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A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON CONSERVATION RESEARCH INTO THE RURAL ART PARKS OF WISCONSIN

Anton Rajer, Dr. Harry Alden and Dr. John Hackney

Our ongoing research aims to study the factors effecting the deterioration of 20th century outdoor mixed media sculpture in the upper Midwest and to help develop strategies for their preservation. Many of the sculptures are located at sites known as "art parks" or outdoor sculpture gardens. Eight of these art parks are located in the state of Wisconsin. Created by self-taught artists commonly referred to as "outsiders" or "primitives," the art parks evolved over a sixty year period between 1920 and 1980.

1. Grotto of the holy Ghost, Dickeyville
2. Nick Engelbert, Hollandale
3. Wisconsin Concrete Park, Philips
4. Grotto Gardens, Rudolf
5. Prairie Moon, Cohrane
6. Wegner Grotto, Cataract
7. Mary Nohl, Fox Point
8. James Tellen, Sheboygan

Figure 1. Wisconsin's Art Parks

The preferred materials of the spontaneous constructions of these rural visionaries included wood, concrete, glass, metal, plastic, and stone. Working in apparent isolation, the artists relied upon an inner vision and inspiration from religious, civil, and historical events to guide them in their creative endeavors.

Preservation efforts at all the sites have been hampered by a harsh climate marked by frigid, snowy winters and sweltering, humid summers. Biological growth, including lichen and moss, plague many of the sculptures. In addition, the remote rural locations of many of the sites and the unusual construction materials often utilized by the artists have made site work difficult, requiring preventive conservation strategies tied to economic reality. Our research project has focused on biological, chemical, and physical components in the degradation and biodeterioration of these sculptures.

The primary focus of our research has been the Wisconsin Concrete Park, created by Fred Smith (1886-1976), which consists of well over 200 life-sized concrete figures which surround his rural home and tavern near Philips, Wisconsin. The site became a county park after a restoration in 1977.
Utilizing the ICCROM model for a work of art within its outdoor environment, we are studying the factors affecting the objects. Lichen, fungus, moss, and wood has been identified in order to understand the mechanisms of biological and physico-chemical degradation effecting the pieces. Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the theory behind our research.

Figure 2. ICCROM Conceptual Model
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In addition, climate studies have indicated periods of high wind shear, sub-zero freezing, and dramatic fluctuations in temperature through the day and the year. Future research will focus on the identification of mortar and metallic corrosion, and on creating models for potential sculpture stabilization. Working with the Friends of Fred Smith Association, some preventive conservation procedures have included the planting of native prairie grasses near the sculptures to prevent touching by the public, inventorying glass shards from the sculptures, covering some of the statues in the winter, and improved written records on each piece. Routine maintenance and periodic controls are sometimes the only way to prevent biological attack in an outdoor environment. (See Tables 1 and 2, Figures 3 and 4).

Two sites which have been particularly well-maintained have benefited from their association with the Catholic Church. The Grotto of the Holy Ghost, in Dickeyville, was begun by Father Wenerus around 1919. Composed of concrete and other materials, the grotto contains a shrine devoted to the Blessed Virgin, the Sacred Heart, and Patriotism. An equally important site, which also served as the inspiration for other art parks, is the Rudolph Grotto in Rudolph, Wisconsin. The site is notable for its use of a local dark red stone and white marble sculpture. Regular maintenance efforts are carried out at both sites, including lichen removal, landscape maintenance, sculpture upkeep, and general care. As expected from the ICCROM model, the efforts made at these sites have succeeded in reducing biological and physico-chemical degradation, in spite of a harsh climate.

Another art park is in Hollandale, where Nick Engelbert (1881-1962) created over two dozen pieces of sculpture which reflect his interest in American culture. Unfortunately, the site has been abandoned for the past twenty-five years and many of the sculptures have been lost. However, much of interest remains and warrants preservation, particularly the original polychrome surface of many of Engelbert's pieces. Unfortunately, the current private owner intends to repaint the sculptures in 1995 as part of a sprucing up project.

In contrast to the Hollandale site, the Wegner Grotto has an on-going maintenance program. Located near Sparta, the art park contains in excess of three dozen pieces by the Wegners, a self-taught couple. The site reflects the strong influence of the Grotto at Dickeyville, which the Wegners observed on a family outing. The Wegners constructed a series of decorative fences, sculptures, and a small church made mostly of concrete. Runoff from rain water, a nearby highway, moss and lichen growth, and debris from extensive foliage have all caused problems at the site. The site was restored in 1987 and has since become a county park; fortunately, the Wegner's great grandson maintains the site and lives nearby.

Ironically, the beautiful setting of the Mary Nohl site, on the shore of Lake Michigan in the Milwaukee suburb of Fox Point, has proven problematic to its preservation. The artist, who still lives in the house at the site, has created incredible tableaux both within the house and its surrounding yard. Unfortunately, high incidence of vandalism have moved Nohl to construct a high, barbed wire fence around the site. The sculptures are also subject to the brutal force of
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winter winds coming directly off the lake. Though generally well maintained, the future of the site remains uncertain.

Research into the materials and techniques used in the construction of the art parks and their deterioration continues and we are in contact with colleagues working at the Watts Towers in Los Angeles and various rural parks including the Garden of Eden in Kansas and the Paradise Garden in Sommerville, Georgia. Ongoing research at the University of Wisconsin and Forest Products Laboratory continues to explore the physical composition of the sculptures and the ways in which their materials behave in the outdoor environment. Finally, SOS! (Save Outdoor Sculpture) has played an integral role in heightening public awareness of the importance of saving Wisconsin's rural art parks. Developing strategies to conserve these eccentric sculptures has been a perplexing challenge; a challenge worthy of continued efforts.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Giulia Canova, Carol Clausen, Rick Green, Don Howlett, Jill Klenke, Pam Knox, Lisa Stone, Jim Zanzi, and ICCROM, Rome.

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**The Sites**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The Sites</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Glass</th>
<th>Stone</th>
<th>Shells</th>
<th>Ceramics</th>
<th>Plastic</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Paint</th>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Biological growth</th>
<th>Plastimata Glauca</th>
<th>Xanthorh Fallax Spec.</th>
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Table 1. Site Materials and Biological Growth.
### The Sites

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Statistics courtesy of U.S. Weather Bureau  
* Research in progress

Table 2. Site Climatology
Figure 3. Wisconsin Concrete Park. Wooden braces support a weakening sculpture.
Figure 4. Wisconsin Concrete Park. Corroding iron armature has led to the deterioration of the concrete veneer.