

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### # 41 / Jeroen van Westen, land artist, earth architect, Heeten, the Netherlands

In 1996 it was when I first heard his name. I was in Kansas at the time, in Matfield Green in a little house on the prairie Ans and I had fixed up on John Astle's land. Janine Benyus was finishing her book 'Biomimicry' while living in the house we would buy in 2009, and we discussed how to draw attention to it after its publication. I came up with "art projects"—land art--related to her subject. Not yet familiar in the U.S., I emailed artist friend Anne Ausloos in Belgium and she referred me to Jeroen van Westen in the Netherlands. We started an intense correspondence that lasted until 2003 (the year he decided to come and visit us, by then living in New Mexico) and beyond. Jeroen is an artist and a philosopher—as Ans said, "Jeez, I sure hope he's not as serious and deep as his emails—I am exhausted already." And then he arrived, and we had so much fun together...

Not that Jeroen ever stopped philosophizing. He is a thinker and an extrovert one—he shares his thoughts with anyone who wants to listen and some who won't. His ideas and concepts are backed by extensive knowledge not only of the earth but also of human relationships including politics. His father was a teacher; he himself is essentially an educator. His field is the earth, the land, the landscape. He wants to understand how it was in past days, how and why it developed in recent days, and what will happen tomorrow—if we don't take good care. Of course, this hasn't to do with nature exclusively—it has to do with what human societies did, now do, and will do, or neglect or even refuse to do in the future. In his projects, Jeroen hides the facts and his thoughts about them, and by *hide* I mean he doesn't wave his opinions in the public's face, but makes subtle and esthetic statements that grow in force over time; sometimes, they disappear after a while, after they have conveyed the message, because nature takes over—but that's intentional, too.

Jeroen is an observer. Nothing escapes him. Trained as an artist and engaged with the earth he became not a landscape architect, not a gardener, but an earth architect, a designer of environments in which, for instance, ancient water flows are restored and incorporated into contemporary suburbs. His projects draw attention to

the lands, to the streams, to change and to permanence. They have served municipalities all over the Netherlands; they are little and sometimes not so little experiments which deserve broad attention.

Our biomimicry project never reached the drawing board. Other projects, though, made it through realization. Jeroen came to work in New Mexico, and later he returned to be artist in residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute. Sometime later, he was one of a little group including Anne Ausloos and Gerco de Ruijter who prepared an exhibition of their New Mexico *travails* called 'Desert Passage' for the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos; a book was published in which one of my essays was included. Again sometime later, he came to Kansas to fire the starting shot for a project called *EARTH--Sites and Structures*, a land and conceptual art project I am trying to get going in "my" Chase County. Jeroen in collaboration with Anne Ausloos and Matfield Green's Bill McBride, and aided by Jeroen's wife Thea van der Geest (an associate professor at the University of Twente in the Netherlands specialized in contemporary communication—the use, the problems, the possibilities, and the effects of the computer, the Internet, and the social networks), re-created an old cattle dip tank and transformed it into a 'Sky Deep' monument.

Jeroen's projects are diverse of scale and content. One of my favorites is 'Seeds and Spores', commissioned by the Dutch CSI about to move to a new complex of buildings south-east of The Hague. The buildings are clearly visible from nearby freeways, and the plan was to surround them by attractive gardens and *bosques*. But they wanted more. What's happening inside is a mystery; the results of the CSI experts' pathological studies come into the open only after the criminal investigation is done; yet they have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide. "Let's make visible what is hidden," they said after discussions with their architects and landscape architects. Because government buildings in the Netherlands as a rule have to spend 1% of the construction costs on art, they did some research and decided land artist Jeroen van Westen was the best choice for their project.

Jeroen's design proposals were astonishing. The best part, in my opinion, was an enormous fingerprint seeded in at the *bosque*. Two different types of soil were put out; each soil type was to receive different plants in such a pattern that eventually the giant fingerprint would become visible in the earth; so-called Typica, parts of fingerprints that define identity, would be placed within the design, which, of course, would only become fully noticeable after a few years of growth and tender care. The tragedy is that a new management decided to plow the fingerprint-to-be before it could grow to recognizable magnificence... maintenance would cost too much, these narrow-minded people said. What's left of the project is a little book that gives insight in the proposals and the first executive phases of the fingerprint. Viewing the drawings and the photographs of the work-in-progress confirms the short-sightedness of the managers; they scandalously created a giant missed opportunity, for which they should be severely punished. I advise their subordinates use the destroyed fingerprint as forensic evidence.

Luckily, not all projects end halfway growth or construction. Many people recognize that Jeroen's rich and varied art explores the ways people express their connection to the world around them. From projects exploring the role of salmon in Seattle, Washington to the reconceptualization of a river in his native the Netherlands, there is a deep and underlying appreciation of our collective human responsibility for the environments we create and inhabit. "At the source of all my work lies the premise that landscape is legible; that a landscape reveals how the culture which created it related to the nature with which, and in which, the landscape was made. Nature and culture are two mutually enriching concepts. My work is about the relationship between nature and culture... in turn it will result in a work of art."

