

Douglas Hollis, *A Sound Garden*, 1983, landform, wind organ towers, paths and benches, sited at the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administrative Northwest Regional Center, Seattle.

## A conversation with Douglas Hollis, artist

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

**A**s a child in Michigan, Douglas Hollis never had much success getting his kites to fly. But after he moved to the Bay Area, a box kite that he built on a whim was swept into the sky above the Berkeley Marina. "It was like having an extension of your fingers in the sky. You could feel the wind, and the line was making a humming sound," says Hollis. He staged several nighttime kite performances, then began to develop installations that heighten the viewer's awareness of natural phenomena like the wind. Early works include the *Aeolian Harp* and *Listening Vessels* at the Exploratorium. Commissions currently in progress include a weather observatory for a public school in New York, a water piece in the new Denver airport, and a courtyard at the University of California, Davis.

**Artweek** *What ideas do you see as the core of your work?*

**Douglas Hollis** I'm interested in phenomena and in mak-

ing places that people become aware of, aware not only of the phenomena of the place but their own ability to sense it. That's one reason I've dealt with sound so much. Our visual sense dominates most of our conscious perceptions. When I ask landscape architects, "What does this tree sound like?" it stops them dead. Sound is a tremendously powerful input into our sensorial condition, but it tends to be subliminal. And we don't have the editorial ability to block sound out—we don't have ear lids—so everything gets in there. If you live next to a light post that puts out a sixty-cycle hum all the time, it may have a negative effect on your psychological state. Or if you pay attention to it like John Cage did, then it becomes music.

**AW** *Do you take an activist position about noise pollution?*

**DH** I try not to talk very much. That seems like a contribution.

**AW** *Do you even think of it as pollution, then? Or is it a condition of modern life which is interesting in its own way?*

**DH** I don't feel very judgmental about it for the most part. I'm aware of those noises that I do not find pleasant but pleasantness is just one particular kind of experience. I find it rather thrilling to go into someplace like a steel mill, a place that's horrendously off the scale in terms of noise. You can think about it as energy—I try not to use the term *noise*, and I don't use the term *music*. I prefer the word *sound* as a neutral description of the energy.

**AW** *In the last five years, you've worked on perhaps fifteen or twenty site-specific commissions. How do you approach the beginning of a new project?*

**DH** I go in as a blank slate. It's exciting to go to a place you've never been before and meet a new group of people. I enjoy the process of investigation—it's a kind of visitor stance where you navigate through the new place, continually accruing information that will ultimately manifest in something.

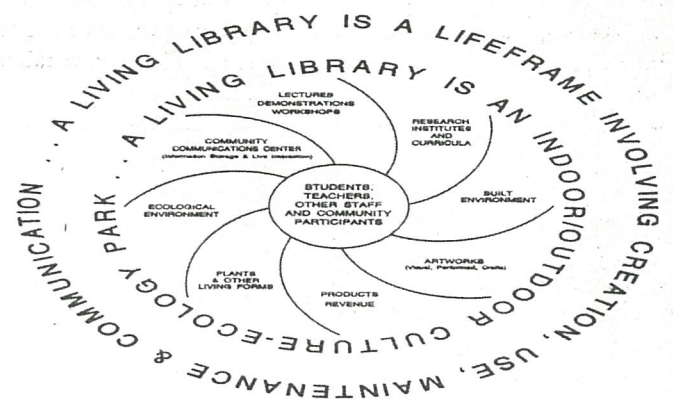
**AW** *The landscape architect Peter Walker, who also has created landscapes all over the country, said that he sometimes wishes he'd remained in one place and developed a deep knowledge of it. How do you feel about the necessity for continually starting over, learning a new place?*

**DH** I think it agrees with me, actually. I have this sense about myself as a tourist in my own life and not just with the work that I do. I moved to the Bay Area because I felt the place has a sense of exploration, investigation, and of collaboration, more than of production and sales and promotion. I always liked that very much.

