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Douglas Buis *Home and Oasis*

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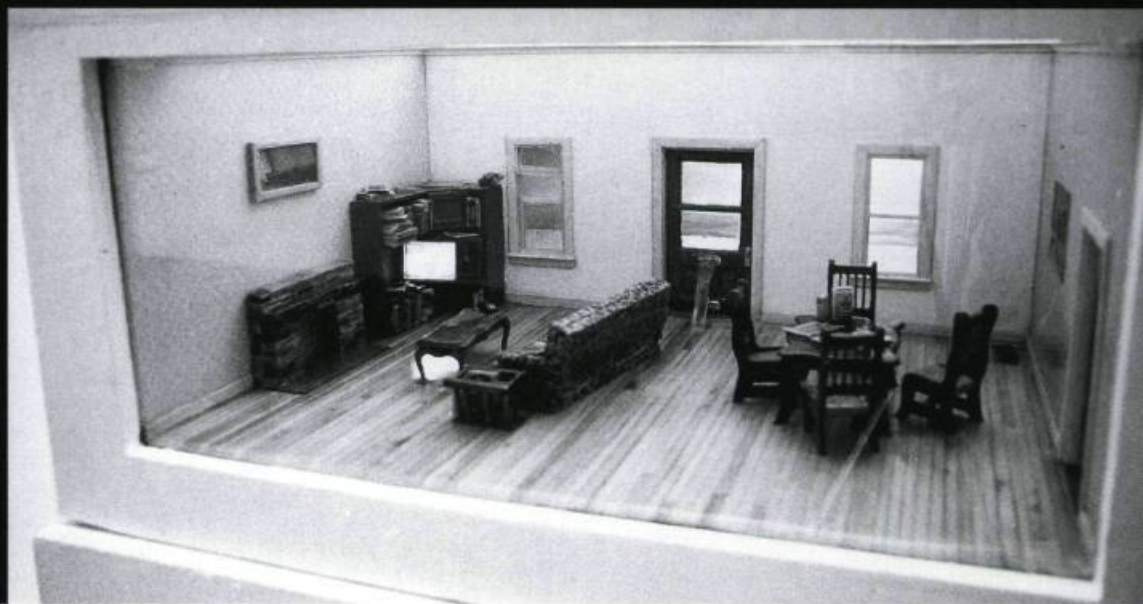
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Home and Oasis



Michael Molter

In 1994, Montreal based artist Doug Buis exhibited on both coasts of Canada with exhibitions in Halifax (Eye Level), Fredericton (Exchange Gallery), Victoria (Open Space) and Vancouver. The more recent solo exhibition, *Home and Oasis*, at

Vancouver's Or Gallery, incorporates gardening and territorial ideas from the previous *Grass Machines* and *Home* series, through a wry personal humour and irony which addresses issues integral to the work. While, at first sight, Buis's work may seem facetious and laden with political overtones, it is far from facile.

One of Buis' contentious issues is that of "belief systems", not the content of those belief systems, but rather the strategies used in creating them. Buis adapts three strategies of information dissemination in *Home and Oasis* to put into question various belief systems: Museological display methods, (such as in natural history or science museums); marketing techniques, (as used by the computer industry) and technological trade shows. Scanning popular media, political events, technological and scientific trends, Buis focuses

on the microcosms and macrocosms within these concepts, creating a series of "hand crafted virtual realities" forming live portable gardens and "Neo-Geo" models in a natural history or science museum aesthetic. Inviting viewer participation, Buis employs electronic, hands on devices to increase public awareness and to expose the absurdity and often arbitrary nature of belief systems.

The politics of "green consumerism" is explored in a sphere model of an aluminum encased planet titled *Earth with Protective Cover*. This piece, displayed as in a trade exhibition, tackles the environmental phenomenon head on. Buis suggests that marketing products as "environment friendly" is a strategy which addresses how we feel about ourselves, in relation to the environment, rather than offering any concrete solutions. The protective cover is an absurd example of a "green product", which attempts to present itself as believable but ironically, as a system, it would cause the demise of the earth's eco-system. Included in an artist publication, produced as a component of the exhibition by Or Gallery, is an ersatz advertisement for the "Durable Protective Earth Cover" with photo reproductions of the Earth Cover, bearing the

trademark "EKO-TEK".

