



Photo: courtesy Fletcher Granite

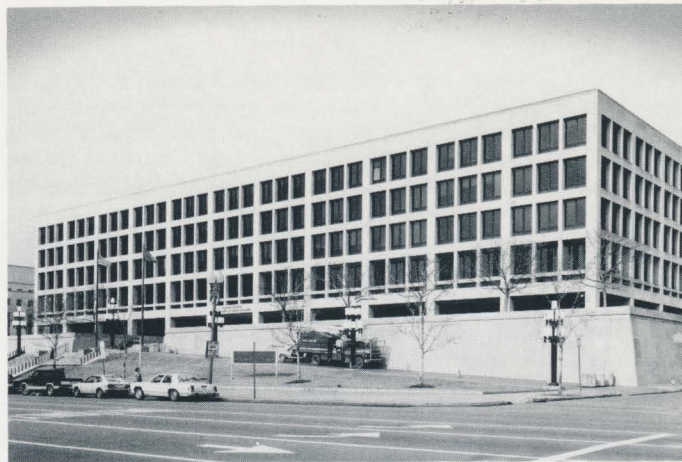


Photo: Lee Stalworth

The Madison Quarry (left) near Mount Washington in Conway, New Hampshire, provided granite for parts of the Frances Perkins Building (right), Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.

Kate Ericson/Mel Ziegler WORKS

March 9–May 30, 1988

In Hirshhorn WORKS, a special exhibition program, invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, will give visitors a better understanding of the museum.

Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler have worked together since 1978. In their projects, which rely on elements that define a particular place, they “try to challenge preconceived ideas about art’s function.” They frequently operate outside the traditional gallery system, making ephemeral works that relate specifically to their site. The following text is edited from a dialogue that took place in December 1987 and January 1988.

Ned Rifkin, Chief Curator for Exhibitions

NR: Why do you work as a team?

KE/MZ: When you live together, have the same profession, and share similar ideas and goals, working collaboratively seems inevitable. We’ve always actively exchanged ideas, and making individualized works has gradually become less and less important. Over the last several years we have done only collaborative projects.

NR: What kinds of problems does collaborating present?

KE/MZ: Collaboration requires cooperation. One of us is always asking a question that the other is to answer, and we constantly reverse those roles in the process of formulating ideas. One aspect of working together involves not assuming anything. Everything must be discussed and agreed upon before any action takes place, which can be time-consuming and frustrating.

NR: What are the issues attendant to creating ephemeral art?

KE/MZ: Time is a crucial element in the development of social ideas and attitudes. We have used time as a basis for our work. Change inevitably occurs with time; notions of public and private space evolve over time. For example, the automobile has greatly changed our attitudes about public space. The shopping mall has replaced the town square as a public gathering place. Using time allows work to be pertinent to the moment and deal with such changes in attitudes.

In the 1970s while we were in school at the Kansas City Art Institute, we were free to use the campus as a site. Our work was temporary primarily out of necessity. Because we were always concerned about finances, re-using materials made sense. We also wanted to work quickly and not be overwhelmed by construction techniques. So we developed a prefab aesthetic and frequently used materials that had a built-in structure, for example, parking a cattle trailer on campus or using metal scaffolding. One project involved building a stone wall through a working quarry—perhaps the beginning of extending our ideas beyond the art institution. This process continued after we moved to Houston. We needed a way to get our work out and were interested in systems other than the gallery. We started to explore urban and suburban sites and advertised in local newspapers looking for home owners to participate in projects. Mel painted a house red (the owners supplied the materials). Kate built a rock wall that ran through a lot—from front property line through house to back property line. The rocks, on loan from a stone distributor, were returned after one month. We now try to collaborate with the home owners to make their participation integral to the development of the work.

NR: How is your work, most of which is site specific, related to art of earlier times?

KE/MZ: We work in conscious dialogue with art of the recent past. Often we directly address other art by using similar forms. As we see it, in the 1960s and 1970s site-specific work dealt formally with an underlying concept particular to a site. Frequently an artist imposed his or her aesthetic on a site; the work was thus a continuation of the language of art outside the museum and gallery space. Open landscape became the gallery. The appearance of a piece was not necessarily particular to its location. Calling such work “specific” always troubled us, and much of what we do today evolved from this troublesome term. We are re-investigating “site specificity.” Artists such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Michael Heizer, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Mary Miss have influenced our thinking about these issues.

NR: Your projects are decidedly public. Why is that important?

KE/MZ: We are interested in an art that can be part of a common experience. Art has the ability to be a valuable social tool, but this function is often constrained by art’s insulation from day-to-day existence. We want our work to be pragmatic, to deal with pre-existing social systems, and to carry on a dialogue with the public.

NR: Does any of your earlier work relate to the project you have done for the Hirshhorn?

KE/MZ: Some previous works concern extraction and display through mapping. Other projects take new forms when their allotted time ends. In *Front Lawn* Mel grew grass on a platform several feet above an unseeded front yard. At the end of the project he planted the sod to make a lawn. For the duration of *Unplanted Landscape*, we showed trees and shrubs, roots wrapped in burlap, in the places where we would later plant them. In *House Monument* we inscribed statements about houses on construction-grade lumber that was later covered when the house was finished.