**AW** *What landscapes or art of the past have meant a lot to you?*

**DH** Have you ever been in the Pantheon when it was raining? That's a good one. And once, in Hawaii, I saw a rainstorm out on the ocean. There was one shaft of sun shooting down through an opening in the clouds. Those two things were the source of the *Rain Column* at Rincon Annex. I like that piece quite a lot, and I sometimes go to visit it. One of the problems with the have-art-will-travel situation is that I seldom get to live with a project. A different sensibility develops when you have that consecutive deep time with a place, where you can get involved with longer durations, the way things grow and the cycles of activity that occur.

### A LIVING LIBRARY™ IS A SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE AND AN INDOOR/OUTDOOR CULTURE-ECOLOGY PARK INTEGRATED WITH PROGRAMS AND CURRICULA



### BONNIE SHERK

One of the greatest problems experienced by humans today is the isolation we've caused ourselves in the false belief that we are separate from nature and that we can control nature. We have forgotten that our species is a part of nature, as are all of our creations. Biological, cultural and technological systems are interconnected, and all are natural phenomena, in qualitatively different degrees.

In an effort to redress this grave fragmentation that has permeated every aspect of our lives, including our treatment of each other, other species, the planet and the spaces surrounding it, I have developed a vehicle and a strategy to create LIFE FRAMES™, public experiential learning laboratories that demonstrate interconnections between phenomena: biological, cultural, technological.

A *Life Frame* is an indoor/outdoor environment or series of environments designed in a site- and situation-specific way, integrated with programs and curricula that synergize local

resources. The *Life Frame* involves people from all sectors of the community in its creation, use, maintenance and communication, and utilizes many elements: the built and ecological environments, plants and other living forms, all the arts, programs of lectures, demonstrations, workshops, research institutes, and state-of-the-art communications technologies.

A *Life Frame* is also A LIVING LIBRARY™ of diversity and can be thought of as a culture/ecology park, a school of the future, a twenty-first century nature center, a community communications magnet, or a whole community of sustainable development. Each branch of *Living Library* is meant to reflect its local diversity with its site- and situation-specific designed place, its rich programs and special characteristics. A goal is to create a planetary network of *Life Frames* linked electronically to form A *Living Library* of cultural, ecological, and technological diversity that will bring us closer to understanding each other and our place on the planet and in the universe.

**AW** *In the early years of your career you made a number of temporary site-specific projects at places like the Exploratorium and Art-park. Would you say they set the stage for your permanent installations?*

**DH** The temporary projects were a very significant part of my development. I'm not aware of as much activity in that regard as there was ten years ago. In the late seventies and early eighties, there seemed to be an understanding of the mutual educational value of those kind of

things. They introduced the notion of site-specific sculpture or environmental art to a general public that had a somewhat limited sense of what art is all about. Likewise for me, those projects provided a contact with the public that became an education in not being arrogant, in knowing that you were going to a place that somebody cares about and somebody lives in. I learned not to make assumptions, so that I can propose something rather than impose it. There don't seem to be nearly as many



opportunities for artists to have those kinds of experiences today.

**AW** *It sounds as if, despite your continuing opportunities for commissions, you are concerned about the vitality of environmental art in general.*

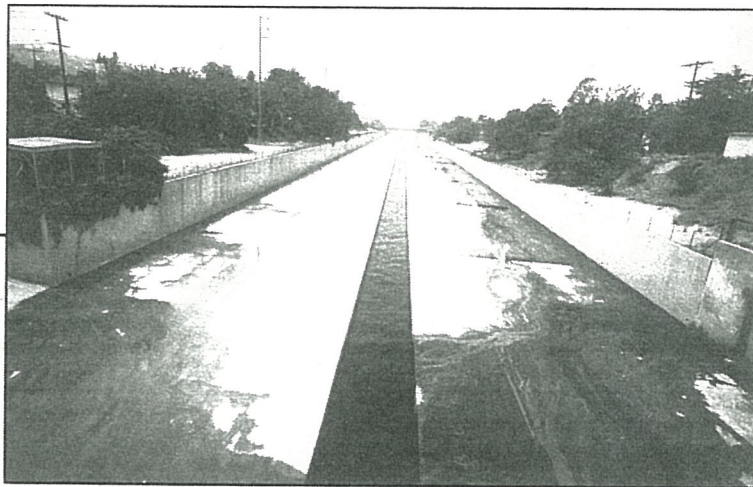
**DH** There's still interesting new work—I like Mel Chin's

work, because, for the most part, he has abandoned object-making for pure experimentation. Also Buster Simpson. There's an altruism to his work, an attempt to shift the paradigm towards more sustainability or mutual interdependence. Those are worthwhile things. Perhaps making places is not the proper