A second installation, *Oasis*, employing the strategy of a science museum display, is a working model sphere, 6' in diameter, with a quarter section removed, exposing the interior of the earth, and displaying various organic structures. The earthquake muscles and lava circulatory systems, reproductive and nervous systems, are viewer operational from a control panel with descriptive labels and buttons. These model systems are connected to LED lights, visible on the open section, which locate and indicate the functioning organs.

Buis uses, as a point of departure for the *Oasis* installation, an article found in *The Gazette*, Montreal, during 1994, according to which a heartbeat phenomenon was located off the coast of California. In the inner pages of the publication text for the exhibit, Buis creates an article on this debate (within the fiction of the work) and sets out to fabricate, using sculpture, a belief system about the new geo-organic discoveries, that he has invented. According to the text, a team of scientists and geologists, headed by Dr. Jane Knott-Guya, propelled by the need to locate the source of the earth's pulsations, discovered organic material inside the

Douglas Buis, *Home*, 1992. Miniature furnished room, video, slides, water, electronics. 28 x 13 x 37 inches on 40 inch height base. *Home* was originally planned by Buis as a theatre piece. Eye Level, Halifax. Photo: D. Buis

earth and related evidence of existing organic systems. In the context of the publication, Buis relates that: "the findings, including musculo-stratic tissue, parts of mechano-organic hydraulic systems and evidence of a silicon-based nervous system, have changed our view as profoundly as the discovery of the spherical format of our planet. They have also sparked intense and, at times, acrimonious debate as to the exact organic structure of the earth." Buis's article covers some of the debates surrounding this issue, while his "geo-models" illustrate some of the "most controversial", and widely held beliefs.

According to Buis' invented theory concerning recent geological discoveries, there are at least three separate circulatory systems within the earth's core, all of which are explored by Buis in this new work: the blood-like system of lava, the water based system and the oil (petroleum) based system. The text states: "Of the three...(oil) is the least contentious. Most... agree that oil, functioning similar to our own hydraulic systems, drives most of the mechano-organic structures, particularly those requiring massive kinetic shifts in position. The bio-strata lateral movement muscle, also known as the earthquake muscle, utilizes a mechanical system similar to a

piston crank-shaft coupling. One role of water, particularly rivers, appears to be within the earth's digestive system, perhaps to carry away the waste products." The article goes on to debate numerous issues about the organic make-up of the earth, such as the function of the three circulatory systems, the reproductive system and the nervous system.

Buis refers to T.L. Kerr as debating the function of gravity in the functioning of the reproductive system: "...as volcanoes spew the genetic material into space, very little of the actual matter escapes the gravitational bond of the earth allowing only the strongest to survive. The free floating matter, with its own weak gravitational field, collects passing dust and other random material and over eons forms a bud planet. (Our own moon being one such example.)" According to other "authorities" referred to, Buis cites the Geo-Biologist G. H. Ellism, who considers the earth to be female in relation with the sun, a theory roundly condemned as inherently sexist. In another theory, commenting on the bond between the earth and the moon, as being comparable to that of a mother and child, Buis notes a Ms. Carol Morgan, who suggests that: "In considering the moon as a bud planet, we cannot dismiss the long term relationship that has developed between the earth and

its satellite. ... in a geological time frame, the moon had spent a similar length of time clutching to its mother's apron." Buis concludes his debate on this issue with: "Most theorists tend to discuss the gender-typing of the earth as simplistic, yet in some ways predictable, as we seem unable to avoid anthropomorphising the geological lifeways."

All humour and financial behaviour lie on the far side of the issues, herein discussed, which revolve around the earth's surface and present us with some of its "interesting geological problems".

Within the mythology of the exhibition context, the text refers to two theories concerning the function of cities; one that cities are part of the earth's nervous system, and another that the city is a form of irritation or dermal condition. The proposal that cities located on the earth's surface are the result of a central nervous system activity, is illustrated in a painting depicting a detail of the earth's surface and crust with nervous system, (22 x 30"), connected with a sculptural *City in Detail*, in a detailed segment indicating a resemblance to nervous systems of the earth. In the debate, core samples obtained from probings deep within the Earth, are reported to suggest a silicon-based nervous system likened to computer chips. The article also considers that viewing cities from a vantage point above the Earth's surface, reveals a resemblance to computer systems, (and therefore a similarity to the nervous system of the earth). Buis contends that the similarity in architectures of cities and computer systems to the nervous system of the Earth, may result from a genetic memory of the Geosystems inherent in human nervous systems. The article continues, to suggest that the nervous system connects and sends impulses through mineral veins, and possibly the electrical systems of cities, presupposing that humanity is an integral part of the earth's organism.

