Excavating the 1970s

Renée Green conceives of her installations as subjective investigations into history. Her most recent project, “Partially Buried,” juxtaposes photographs, videos, books and debris relating to the 1970 Kent State massacre and a lost Robert Smithson earthwork.

BY BRIAN WALLIS

"H"istory," wrote Robert Smithson in 1967, "is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information"—which is another way of saying that we understand history not merely through representations and narrative, but through tangible artifacts and concrete human experience. When Renée Green began a quixotic search to find Smithson's lost 1970 earthwork Partially Buried Woodshed at Kent State University, her goal was in part to reclaim a segment of the past and to locate within it aspects of her own identity. This quest was documented in her recent installation "Partially Buried" at the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York.

On a small modernist table near the entrance to "Partially Buried" Green displayed a curious still life, consisting of a box of paperback books by James Michener, a black-and-white aerial photograph, and several palm-sized slabs of concrete. As it turns out, the fragments of concrete are about all that remains of Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed, a metaphorical anti-monument in which earth was piled on the roof of an abandoned woodshed until its main roof beam cracked. But all the objects on the table, including the concrete fragments, refer in different ways to the event for which Kent State is most famous: the National Guard massacre of four student protesters in May 1970. Smithson's earthwork, erected just months before the Kent State shootings, became associated with that event as a kind of inadvertent memorial. (Smithson subsequently made an antiv war poster incorporating an image of this work.) The Michener books include, among his famous historical sagas, a bland nonfiction account of the killings that he wrote in 1971 for the Reader's Digest Press (and which includes the warning, "This could be your university. The students...could be...your sons and daughters. This could be your community."). And the aerial photograph maps the site on the campus where the shootings occurred.

These talismanic objects provided the key to the rest of the densely layered installation. As with her earlier works, here Green packed two rooms with an encyclopedic array of books, photographs, video monitors, furniture, records and computers. The connections between artifacts and images, though highly suggestive, were not always readily apparent, and required the viewer's cooperation to reconstruct their meanings.

On a literal level, Green's project was about searching for Smithson's site-specific work, which, in keeping with his penchant for entropy, he stipulated should be allowed to disintegrate naturally, as a kind of ruin. (Some years later, the school administration went one step further, however, declaring the art work an eyesore and ordering it bulldozed.) Color photographs arrayed along one wall of the gallery showed Green meandering around the periphery of the Kent State campus, looking for the lost Smithson, but encountering instead a series of blasted landscapes much like those in Smithson's own well-known photographs of Passaic, N.J.: industrial buildings, chain-link fences, generic diners, slag piles.

Opposite the images of Green as present-day tourist were about 20 grainy black-and-white images rephotographed from those in the Michener book. These news photos depicted some of the events leading up to the killings at Kent State, and captured the rather matter-of-fact character of the student demonstrations before they became cataclysmic. These images also record the lesser-known role of Black United Students, the university's Afro-American student union, which was so committed to nonviolence that it had marshals at the scene of the main protest to prevent black students from getting involved. These few images offered evidence of Green's ongoing interest in African-American engagement in the revolutionary social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Green has repeatedly critiqued the ways the progressive and intellectual aspects of those engagements are frequently glossed over by white historians in favor of images of blacks as gun-toting criminals and white student activists as the real thinkers (cultural critic Michele Wallace refers to this history-as-usual as "the Great American whitewash").
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In a triptych sequence exhibited in "Partially Buried," Green suggests how, in the case of Angela Davis, this history was suppressed, recovered, mediated and recycled. One print shows a cover of Life magazine from 1970 which labels Davis a fugitive. A second print complicates our image of Davis by juxtaposing her portrait with that of the Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno, with whom she studied in Germany. And a third print simply appropriates a recent Italian clothing advertisement in which Davis's famous Afro is revived as retro style, demonstrating almost too literally how easily revolutionary forms can be retooled as fashion.

This unexpected interweaving of history and popular culture amply characterizes Green's own highly subjective approach to historiography, and her attention to the symbolic value and formal clashes to be found in even the most mundane aspects of the material culture of everyday life. In the rear space at Pat Hearn, Green built a sort of rec room with a bright orange wall and 1970s-style floor cushions for the public to lounge on. Visitors were encouraged to hang out and watch videotapes of Green's own deliberately casual interviews with people who had been present at Kent State at the time of the killings (journalists, black activists, her own relatives and others). One could also see a tape of Emile De Antonio and Haskell Wexler's film Underground (1975), a series of dialogues with members of the Weathermen, radical American leftists who by then had been in hiding for five years; or use a computer to investigate Green's new CD-ROM, which looks at the assimilation of American counterculture in Germany. There were also books on display (including the Kent State yearbook from 1970) and hit records from the 1970s (wall text identified them as a "Simulated Vinyl Diary" of the records Green herself may have listened to at the time), creating a heady audio-visual environment where the period could be revived in a kind of three-dimensional montage.

