



## INTERLOOP/WIND AS WEFT

Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello  
Marion Nicoll Gallery  
Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Alberta  
October 9, 1990

*Rob Milthorp*

**O**n October 9, 1990, Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello presented a two-part installation, *in situ* on Nose Hill in north Calgary, and at the Marion Nicoll Gallery of the Alberta College of Art. This work encompassed an element of performance, and a range of media from weaving to videotape. The core of the installation took place on a slope of Nose Hill Park where the two women worked together to warp a variety of threads and strings across two descending gullies. This ephemeral web, anchored by removable spikes, encroached minimally upon the environment, while the varied colors of the spliced threads echoed the autumnal colors of the scrub. As the title suggests, the wind tugged at these chords, producing a stunning visual effect. The work was completed throughout the day and removed the same night. Viewers were invited to watch the process in the late afternoon. In the gallery space, over a period of a week, a display of slide and video documentation of the event was combined with a sculptural arrangement of canvas sheets on opposing walls. These sheets were pulled tautly towards each other with threads woven across the room, reflecting the activity on Nose Hill.

What set the outdoor work apart from a traditional sculptural intervention into the landscape was the manner in which Caplan and Riordon-Sello, one on each side of the gap, attached themselves to each other using a clothesline pulley mechanism. Threads were shuttled from one to the other on this umbilical cord, while they gave instructions to each other or conversed with the viewers. The deliberate and seemingly casual nature of the activity displaced urgency from the making of an object, the transformation or colonization of material, to the symbolic relationships contained in the activity itself. By emphasizing their own interaction, the choice of weaving as a medium in a non-

traditional form, and the integration of nature as partner into their work, Caplan and Riordon-Sello explored their identity as women and the nature of "women's work" within western cultural history, as well as their ontological relation with the world in general. As a consequence, they drew attention to the implicit "maleness" of modern artistic conventions.

Given the powerful historical symbolism of the woven thread in women's mythology, it is ironic that women have fallen through the weave of the Modernist grid. This mythic symbolism ranges from creation and unification (the cocoon, the womb, the umbilical) on the one hand, to preservation and continuance (the healing of wounds, stitching together, the lifeline) on the other.<sup>1</sup> Particularly relevant and illuminating with regard to *Wind as Weft* is a myth which runs through world cultures but has had a particular influence in our own, that of the Moerae or Fates. This took its strongest form in the matriarchal system of the Mycenaean culture. Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, aspects of the goddess Aphrodite (sometimes known as the Dove of Peace), respectively spun (created), measured (judged), and cut (making room for others) the threads, each of which represented an individual life, and which the Moerae wove into the tapestry of Fate.<sup>2</sup> The Moerae were integrally associated with birth and death and all major events in life. Offerings were made to them and related deities on important occasions as well as in supplication for the healing of wounds. In the Middle Ages the life affirming nature of these female deities fell victim to patriarchal values. The Fates — sometimes referred to in northern Europe as the Weird Sisters — became the equivalent of faeries, more closely associated with demons and witches than life givers, or worse perhaps, associated with empty-headed nymphs and tricksters (the predecessors of Tinkerbell). Fairy Godmothers were as much to be feared as invoked, perhaps



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Nose Hill (installation view), 1990

because of their power, the threat of their “otherness” in male culture.

Similar ideological processes have historically contributed to the devaluation of women’s social practice in western culture. The notion of women working together or writing their own histories and understandings of the world has been repressed, just as the importance of their existing contribution to culture has been neglected, and activities such as weaving perjoratively relegated to “craft.” Caplan and Riordon-Sello’s work on Nose Hill, guided by their interest in feminist critique, was emphatically social, celebrating their work as a function of their own identities and relationship. The viewer became part of the environment, part of the piece itself. Even the generous

offerings of refreshments, which has become such an expected and jaded feature of opening receptions, in these circumstances contributed to an unusual bonding of the participants. Consequently, “art” appeared as a reflection of, rather than as subject of, these women’s activity.

The gallery component of the exhibition was a more problematic aspect of the project. In a darkened space, continuously revolving slide projections describing the Nose Hill environment and aspects of the event, played off the walls and the sculpturally arranged canvas and threads. The projections were placed at right angles in order to disturb normal viewing, resulting in a rhythmic interplay of light and materials. Outside the gallery’s facing glass wall, two video monitors documented the passing of threads between



Nose Hill (installation view), 1990

the two women at Nose Hill. These images, which did not depict their physical selves but rather the space between them, were accompanied by the sound of their voices. The decision to avoid representation of their own bodies produced an intriguing abstract allusion to presence. However, in the end, the conviction of their activity on the hill, of their actual presence, tended to be lost to formal arrangement and to the distanced framing of the technology, especially for the viewer who had not attended both parts of the installation. The canvases which had been woven together in the gallery, unlike the woven gullies of the outdoor site, fell more easily within the conventional formal and material discourse of art practice and the "objectness" which these artists sought to critique.

Nevertheless, the decision to use the gallery as an arena for its own critical examination was significant. It implied that in the recuperation of women's cultural identity, the existing structures and ideologies must be, as in the task of the Moerae, measured, evaluated, where possible healed,

and ultimately rehabilitated into the social fabric. Curiously, pursuing this metaphor suggests an alternate possibility. One of the many aspects of Atropos, the Moera who snipped the thread of life, was Nemesis, a term which has come to be associated with retributive justice and causing the downfall of wrongdoers. Nemesis might suggest the need to destroy existing offending structures and to start afresh; in other words, to abandon the gallery and the patriarchally determined infrastructure of art. However, Caplan and Riordon-Sello, like many contemporary feminist artists, seem to align themselves with Irene, yet another aspect of the Atropos figure, whose definition is of one who brings peace at the dissolution; that is, resolution and unity with the world in the very process of dismantling. ☪

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Walker, Barbara G., *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1983.
2. Curiously, in the Mycenaean system of matrilineal inheritance, the word Moera became synonymous with "lot" or property, from the "allotment of fate."