Either theory concerning the function of cities, that as nerve clusters, or that as a form of skin irritation, (implying that earthquakes and other phenomena, such as hurricanes might function as an irritation response) suggests the possibility of the Earth as a sentient being.

Included in *Home and Oasis* are two works previously exhibited in Amsterdam, 1993, at Open Harbour Museum (Het Open Haven) and in May 1994, at Open Space Gallery, Victoria, British Columbia, and in March, 1994, in a benefit exhibition at Ramsgate Gallery in New York. *Biosquare* and *Home* are concerned with the human place in the environment, as well as how self-definition manifests itself in relationship with the environment. For



Douglas Buis, *Home and Oasis*, 1994. Or Gallery, Vancouver. At the center: *Oasis*. Wood and plaster, hand painted acrylic, quarter section removed, 6' diameter; at the back: *Earth with Protective Cover*. Metal Sphere, 6' diameter with 12' globe inside. Photo: D. Buis

example, in *Home*, flooding waters seemingly criticize flooding people's homes to create power. Through juxtaposition of the house and photographic images from Great Whale projected on windows of the miniature one-twelfth scale structure and video television, Buis examines definitions of home and how they differ from one culture to another. Buis suggests: "For ourselves, I think a home is the house or building we inhabit, along with our other possessions therein. Our "home", the building and the objects inside, reflects our level of attainment, thus, our identity is through our "home". It was my impression that the Cree and Inuit of Great Whale identified "Home" as the environment they inhabit and which has formed their community. The land was not owned by formal title, but interacted with; one's identity is manifest through the relationship with the land, i.e.: fisherman or hunter. The government-built houses, generic in nature, reflect very little of each person. Of course, to some degree ownership and possession do exist. The strategies for existing within the environment differ greatly if one inhabits a house or the land. In the context of possession, "home improvement" is simply a matter of consuming a greater amount of material (with a cost to the environment). Home improvement when living on the land is an absurdity; one can only sustain the home. For ourselves the idea of a cash settlement for flooding one's home makes some sense; just buy a new home. When one's self is intertwined with the land, the notion of buying, or moving to a new home, is an alien idea. Our differing definitions of self create a gulf in communication and in our ability to resolve confrontations such as at Great Whale. This is a profound difference in the fragmented culture that we share".

The essential ingredients of each work, and how they relate to each other in *Home and Oasis*, are found in the use of variations on the creation of "belief systems" strategies.

Buis' *Computer Gardens*, also bearing the "EKO-TEK" label (and listed as "New for '94 at '93 prices, with Colour Desktops, Powerful Laptops, Fast Notebooks and Light Palmtops" in the exhibition publication advertising section), were placed on display in the storefront window of Or Gallery. The presentation included the shell of a desktop computer, in which plants actually grow, as well as various smaller portable size gardens, planted in tempera color boxes as laptop sizes. The portable garden models are equipped with flip-top lids, in which grass and other plants grow,

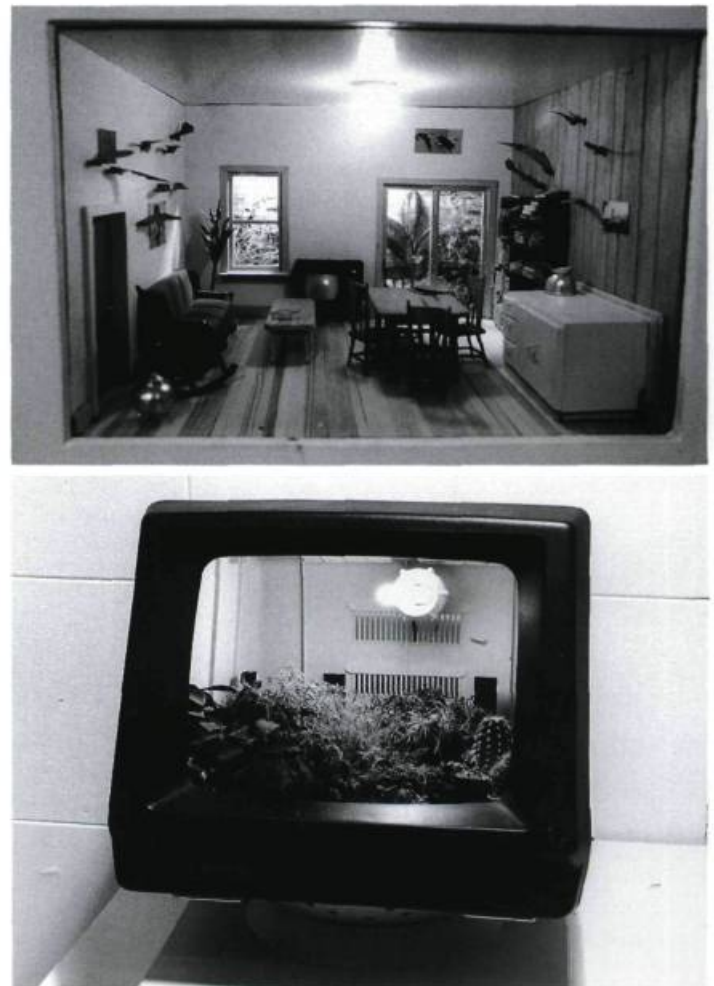
sandwiched between plexiglass and aluminium, mimicking the active matrix screens of laptop and notebook computers. Buis' *Dot Matrix Planter*, a viewer activated converted printer, plants seeds on plastic pages covered with soil. Each page takes one full day to plant, and each page functions as a record of the viewers' activities.