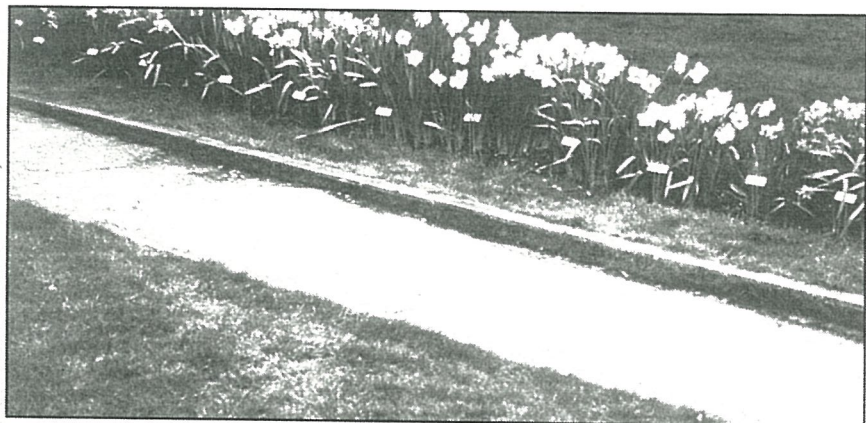
approach to those ideas. If I feel disappointment with the state of environmental art today, it may be also that I've gone up one particular alley as far as it's useful to go. These ideas require continual redefinition.

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

# Fixing the Earth



Right: Wanda Hammerbeck, *The LA River at the Lankersheim Drain*, 1989, color photograph. (Photo courtesy of The Water in the West Project.)



George Gessert, *Mirror*, 1992-93, installation of daffodils, at Marylhurst College, Oregon.

## ROBERT DAWSON and ELLEN MANCHESTER

The Water in the West Project was founded in 1989 by a group of photographers who shared a common interest in landscape and environmental issues. To its members, water is the most compelling metaphor and prescient symbol for the legacy of attitudes that have so profoundly shaped the landscape of the West. The full range of our nation's regard for the natural world manifests itself in Western water history—from loving stewardship and respect to outrageous abuse and plunder. Although the current water crisis is global, the Project has chosen to focus on the American West, for it is here that the impact of human settlement and resource development is immediately visible, and the potential for self-regulation and restoration is the greatest.

Our goal is to create an archive of contemporary and historical photographs on a wide range of topics related to water and landscape issues in the West. But the Project goes beyond documentation to include considerations of the relationship of history and culture to nature, landscape and the environment. We are interested in combining these broader issues of cultural history with specific environmental, political and aesthetic concerns. In addition, the Project is committed to exploring the collaborative process and to bringing water issues before the public with highly visual exhibitions, public forums and occasional publications. While the work of some members will promote and test the use of art as a tool for environmental advocacy, the work of others will gain value over time as historical records of our relationship to the landscape.

Water in the West Project members are photographers Martin Stupich, Sharon Stewart, Mark Kleit, Sant Subagh K. Khalsa, Wanda Hammerbeck, Ellen LandWeber, Peter Goin, Geoffrey Fricker, Terry Evans, Robert Dawson, Gregory Conniff and Laurie Brown, historian/curator Ellen Manchester and administrator Jane Stenehjem. Manchester and Dawson act as project directors, and Headlands Center for the Arts is the project sponsor.

