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Forêt-Frontière An Art/Nature Action

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a n a r t / n a t u r e a c t i o n

Greg Beatty

For eight years now, the Quebec artists' collective Boreal Multimedia has made their home in the upper Rouge Valley of the Laurentian Mountains. While the artists work professionally in a variety of different disciplines, they are all united by a deep commitment to social justice and the environment. In addition to operating the artist-run centre La Gare in the former railway station of L'Annonciation, the collective mounts periodic art/nature actions. According to their promotional literature, the concept involves the organization of "innovative artistic encounters which we describe as creative wilderness immersions. In the bush, far from civilization, we explore the land and the raw materials of our work in a direct and active relation with nature". Overall, close to 300 artists have participated in events organized by Boreal Multimedia.

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Regina sculptors Dennis J. Evans and Chris St. Amand about their involvement in the collective's most recent art/nature action, *Forêt-Frontière*, which was held this summer on the shores of Henderson Lake near Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island¹. "The opportunity for me to participate came about through Luc Beauparlant", says Evans. "He was a graduate student of mine at Concordia. He knew I'd done work previously related to British Columbia's old-growth forest, so he asked me to join them. Chris is also interested in environmental issues, so I invited him".

Previous Boreal Multimedia projects, including *Deadlines/Ça Presse* (1989), in which thirteen Quebec and American

artists examined the problem of acid rain at Lac Preston in the Laurentians, and *À l'Affût* (1994), in which twelve Quebec artists looked at the issue of deer hunting in La Minerve forest, were all staged in Quebec. This was the first art/nature action to be held outside the province. The collective's choice of remote mountain-lake-forest settings enables its members to think as nomads. "For days or weeks we are a migratory group of artists of different origins, languages and cultures living in the wilderness", the promotional literature states. "Creating art in the isolation of the wild, we strengthen our individual bonds with nature; experiencing it collectively, we become more closely bound together".

The seventeen participating artists in *Forêt-Frontière*, who were all from Quebec, Saskatchewan and B.C., assembled on Vancouver Island in early July. "The camp was roughly two hours by boat and truck from Port Alberni", says St. Amand. "We had to carry in all our own supplies. There was no electricity, and no one had a watch, so we soon lost track of time. It was like being shipwrecked, but we all pitched in and without much planning things got done".

While at Henderson Lake, the artists were guests of the Hochuktlisat-h First Nation. Prior to venturing into the region, some of the artists met with band spokesman Ron Hamilton, who informed them of the land's spiritual significance to his people. At any one time, there are upwards of 100 band members in the Henderson Lake area. The lake itself is 240 meters deep with a salt water bottom.

It's located in a valley sheltered by five mountain peaks, the *T'iitskin Paawats*, which the Hochuktlisat-h and other Pacific First Nations revere as the home of the Thunderbird's Nest. While tribal variations exist, the Thunderbird is conceived by most North American First Nations as a huge bird that produces thunder by beating its massive wings. Lightning is similarly believed to originate from its mouth and eyes. As the principal sky-dwelling deity, the Thunderbird wages eternal war against underwater powers. "MacMillan Bloedel holds cut-rights to the valley", notes Evans. "And the Hochuktlisat-h are currently engaged in a struggle to protect the Nest from encroaching logging operations. Facing our campsite on the east side of the lake, we could see a patch of clear-cut the company had done by flying loggers in by helicopter. And MacBlo employees were busy spray painting and tagging trees for destruction to clear logging roads".

Throughout their millennia-old guardianship of the valley, the Hochuktlisat-h have practised a sustainable form of forest management. If lumber was needed, for example, it was possible to slice into the bark and remove a board without killing the tree. Rope could be produced from the inner bark in

Dennis J. Evans, *Untitled*, 1996. Rope, multi-colored plastic flags. The work comments on the way in which MacMillan Bloedel employees mark trees for destruction when they clear a logging road into an area. Photo: Dennis J. Evans.



a similar manner. MacMillan Bloedel's mechanized clear-cut method is much more intrusive. Not only does it destroy the forest ecosystem, it also leads to heavy mountain-side erosion (Henderson Lake averages 472 cm of rain annually). The Hochuktlisat-h once enjoyed a thriving Sockeye salmon fishery. It too has been decimated by silt which has clogged upriver spawning grounds. To combat this decline, the Hochuktlisat-h have recently established a hatchery to release 350,000 fingerlings a year into the lake.