NR: What particular aspects of the Hirshhorn did you consider in creating a piece for the WORKS program?

KE/MZ: The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden offers characteristics that other museums cannot. The building has an unusual shape and several uncommon features. It is outside-in (all the windows save one face in), which suggests an internalization of museum and cultural affairs. The window bays suggest categories, compartments, and even dioramas—a significant factor in developing the piece.

Beyond the museum's physical features, we considered its overall context, its relation to the Smithsonian Institution and Washington, D.C. Think of the many categories and departments in government. Where is the line between internal and external affairs drawn? In thinking about the Smithsonian we considered its commitment to collect, categorize, and display information. In doing so, it recreates meaning. How could we encompass all those considerations? On a material level, stone seemed best because how it is used can evoke meaning. As a building material it is pragmatic but also highly symbolic. In the Museum of Natural History it is geological and scientific. As an art material it suggests an individual's ability to extract "life" from it. Today in art a more romantic use of stone suggests meaning through its history, context, and form.

We started the project by trying to find an already existing system of collected information. The Department of Interior publishes a U.S. Geological Survey list of building stones used in Washington, D.C., which became one of our key sources for the project. The other source was the quarries.

The Conscious Stone relates to the work of Richard Long in that he collects stones from remote areas and displays them in an art context. We gave the rocks their glory temporarily, only to then pulverize them at the end of the show, proposing to fill potholes in the streets of Washington. This aspect of the project relates more to Robert Smithson's work, particularly *Asphalt Run-down*, which stopped erosion on a hill. It is one of the few earth works that goes beyond aesthetics to have a positive effect on the environment. We are interested in the social application of materials and thus our proposal to fill potholes with the same stone that was on view at the Hirshhorn Museum as art—the kind of stone used to build Washington.

We also thought about the concept of a show in a series called WORKS. *The Conscious Stone* suggests the idea of art as a work, the actual working of material to create art, and the work that goes into not only quarrying, cutting, and building, but maintaining a structure once it is built. Work, too, is controlled by government with its regulations. Our piece was controlled as well through institutional standards of presentation. All these aspects helped determine the project, which changed as the process evolved. It is not so much that this work should be seen as a completed entity, rather that it develops through a process much like those that have shaped the Smithsonian, the federal government, and the city of Washington.

BIOGRAPHIES

Kate Ericson

Born December 25, 1955, in New York City. Education: University of Colorado, Boulder, 1973-75; Sir John Cass School of Art, London, 1975; Kansas City Art Institute, 1976-78, B.F.A. in sculpture, 1978; University of Texas at Austin, 1979; California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, 1980-82, M.F.A. in sculpture, 1982. Lives and works in New York City.

Mel Ziegler

Born January 24, 1956, in Campbelltown, Pennsylvania. Education: Rhode Island School of Design, 1974-76; Kansas City Art Institute, 1976-78, B.F.A. in sculpture, 1978; California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, 1980-82, M.F.A. in sculpture, 1982. Lives and works in New York City.

SELECTED SOLO PROJECTS

Kate Ericson

1980 Houston, *Rock Extension*.

1981 Los Angeles, *House Sign*.

1983 New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, *Window Installation*.

Mel Ziegler

1979 Houston, *Red House*.

1981 Los Angeles, *Front Lawn*.

1984 New York, *Instant Landscape*.

SELECTED COLLABORATIONS

1980 Houston Public Library, *Public Cathedral*.

1985 A.R.E.A., Wards Island, New York, *Garden Sculpture*; Bellport, New York, *Unplanted Landscape*.

1986 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, *House Monument*; Creative Time Inc., Central Park, New York, *If You Would See the Monument, Look Around*; White Columns, New York, *Stones Have Been Known to Move*; Central Park, New York, *Give and Take*.

1987 Loughelton Gallery, New York, *Time the Destroyer Is Time the Preserver*; Hawley, Pennsylvania, *Half Slave, Half Free*; DiverseWorks, Houston, *If Landscapes Were Sold*.

1988 Wolff Gallery, New York, *Dark on That Whiteness*.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1984 Artists Space, New York, *Selections from the Artists File*.

1987 Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, *CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)*, and tour to Newport Harbor Art Museum, California; Feature, Chicago, *Nature*; Milford Gallery, New York, *The Errant Sign*; Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, *Walk Out to Winter*.

1988 Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, *Temporary Public Art: Changes and Interventions*.

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_____. "Kate Ericson-Melvin Ziegler." *Houston Post*, July 11, 1980, sec. E, p. 14.

Hunter Drohojowska. "Transitional Use: A Suburban Exhibition." *Arts and Architecture* 1, no. 4 (1981): 13-15.

Jane Greenstein. "'House Monument' Has a Poetic Frame." *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1986, part 6, p. 2.

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Marina La Palma. "When the Hammer Breaks." *Artweek* 17 (May 24, 1986): 5.

Patricia C. Phillips. "Stones Have Been Known to Move." *Artforum* 25 (February 1987): 119.

John Sailor. "Stones Have Been Known to Move." *Stone World* 4 (September 1987): 70-71, 78-80.

Roberta Smith. "Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler White Columns." *New York Times*, November 28, 1986, sec. C, p. 28.

Donna Tennant. "Home Is Where the Art Is. . ." *Houston Chronicle*, June 22, 1980, p. 15.

