordinate' view of the world, the incursion of European values on indigenous cultures. But there's also the scientific perception of efficiency. Many atomic structures are organized in grid-like forms because it has to do with packing, how materials fit together. If you look at it in those terms, the idea of efficiency is a form of nature. A lot of different layers here are open for thought.

**AW** *Ideas and language from science are a*

*frequent starting point for your work. Do you think your work could have a reciprocal influence on science?*

**JR** Ideally, yes. But even though I was interested in being a scientist at one time, my experience is that scientists tend to see artists as illustrating information rather than transforming it. That's a problem I see in America, as well, that the artist is seen as a kind of an illustrator, someone who represents answers rather than questions. I think that scientists have something to learn from artists in terms of the kinds of questions that need to be asked.

As an artist working with the public and an educator, I would like to develop the interface between technology, science and art in the same way that multiculturalism has been developed in the art community. I'd like to bring people from organizations like the Santa Fe Institute, who are working with complexity and chaos theory, into the art environment and let them see what that's about.

**AW** *This is a question for art as a whole, and not just public art.*

**JR** Yes, but what's the difference, in a sense. A gallery doesn't limit who comes in. It's a business but it has a public com-

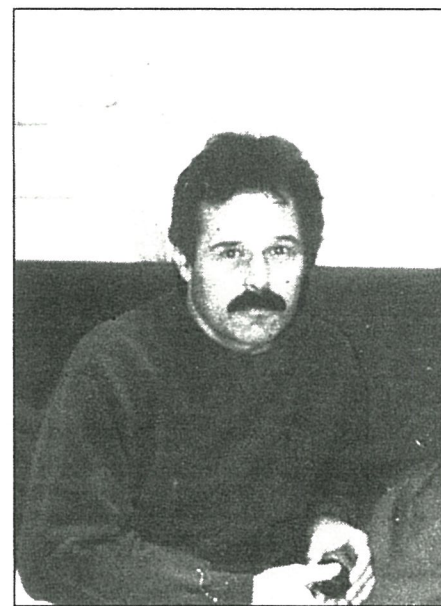
ponent. Museums are the same. It's a particular kind of place, in the same way a plaza is another kind of place.

**AW** *But the words 'public art' are generally understood to denote art that exists in even more accessible places, without the social barriers that might surround a gallery or museum.*

**JR** All those questions exist, but I think that the basic question is how art is understood in our society. The fact that public art has to be different is an interesting problem. In

general, people in America don't go into contemporary museums and galleries for nourishment, intellectual, physical, whatever. I see this as related to the low priority of education in our society. And art is on the bottom rung of the educational ladder. There are artists working with this and related issues, but the need is much, much greater. We need a paradigm shift in education and our view of culture, and in the quality of questions we ask, not just for artists and intellectuals but the whole society.

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.



John Roloff, 1993.