In its focus on history and memory, and as a kind of personal investigatory tourism, "Partially Buried" established direct thematic links to Green's earlier work. Each of the dozen or so individual exhibitions she has created since her graduation from the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1990 has focused in this multileveled way on the relationship between a specific site and her own identity. As she says, one of her key subjects is "an exploration of Western history and the way in which African diasporic subjects have been configured into this history." Thus, in Bequest, a 1991 installation at the Worcester Art Museum, she investigated the involvement of the museum's founders in the African slave trade and, using quotations on clapboard walls, juxtaposed concepts of blackness and whiteness running through 19th-century American literature. And in a 1992 project for Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop, she re-created yards of 18th-century French toile de Jouy, substituting scenes of slave beatings for the original fêtes galantes. That work was in turn derived from an installation that Green made in Clisson, France (also in 1992), in which she connected the two major 18th-century businesses of the nearby port of Nantes: the production of toile de Jouy and the slave trade.
Charting the intersections of history, identity formation and the complicated nature of cultural translation has inevitably embroiled Green in art-world debates over "multiculturalism," a term that is generally used merely to refer to the incorporation of nonwhite or foreign artists into mainstream cultural institutions. But the sort of reductive classification of individuals on the basis of "race," gender or nationality that multiculturalism often entails is precisely what Green disavows. In a 1991 essay she asked, "Is the designation 'multicultural' itself a 'mixed blessing'? Is a new kind of confirming categorization being inaugurated?" She describes herself, for instance, as "African American, born in Cleveland, allergic to tomatoes, possessor of a driver’s license, an avid pedestrian, as well as a woman, among lots of other things." Thus, she rejects the very concept of an absolute or one-sided subjectivity, instead insisting that our complex individual histories inevitably produce multiple or plural identities. Cultural critic Stuart Hall describes these personas as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past." Like Hall, Green is less interested in group affiliations in the present than in genealogical byways to the past.

Green’s challenging quasi-ethnographic exhibitions are part of a larger investigation among contemporary artists into the way history is shaped by museological constructions. This work builds on the institutional critique of 1970s and ’80s artists like Andy Warhol ("Raid the Icebox"), Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler, who sought to analyze the museum as a frame of interests that always inflects the meaning of what it shows. Younger artists, such as Green, Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, and the collective Group Material have developed strategies that extend and rethink this earlier approach by examining the collecting practices of museums, making parodies of shows or tours or simply reinstalling the museum’s own objects. In adopting a critical slant on history-making practices, these artists seek to redress past representational or structural injustices; pose questions about power, context, reception and meaning; and reveal latent meanings by reorganizing or recontextualizing artifacts, sometimes exhuming the sorts of objects the museum would prefer to keep hidden. Such interrogations, often in the form of site-specific installations, constitute a sort of countermemory, a practice that persistently questions dominant modes of constructing the past while at the same time seeking to recuperate submerged histories or meanings.

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By approaching the artifacts of the past in light of present-day issues, Green practices materialist history à la Walter Benjamin.

Green’s attention to her own dispersed past almost requires her to tend to both the personal and the public, and to adopt a critical or skeptical attitude toward dominant versions of history. While this self-consciously critical method clearly derives from recent feminist and postcolonial theory, which Green knows well, her approach is not primarily rationalistic. She freely allows dreams, desires, chance encounters and the unconscious to help determine the choices and juxtapositions in her work. Excavating historical meaning through an intuitive approach to the selection and display of common artifacts, Green employs a form of what anthropologist James Clifford once called “ethnographic surrealism.” By this, Clifford was referring to the tendency of Surrealist writers to embody their critical cultural politics in symbolic relics which they found in the junkheaps of the Parisian flea markets. This practice, according to Clifford, “studies, and is part of, the invention and interpretation of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export.”

In a similar way, Green brings back from her expeditions remnants of diasporic culture the way others might bring back souvenirs from the seaside, as eccentric markers of time (her own history) and space (her own travel). History and travel, the twin themes in all of Green’s work, are parts of a practical search for the seeds of a new way of thinking about the object-based world, about life. Green pursues a series of local histories which she finds to be, in one way or another, connected, in a line of descent. The linkages she detects are accidental and deviant; they do not conform to some master narrative or universal history but, rather, to her own faulty calculations and serendipitous tourism. Her probing, multilayered art reminds us that, as Michel Foucault observed, the modern social self is produced through successive dislocations and the acceptance of an inevitable incompleteness.


8. Green, Certain Miscellanies, Some Documents, Amsterdam, de Appel and Berlin, DAAD, 1996, p. 120. This statement appears in Green’s discussion of her book After the Ten Thousand Things.

