A Place Called I-Park: Erasing the Separation between Life and Art

NOVEMBER 24, 2013 BY ISHMAEL VON HEIDRICK-BARNES

By Ishmael von Heidrick-Barnes

On September 17, 2013, I awakened in a small boat house on a pond in the wooded Connecticut countryside of East Haddam. A thin smoky mist wrote in calligraphy just above the water. My roommate, Roger Rigorth, peeked his head through a curtain separating our two beds and whispered, “Welcome to I-Park!”

I-Park is 450 acres of living art married to nature. International artists experienced in a variety of mediums are invited to spend 3 to 4 weeks living and working in the idyllic setting reminiscent of Thoreau’s Walden Pond.

Founded by Ralph Crispino in 2011 as an "unconventional memorial to a friend," I-Park evolved into a residency program for artists. It’s almost sacrilegious to write about a place imbued with an uncompromising respect for the mystery of life and art. I-Park defies simple categorization so it will be impossible to capture it in prose.

I-Park is not a sculpture garden nor museum. It isn’t “life imitating art” or “art imitating life.” Its genius is in its ability to erase the separation between life and art. Here in the Connecticut countryside creativity flows from the hands of artists and branches out into the wind-sculpted trees.

From a gray whale’s mouth

Feathers of light are foaming

Sheering clouds from bone

My roommate, Roger Rigorth, was one of 14 artists invited to spend three weeks focusing on environmental art at I-Park (known as the Environmental Biennale). Soft spoken and creatively prolific, Roger is a world renowned sculptor. We met in 2007 when Roger was invited to teach a course at Cal State Bakersfield. Our lives crossed paths through an adverse turn of events and a telephone call from my sister in-law who was a student in Roger’s class.
When Roger landed at LAX in order to begin his teaching duties, he was detained without explanation by customs officials. After the long flight from Germany he was chained to the back of a van with several other unfortunate souls from Latin America. Questions echoed unanswered in Roger’s mind as the van sped toward an undisclosed prison.

Half way to the facility the van stopped while the guard in charge of the transport decided to take an unscheduled nap. While their captor slept in an air conditioned cab, Roger and the rest of the driver’s human cargo were forced to endure the stifling heat of the sun. There was no choice but to sweat out the wait in the unventilated back of the metal vehicle as temperatures soared.

The professor assigned to pick up Roger at the airport was baffled when the German artist didn’t exit from LA customs. She made inquiries with airline and customs officials but no one would tell her what had happened to Roger.

Eventually, the driver awakened the van reached its destination. Roger was put in a crowded jail cell. Every time he attempted to find out why he was being held as a prisoner, he was ignored. As night fell and the temperatures in the facility dropped Roger requested a blanket but the agents denied even that simple request. Haunted by the recent media coverage of Guantanamo Bay, Roger began to fear for his life.

The next morning a guard came to fetch him. He was once again chained to the back of a van. Visions of water boarded detainees ran through his mind. To Roger’s surprise he was driven directly back to LAX and put on the first flight back to Germany, again without explanation.

Only later did he find that the reason for his incarceration had to do with a mistake he had made on his Visa application. He had neglected to check a box saying he would be teaching while he was in the United States for a few months.

Most people would have never returned to a country that had imprisoned them without explanation. Roger, however, booked the first flight to California and flew back to Los Angeles. He told me that if he did not return right away he might not ever visit the United States and it was a place he had always dreamed of seeing.

My sister-in-law telephoned me about her German teacher’s troubles entering our country. Her class was going to be visiting the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. She knew I spoke a little German and that I would enjoy meeting a fellow artist from Europe.

Roger and I were introduced over a cup of tea at the museum. Since that day we have remained friends. When my book of poems, Intimate Geography, was being readied for publication by Ragged Sky Press, Roger donated the artwork for my book, gratis.

One of the original sketches appearing in my collection of poems was of a sculpture he had done previously at I-Park. As Roger and I walked up the trail from our little cottage to the main house for breakfast, we passed the piece he calls, the I-Dragon, hanging in a tree just off the main trail. I had no idea that the drawing in my book had actually been brought to life by Roger.
The sculpture consists of two ominous structures both carved from wood and woven with rope. Each wing is 450 cm high and about 150 cm in diameter. They spread out of two parallel branches about 6 feet from the ground. The dawning sun exhaled orange light through the trees and Roger’s I-Dragon, lit up the forest around us. It was worth a trek across country just to see the piece flying through the fiery New England Autumn foliage.

At breakfast I met most of the 14 artists in residence. Men and women representing 7 different countries gathered for a quick meal and then dispersed to their hand-selected locations on the property to begin their creative endeavors. I had the luxury of wandering around the pond and watching several of the artists in action.
Before the cello

Was plucked and sawed it composed

The song of a tree

As I meandered through the woods along the lip of the water the first artist I came upon was Michael Fairfax from the United Kingdom. Michael resides in Somerset, England. A joyful soul with a contagious sense of humor, Michael made me feel at home underneath the canopy of turning leaves. I watched the jolly Englishman hand carve 94 pins from fallen tree branches and drill small holes into a bifurcating trunk. He then fastened strings between the branches turning one of dozens of trees at I-Park into a harp. As I put my ear up against a specially constructed wooden amplification device, I found myself listening to the music of a tree. Michael strummed the strings and an English folk song reverberating through the trunk into my ear.