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### **# 42 / Carole Brown, musician, hermit, somewhere in the heart of the Flint Hills, Kansas**

Carole Brown, a violinist and bassist who plays classical music as well as jazz, of her own free will left “civilization” to hermitize on the prairie. Or, rather, she decided to get out of the rat race for a few months and asked Jane Koger if she knew of a secluded place where she could stay in peace, and Jane said “Yes” and took Carole to an old shack, practically falling apart, and Carole said “Wonderful, I’ll do it.” At that time, it was winter. Carole decided to sit out the cold season – without running water, without comfortable heating, without power, without phone. Fourteen years later Carole is still living in this prairie hermitage, and she still lacks easy heating, running water, plumbing, cell phone, computer and electricity. She owns no car. She bicycles the 25 miles to Cottonwood Falls, and 25 miles back, to do her grocery shopping and no matter what the weather is like –pouring rain or ferocious winds or 105 degree heat– she refuses all ride offers. “No, thanks, I need the exercise. I sleep better after a ride, you know.” No wonder.

Carole became a professional musician when at age twenty she moved to New York City. The Manhattan music scene disillusioned her quickly, and she worked as an editor at a publishing house for long years before returning to music. At that point she also returned to Kansas City, but K.C. couldn’t keep her there. She was emotionally ready for isolation. “Societies consider people who can be alone to be a threat. I believe the more technology we create to serve and protect ourselves, the more threats we see and the more fearful we become. I question the claims that contemporary life is superior to simple life lived close to nature. And, really, I did not find loneliness out on the prairie, I am still connected even though I do not make use of the modern channels of communication. I still enjoy many friendships and the people I meet when bicycling. Moreover, I find that my physical labor provides a balance to my intellectual activity. I study, I read.” She even learned Russian and German to read authors in their original language.

Carol's hermitage is miles east of Matfield Green. There is grass as far as the eye can see and just a few clusters of trees to indicate the presence of a creek. Carol lives somewhere under those trees, on the other side of a creek, in solitude, almost "Forlorn and naked (...) remote from all pleasures of the world," to use Shakespeare's words. Her hide-out is constructed from local rock and pieces of plywood plastered with dirt. The cabin sits mere steps away from the creek's streambed, which at this location is somewhat wider and creates a swimming hole. The north bank is high and protects Carole's spot from the most miserable winter storms as well as from being noticed from the dirt road which connects pastures. Inside, the space where Carole lives, cooks, sleeps, and stores her provisions and her books, measures roughly 15'x9' or 15 m<sup>2</sup>. That's all. Her small *Vogelzang* woodstove, for cooking and heating, occupies a whole corner, as does the door. A "kitchen area" with a small table and a narrow bench are built in under shelves for pots and pans, tins and bottles and bins, and more books. No space is left for hanging art, which she regrets much. Carole sleeps in a hammock, she reads by the light of an oil lamp, she gets her water from the creek where she also takes her baths. All visitors wonder, "Would I be able to live this way? Not for one week, but for years and years?"

"The hardest?" Carole says, "Well, what I discovered, and what drags me down most, is the continuing battle to make it to the next day. The daily chores to keep the house standing, to fight the elements, to grow veggies in poor soil, to cut firewood. When I came here, I was in the belief that I would have all the time in the world to enjoy nature, to read, to think. But what I am thinking most about is: plain survival. The creek becomes a raging stream and approaches dangerously; sometimes the house is an island in an inland sea, completely surrounded. But during a drought the creek is dry, and I'm forced to leave – I can do without many amenities, but living without water is impossible." Persistent drought recently forced her to spend more time in Kansas City than she wished for. "The good thing was, I could help my parents, who are not getting any younger. But I miss my own home. Even if after fourteen years I am a little tired of the place I live in, I am content and happy with my lifestyle. I am dreaming, seriously thinking, of finding a new spot and designing and building my own house. I can buy a small piece of land and no longer be a guest at Jane's. If I can find something, far out, away from invading sounds, under trees, near a creek... I would build with a little more space including wall space to hang art. I would have cabinets instead of shelves and a separate storage for my bikes and my garden tools. No electricity. Nothing to power a computer, no cell phone, no."

No need to change her lifestyle. Carole still finds her passion in solitude. "Early in my life I began to be troubled by a vague sense that I would not be allowed to remain my authentic self or hold on to my own true personhood to experience life from a unique individual perspective ... The concepts of indoctrination and socialization were far from my awareness at that young age, but I sensed that I would be expected to adopt the indoctrination that constantly surrounded me in order to further the agenda or the cause of someone else ... The cost of that, it seemed to me, would be to surrender my authentic identity, my thoughts, my intelligence ... in order to conform to that societal agenda," she said in a previous interview.

Carole's thinking is clear as glass, probably because she doesn't allow infiltration from coercive, manipulative and domineering exterior influences. "Years ago, my opinion of the world was harsh. I wanted out. *I had to escape* from a wasteful and destructive way of life. Learning to live without artificial limits became a relief. In due course, my viewpoint softened because I lost the aggression society had installed inside me. My sense of humor improved. I can joke about my experiences out in the big world, in N.Y.C. and K.C. That big world is not the real world, even if more than fifty percent of the world's population is already living in monster cities. That's where wolves eat dogs and men eat men, isn't it?"