As somewhat of an aside, the computer gardens also address what seems to be a growing trend in the visual arts, a desire to reduce images and objects (of work that is not intrinsically photo or video based, Buis is careful to point out), to a photo or video based image, often robbing the original work of its potency. Buis's own experience includes a suggestion that the small homes would function better as video images. The increased mediation of the work further limits viewer access, perhaps to give it an aura of sophistication or elitism, more adaptable to critical theory or debate, but often producing less interesting work. Buis suggests that there is no real basis for these reductive tendencies, but that they are perhaps the result of another arbitrary belief system. The gardens are, in part, an attempt to reverse this trend, by turning the computer screens into the actual object intended for portrayal. The intent is perhaps somewhat naive, like Don Quixote tilting at the windmill.

Unlike *Earth with Protective Cover*, which in reality would extinguish the environment, the *Computer Gardens*, somewhat more optimistically suggest micro gardening possibilities for the segments of the population unused to the notion of "gardening", (in this case targeting the business person). Buis' *Laptop Gardens*, *Desktop Gardens* and *Dot Matrix Seeders*, interweave ideas of *Home*, garden and gallery, acting as visual links in loose connection with the planetary structures. Breaking down conventional barriers, by slightly altering the gallery as a place to grow in, and gardening on a small scale within the small house of *Biosquare*, suggests the gallery as part of the larger *Home*. Through change of scale, altering perception and taking on a different form of reality, *Desktop Garden* and *Biosquare* are equally real as gardens, equally fictional as realities. ■

Or Gallery
Vancouver, British Columbia
October 15 — November 12, 1994

Avec *Home and Oasis* (Foyer et oasis), l'artiste montréalais Douglas Buis tente d'opérer une mise à nu des mécanismes de propagande qui soutiennent les appareils idéologiques à l'oeuvre dans nos sociétés. *Earth with Protective Cover*, par exemple, est une installation interactive qui tend à démontrer la fausseté de ces publicités bien-pensantes qui auréolent le consommateur de bienfait écologique. *Oasis* présente, à son tour, un modèle réduit de l'hémisphère terrestre à l'intérieur duquel on peut analyser — et même activer — les phénomènes sismiques, circulatoires, reproductifs et nerveux de la planète. Buis s'est inspiré pour ces oeuvres des nouvelles découvertes qui font de la Terre un ensemble géo-organique avec son propre système "sanguin" (lave volcanique, eaux fluviales, pétrole). Cette sensibilité terrestre s'étendrait, selon cette théorie, jusque dans la constitution architecturale des villes qui en seraient une espèce d'extension nerveuse. *Home and Oasis* regroupe deux oeuvres antérieures présentées à Amsterdam et Victoria, *Biosquare* et *Home*. Toutes deux traitent de la place de l'humain dans son environnement.



Douglas Buis, *Biosquare*, 1993. Painted wood, photocopy, mechanical electronics, glass, maple seed wings. 22" x 12" x 25". Photo: D. Buis.

Douglas Buis, *Portable Garden-Desktop model*, 1994. 20 x 15 x 18". Shell of computer monitor with garden and light. Photo: D. Buis.