

Shirley Wiebe: *Cozy*

Shirley Wiebe is an installation-based artist whose practice engages sculpture, space and light. Her recent work concentrates both on the land and on the interaction of a community with its environment. Shirley has created site works in a number of landscapes in the Pacific Northwest and internationally. She has been awarded art residencies in the Yukon Territories, the USA, Turkey and most recently, Berlin.

John K. Grande (**JG**): Hi Shirley. Nice to meet you. I was wondering, how did you approach the Stanley Park project when you first saw this site?

Shirley Wiebe (**SW**): This site in particular seemed to exemplify the forest and the devastation of the 2006 windstorm. It is close to a highly used walking path. When I first found the area in early 2008, it still appeared ravaged and torn up. I wanted to work with one of the tree stumps that had been cleanly severed by a saw, and this area had a number of them.

JG: It was like a nature museum before—you could not touch Stanley Park.

SW: Yes, and we have the privilege of being the first artists invited to create work in the park using natural materials. The windstorm of 2006 made such a huge impact here, and internationally. It was the catalyst for our opportunity. Permanent sculptures and monuments had been proposed by different groups for years, but the notion of environmental art that would eventually break down and decay paved the way for officials to realize they could change their approach to artistic intervention.

JG: Did you spend some time in choosing the location you actually are working in?

SW: This is the second summer for the environmental art projects so I've had time to explore the entire park and all of its trails. Most often an artist has just one opportunity to respond to a particular environment. This has been a two-phased project where ideas could

deepen and expand. The location had inherent ecological considerations plus the area had been replanted with conifer seedlings that were still fragile and needed to be protected. So my approach was one of careful consideration and dialogue with park ecologists, foresters and stewards.

JG: Have you worked on community projects in Vancouver before?

SW: I've completed several public art projects where the process and design were developed in conjunction with a local neighbourhood, and my site-specific work in other places has also relied on research and dialogue with a local community. *Cozy* represents the most hands-on, widespread engagement I've had.

JG: Do you think this work relates to other projects or sculptures you have done in the past in some way?

SW: I find that each project informs the next, and hopefully builds on it. I was able to carry out a more complex process with *Cozy* based on past experience. The project also came with administrative and technical support that allowed me to think bigger. I wanted to explore the social and physical relationships that take place in the forest and in the city, and how they shape the park. My interest in connections between environment and identity remain a core focus.

JG: This work is sort of like a covering for the remains of a Douglas fir stump.

SW: The name "cozy" refers to both the form and its snug fit.

JG: It is quite dramatic. How did you calculate and join it all together to fit the stump?

SW: I roughly determined the number of maple wood medallions needed with the help of an architect, based on measuring the surface area of the stump. I wanted *Cozy* to be very form fitting to reveal the magnificence of the stump and the energy of its leaning orientation. I

joined large sections of medallions in the studio, a process of drilling holes and tying the pieces together with hemp twine. Other people assisted and participated in this labour intensive process as well. I then brought the sections to the site and began fitting them together into one form. It was like tailoring an enormous garment.



Shirley installing *Cozy* in sections, July 6, 2009. Photos by Paul Colangelo.

JG: And it looks like this work has involved collaboration with lots of people.

SW: Yes, people from all over the city, and beyond, have contributed to the concept and the content of *Cozy*. I envisioned the sculptural form, but its real significance is conveyed through the drawings and inscriptions created by the hundreds of individuals who participated. And now that the work is assembled, the collaboration continues as the images and inscriptions dialogue with each other and with the site itself.

JG: Who made the wood-burned inscriptions and images? Were they young people?

SW: The people who participated ranged from children to seniors. It was important to me that *Cozy* embrace a diverse population because Vancouver is such a multi-cultural centre. In the last year I've witnessed first hand that Stanley Park draws visitors from around the world on any given day, and I hoped that my work would be representative and inclusive of many cultures and ages. I developed a process of bringing the materials and the tools to various group events, schools and community centres in order to gather as much random participation as possible. This mode of 'taking it to the people' also relied on their

spontaneity to contribute something creative, as many of the individuals did not consider themselves artistic.



Participants of all ages contributed to the making of *Cozy* through a series of workshops held throughout the city.

JG: How many pieces in total do you think people created for your collaborative *Cozy* sculpture?

SW: I think the work includes approximately 1500 to 2000 wood medallions, with the idea that each one represents a different person. Towards the end, I did encourage people to create more than one, and at other times, people worked together on one.

JG: I can see that some contributions are images and others are phrases like 'Go Green', 'Anima Mundi', 'Victory', 'Green', 'Peace', 'Life is Sacred' and 'Watch for Bear'. The textual and the visual are mixed in the way you arrange them.



Details of *Cozy*. Photos by Paul Colangelo

SW: The arrangement was intentionally quite random, partially based on fitting the different sized wood medallions together like puzzle pieces. The associations and repetitions that appear are really delightful though. During the burning sessions, we would have a dialogue about *Cozy* being an environmental art project for Stanley Park, and the windstorm of 2006 was a starting point. The invitation was to draw or inscribe something that referenced the person's connection with nature, something that was significant for them. Wood burning is a very sensory experience-the heat, the smoke, the mark that forms, and the scent. People talked about camping experiences and about using a similar tool when they were children. The process lent itself to storytelling and conversation as we sat and worked around one large table.



Vine maple medallions were tied together with hemp in carefully measured sections, with each section installed onto the stump in precise order.

JG: Your approach is open and not at all exclusive, and that is what art, particularly that works with nature, can achieve.

SW: The wonderful thing is having had the opportunity to develop something locally in my own city. Often my site-specific work is elsewhere, and while I enjoy travel and the exploration of new environments, I am not there very long and I don't get to see the weathering of the piece over time. It doesn't allow for the same kind of process.

JG: The different layers of an artist's conception are ongoing, community input, site and the context of nature in the city...

SW: I see Stanley Park as an urban forest, and the heart of Vancouver. It is a place of relationships and interactions between trees, plants, birds, wildlife, insects, organisms, people and animals. One can also sense the sacredness and history that emanates from this land, even with all the human intervention and management. *Cozy*, through its collective voice, speaks to all of that.

JG: Often the criticism of sculpture symposiums is that artists don't actually get to know the place where they are working. They don't know the context of the project's site.

SW: Symposiums seem like a kind of a performance where an audience gets to observe artists at work in the 'making' process. Traditionally they have involved permanent materials such as stone, and the finished work has been placed in the environment as a

sculptural object or monument. This sculptural object or monument might not be a response to the environment so much as an impervious aesthetic form. I believe this forum is evolving to hopefully include some transient works and materials. Environmental art, and its potential for dialogue with its surroundings, can be an entry point for people to perceive and experience the outdoor world in a new context. We see how nature continues to collaborate with the work-how it alters and weathers. When people can participate in the process as well, it becomes very dynamic for the work and for the individuals. With *Cozy*, people have anonymously expressed their hopes, concerns, joys and philosophies. These contributions will add life to a site that is already regenerating with wild flowers.

JG: So the project became a metaphor for healing, like the wound in the tree you have left exposed, and the cover for the wounds-“Cozy”.

SW: Yes, *Cozy* acts as a protective covering that some have also compared to scale or chain mail armor, intended to protect against being cut. The work is a nurturing gesture that acknowledges the care and attention our environment needs in order to continue looking after us.



Cozy, from left to right: on July 14, 2009, November 24, 2009, April 11, 2010. Photos by Paul Colangelo.