

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## FEATURES

### 104 GREEN PIECE JAN AVGIKOS

*I'll send an SOS to the world  
I'll send an SOS to the world*

*I hope that someone gets my  
I hope that someone gets my*

*I hope that someone gets my  
Message in a bottle—Sting*

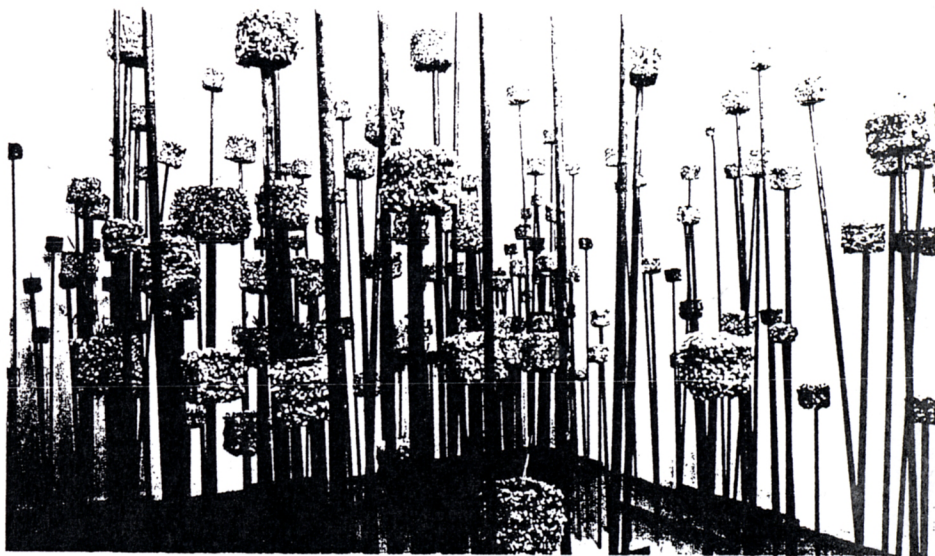
Jan Avgikos

We've got the message. The bitter fruit of the technological age is ecological disaster. It has been a speedy and global collapse. And, as many would have it, it has become art's new moral content. The green approach pulls the plug on the cool reflective screen of culture crit and takes us "back to nature" in a big way. Designed to reveal our folly and our fate, the belated homecoming is bittersweet. Forget theory. Green art's nature is neither commodity nor code nor concept. Get this: it is (gulp) real—and the real is on the verge of extinction.<sup>1</sup> Assuming the missionary position, green art preaches to the infidel and the converted alike. As the voice of (our) conscience, its moral imperative is to save the soul of the planet—and that means you and me too.

Not since the '70s have we seen so much "nature" in art. Gardens sprout, sculptures grow, organic materials decay, insects eat, fish swim, waters flow. Contaminated soil and nondisposable waste and chemical sumps are romanced under the spotlights, and we're flooded with statistics on everything from animal rights to oil spills. Exhibitions such as "The (Un)Making of Nature," "A Natural Order," and "About Nature—A Romantic Impulse" proliferate.<sup>2</sup> The art press bubbles with articles on "Eco-Logic" and "The Greening of Art," and even the academic *Art Journal*, published by the College Art Association, will devote an upcoming number to the issue of "Art and Ecology."

The problem with this is that not all nature is "green." The stampede to board the green bus threatens to crush into conformity all work that takes nature as its referent (either directly or indirectly), to hustle it into one hunky paradigm of just causes and didacticism. First of all, we might ask, dispassionately, what it means in the '90s to bring nature into the gallery; quite separately, it's time to take off the gloves and to ask hard questions about turning just causes into art, and art into a just cause.

Early returns suggest that nature in the '90s is of the *natura naturata* variety, as opposed to its previous incarnation in the '60s and '70s as *natura naturans*. The basic distinction is that between a passive object and an active force, between that which is created and that which creates. The difference is easily illustrated by contrasting, for example, Robert Gero's indoor *Energeia*, 1990-91, with Agnes Denes' outdoor two-acre *Wheat-field for Manhattan*, which rippled luxuriantly and defiantly on the banks of what is now Battery Park City throughout the summer of 1982.<sup>3</sup> Gero recently installed 200 copper poles at Artists Space, each mounted with cubes containing corn seed and soil, that were supposed



Robert Gero, *Energeia*, 1990-91, copper, corn seed, and oil. Installation view at Artists Space, New York.

to sprout and grow into an indoor cornfield. Despite the desperate attempts of the staff, who climbed ladders daily to dose the cubes with Miracle-Gro and water, Gero's stillborn *Energeia* (from the Greek, meaning "actuation of life") remained a field of dreams.

To feel the presence of *natura naturans* is at the heart of Romantic nature worship. In the early 19th century, American artists perceived nature as a wild, majestic, uncontrollable, even apocalyptic entity, which they worshipped in the votive act of landscape painting. Paradoxically, the development of this sublime landscape tradition coincided with the relentless destruction of the wilderness: intense reverence for nature came only with the realization that it could be lost, and the predations of nature wrought by man were, in fact, a repeated concern in artists' writings of the time.

In the late 1960s, the widespread reengagement with landscape—not the depiction of it, but the entering into it—reopened the question of the meaning of nature, coinciding, yet again, with a wave of unprecedented environmental assault. A nascent awareness of the crisis was fostered by ecological theory, which, until the '60s, had an extremely limited influence in the United States. Although ecological nostalgia for a lost Eden was not far away, the impulse to make earthworks was not itself specifically ecological but was imbued with a transcendent intention to reconcile humankind (otherwise known as "viewers") with the natural environment and its implicitly sacrosanct character.<sup>4</sup>

The earthwork revealed nature anew and resurrected the 19th-century tradition of *natura naturans*. Michael Heizer found in the immense scale and emptiness of the