After I left Michael I came upon several other trees he had transformed into harps. Each tree produced a unique timbre. I found that if I listened long enough, the invisible fingers of wind would pluck melodies without any physical intervention on my part.

What appeared at first glance to be a harp for human hands was actually a work of art that brought out the music already present in nature. My ears haven’t been the same since that day at I-Park. What used to be ordinary hikes up mountains or along beaches are now symphonic treks. Everywhere I hear the universe singing to me!

“Nobody killing

The cyclops-blue eye of earth!”

Sun is flowering

Wandering further around the pond I walked into a sunflower heliotropically “levitating” between trees. The artist, Tatiana Feraian from Cyprus, arranged “500 cast-off sunglass lenses following the natural pattern of sunflower seeds.” Her intention was to “highlight the defenselessness of nature due to environmental factors that influence UV penetration,” and to inspire people to “up-cycle what is readily available instead of wasting precious resources.”

Tatiana had resurrected the Greek myth of Clytie and Apollo. Not unlike the pond at I-Park, Clytie, who was a water-nymph, fell in love with the sun god. Clytie’s reflective affection for Apollo was unrequited and grief gripped her limbs rendering her body motionless on the cold ground. Like many men and women whose hearts have been broken, she was unable to eat or drink anything but the seeds of her tears.

From dawn to sunset, Clytie religiously followed the golden god’s course across the sky. Her “fixation” with Apollo was so intense that it blinded her to anything else in the world but him. Her physical and psychological stagnation eventually caused her to become rooted in the soil. It is said that Clytie’s face was transformed into a sunflower, forever turning towards the light of the ancient sun god.
Tatiana’s sunflower which could have been spun from the silk of a spider (it was so thin and intricately tied together) altered the way I looked at nature and myself. Too often my vision of life is a narrow oversimplification. How easy it is to become caught by the glittering objects of affection and become blinded to the totality of the universe.

When I stood back and saw the patterns in Tatiana’s installation, I saw that individually we are just one lens in the mosaic of life. We are smaller than our self serving desires, but if we can look at ourselves objectively, we are also a part of something so much larger than our imaginations. The human mind is a tiny mirror reflecting external stimuli, but, like the glass that makes up a mirror, we are created from the same sand and fire that makes up the sun and earth. Here was another work of art grounded in life and turning on its axis toward a star.

Around 12:30 the artists and staff met for lunch in a tent adjacent the main house. I-Park provided a gourmet cook for these communal meals. They also had a coordinator on staff during the days to help procure materials, arrange travel plans, and assist resolving any problems that came up during the residency. This service helped ease the finite details of life, freeing the artists to focus exclusively on their work.

Meals fostered a spirit of community among the international group of artists. There was no sense of competition or rivalry among members. If an artist was struggling with a particular facet of a project people offered suggestions and exchanged ideas. I had the definite sense that many of the people attending the Environmental Biennale would remain friends after they left Connecticut.

*Canadian geese*

*Swimming south in sun stoked pond*

*Flocks of molting trees*

After lunch Roger and I went for a walk in the woods. Beneath the dense foliage we spotted numerous stone walls once marking the boundaries of farms. “Isn’t it wonderful,” Roger asked, “That nature has reclaimed her canvas?”

On our way to a stream we passed many previous installations. In one section of I-Park we discovered several pianos in various stages of decay. Wooden musical notes dangled from the branches of trees. Time, the weather, and the growth of the woods have rewritten their scores.

We paused before one piano which, to the untrained eye, might appear to be a pile of rubble ready for the junk yard. Roger paused before the piece in awe studying the patina rain and snow had left in the wood of the instrument.

I thought of the many painters, poets, and musicians in history who had sought to create something that would last forever in hopes of achieving a kind of god-like immortality. I-Park not only rendered that pretentious notion untenable, it embraced the transient nature of all things human. The art, inseparable from nature, was free to evolve with the woods. Every stage in its slow erosion made it more beautiful in Roger’s eyes. At I-Park, art might not live forever, but at least there it lives.
Over the next week I watched Roger devote his time, sweat, and heart into creating three pairs of “Wings” constructed primarily from bamboo. When they were completed, we took them out onto the pond in a canoe and set them free. As we sat in the silence of the New England countryside, a flock of Canada geese skimmed over the treetops on their migration south. Their trumpeting calls providing the music as Roger’s wings danced in a breeze and soared into the watery reflection of sky.

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Ishmael von Heidrick-Barnes was born and raised in San Diego, California. He attended Herbert Hoover High School and went on to study Religion and Theology at the University of San Diego. His book Intimate Geography, published by Ragged Sky Press, won the 2012 San Diego Book Award for Poetry. Ish, as he is known, has also written lyrics for German musicians Andrea Hörkens and Thomas Roderburg (Tender Art).