## GEORGE GESSERT

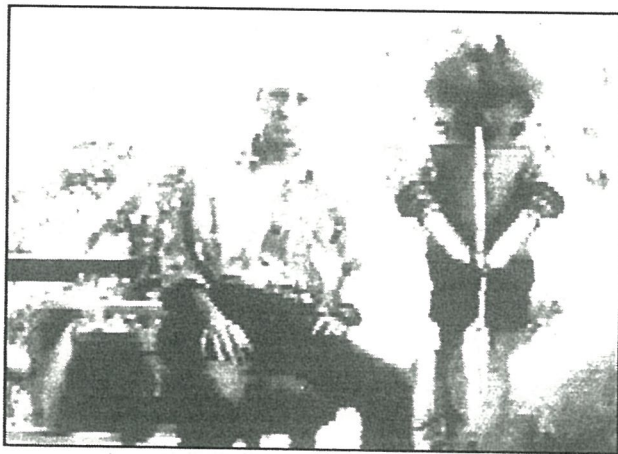
Since 1982, I have been exploring the overlap between art and genetics. I hybridize irises and other plants, do installations of hybrids, and exhibit paintings and documentation about selection. I also write about the aesthetic and ethical issues involved in plant and animal breeding. *Scatter*, my largest project, is a boundaryless planting of iris seeds and plants. Most of the plantings are along roadsides, and in gardens, parks, clear-cuts and wildernesses in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, within the natural range of these irises, although I have sent seeds to places around the world.

What I am doing is basically no different from what others have done for a very long time: select and otherwise favor par-

ticular living beings for their aesthetic qualities. Our pets, ornamental plants, sporting animals, spice plants, and even to some extent consciousness-altering drug plants, many of which are highly domesticated, constitute a vast genetic art, or art involving DNA. Many urban areas now have humanly assembled florae and faunas consisting entirely of organisms that are displaced from their native habitats, or are the work of hybridizers. Very quietly, hybridizers have become major interpreters of nature, producing organisms that are simultaneously beings and images. These living images shape assumptions about nonhuman nature. "Nature is an aesthetic project," as Vilém Flusser once said. As we move into the era of biotechnics, an aesthetics of evolution is imaginable.

## BARBARA T. SMITH

In September 1991, pathologist Roy L. Walford and seven others stepped into Biosphere 2 (near Tucson, Arizona) to live by maintaining a totally recycled and self-supported ecosystem for two years. Simultaneously, performance artist Barbara T. Smith (in connection with Walford) began *The 21st Century Odyssey*, a two-year art pilgrimage conceived by Smith and modeled loosely on Homer's *Odyssey*. During the two years, which will be brought to completion on September 26, 1993, Smith has traveled extensively in the Far East, northern Europe, and the United States, embodying the legend of "Odysseus" as Walford embodies "Penelope." Smith's goals were cultural, spiritual and environmental. In India, Nepal, Thailand, Australia, England, Norway and on several



Videophone printout of Roy L. Walford in Biosphere 2.

occasions in the U.S., she made personal connections with people who participated with her in ceremonial, musical and conversational performances, workshops and classes. Images were transmitted live by videophone to Biosphere 2 for Walford's response. This was not without struggle as she faced the enormity of the various national communications

systems in very different cultures. Inside Biosphere 2, Walford worked with his colleagues, and despite all difficulties, they mutually farmed, managed, studied and created art in the precedent-setting Biosphere. As medical officer, Walford monitored the diet and health of the group and was able to conclude work which has led to scientific papers. He also created poetic, musical and other art events to share with Smith and the outside world. Both Smith and Walford maintained a personal dialogue with each other via laptop computer, fax and telephone. They each documented their respective journeys of struggle, exploration, sharing/receiving information and growth in this rare rite of passage. Both are in their sixties and seek to exemplify their

age transition as one of continued expansion, new vistas and vital contribution, including the demonstration of personal responsibility and concern for the health of the planet and community.

They were assisted in this space/information age media connection by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz of the Electronic Cafe International in Santa Monica, the third collaborating entity, which has pioneered a global media network focused in their "cafe." ECI has archived their calls and hosted the Los Angeles audiences. The intent has been to learn, to promote ideas of ecological healing, to create media events which exemplify their experiences and to communicate with each other and the world. Eventually, all three will participate in exhibitions and performances of the edited and compiled images, texts, objects and materials from the two journeys and the videophone printouts from ECI.

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