The artists were at Henderson Lake for a two week period. While there, they worked individually and collectively to produce a variety of site-specific art works. "I spent the first week simply exploring the area", recalls St. Amand. "I worked primarily with stone and wood. If I found something I wanted to use, I would float it to my worksite. In total, I created five pieces that will continue to exist until they succumb to the elements". As part of their collective effort, the artists used driftwood to build a central performance area among the scattered lakeshore encampments. They would gather there each night to sing songs, tell stories, chant and make music by the fire-light.

As part of their struggle to preserve the Thunderbird's Nest, the Hochuktlisat-h are attempting to prove to MacMillan Bloedel that the five peaks are sacred. To do so, they must overcome the prevailing business and government mind-set that regards the old-growth forest as an exploitable economic resource. Their task is made even more difficult by the stranglehold MacMillan Bloedel holds over the B.C. forest industry. At present, the company owns cut-rights to two-thirds of Vancouver Island. In pressing their claim,



Chris St. Amand,
Untitled, 1996.
Wood, rope, stone.
Photo: Dennis J.
Evans.

Members of the
collective preparing
supper in a central
kitchen area that
they erected. Photo:
Dennis J. Evans.



the Hochuktlisat-h must argue that their ephemeral oral-based spiritual beliefs are worthy of the same consideration as the precise legal arguments put forward by MacMillan Bloedel. "What it amounts to is a clash of cultures", says Evans. "On one side, there's the materialism of Western industry. On the other, the deeply personal spirituality of an indigenous population. As artists, we endeavoured to express the "spirit" of the valley through on-site sculptures, performances, photography, poetry, music and video. Living and creating there for two weeks made it clear to us that the land is sacred, and each of us signed a statement strongly urging MacBlo to stop the cut".

As with previous Boreal Multimedia art/nature actions, a catalogue is planned to document the project. Participating artists are also exploring the possibility of

mounting mixed-media exhibitions in their respective provinces to further inform people of the courageous battle being waged by the Hochuktlisat-h to preserve their ancestral homeland from the rapacious greed of MacMillan Bloedel. ■

NOTE :

1. Participating artists: Luc Beuparlant, Alexander Burr, Thérèse Chabot, Julie Durocher, Dennis J. Evans, Jeane Fabb, Heather Frise, Zoe Lambert, Pia Massie, Ginette Piché, Daniel Poulin, Jodel Poulin-Éthier, Richard Purdy, Velcrow Ripper, Sylvia Scott, Chris St. Amand, Tedi Tafel.

L'auteur commente l'événement *Forêt-Frontière*, la plus récente réalisation du groupe *Boréal Multimédia* qui, depuis plus de huit ans, intervient sur des sites naturels éloignés des grands centres urbains, avec des projets à connotations sociales et environnementales, tels *Deadlines/Ça presse* (1989) et *À l'Affût* (1994).

L'événement de l'été dernier s'est tenu à proximité du lac Henderson sur l'île de Vancouver, et regroupait dix-sept artistes. Ils ont été les hôtes des Premières Nations Hochuktlisat-h, qui les ont initiés à la dimension spirituelle que revêt pour eux la région. Durant deux semaines, les artistes ont produit des oeuvres *site-specific* à la fois individuelles et collectives. «Il est évident, précise l'artiste Dennis J. Evans, que nous assistons ici à un important choc des cultures entre les visées matérialistes de l'industrie — notamment la mainmise de la compagnie MacMillan Bloedel sur l'industrie forestière de la Colombie-Britannique —, et la profonde spiritualité de la population autochtone, laquelle se bat pour protéger ses terres ancestrales. En tant qu'artistes, nous avons tenté d'exprimer l'esprit de la vallée avec des gestes relevant tantôt de la sculpture, tantôt de la performance, de la photographie, de la poésie, de la musique et de la vidéo. Ce faisant, nous avons pris conscience à quel point il s'agissait d'un lieu véritablement sacré. Chacun de nous a d'ailleurs signé un document stipulant l'urgence de cesser la coupe des arbres».