

STEPHEN VINCENT KOBASA

Ephemeral Art in a Permanent Place

There are secrets in every landscape. One of those is that the twelve-year-old Connecticut sanctuary for artists known as I-Park began with a thought for the dead. Ralph Crispino, founder and executive director, first intended to make a place for a friend's memorial, outside the usual conventions of cemetery and monument.

The project has expanded beyond that precise and contained notion into a residency program that brings together international groups of six or seven artists several times a year in an intimate and protected setting. What Crispino describes as "creating mystery in a place" has resulted in a self-conscious privacy so complete that not even immediate neighbors are entirely aware of I-Park's existence.

According to Crispino, the artists who take up residence are simply offered the "gift of time and space." The intention is to be "process rather than product oriented," giving participants an extended period of time for both work and conversation. Given that any particular group may contain a visual artist, a musician,

an architect, a filmmaker, a landscape designer, and a writer, Crispino believes that their "exchange is precious."

Yet its core thirty acres of land has defined the project most completely. Crispino notes that the property itself has a subtle impact on every residency, regardless of the artist's medium. While the land was initially thought of as the background against which work would be created, it evolved into the very material that artists could use. And while the work being done is not exclusively devoted to installations on the grounds, the environmental art program is, so far, the clearest evidence of what I-Park is inventing. The cleared landscape announces a long-term commitment to site specific and responsive work that, in Crispino's vision, "should emerge from the land and could only happen in this particular time and place."

This is not landscape conceived simply as a gallery; there is no inclination here towards the permanent pageant of a Storm King Art Center. Instead, the ephemeral has become more prominent in what is invited from the makers.

With the time between conception, execution, and interpretation deliberately compressed, there is an immediacy to what results. "The point of creation is much closer," as Crispino puts it.

The conceptual model forces both experimentation and adaptation. This is "a laboratory here," Crispino says. "If the idea is really interesting, it doesn't matter if the work is refined." Without those constraints, there is "more invitation to risk," with the work that emerges being not as precious. The sites of earlier projects can be continually reused and reinterpreted, with the remains of previous pieces recycled into new configurations. The one expectation is that any work be attentive to the landscape and engaged with it. The point is not to come with a preconceived idea, but rather to let the place set the terms for what would be integral to it.

An intervention that is ephemeral by design rather than necessity, and that "didn't want to be something difficult to reverse," as Crispino says, is also a pledge to preserve the land.

There is an additional commitment to conserve resources in the practical economic conviction that, as Crispino puts it, "twelve ephemeral works are more interesting than two permanent." Of course, some pieces have survived over a longer period of time, but that is only because their disappearance has been more gradual. What is gathered here is a celebration of impermanence, not of preservation; decay is the subject, rather than the threat.

The question of whether such a laboratory needs or even wants an audience is beginning to be answered in a different way, now that I-Park has been granted nonprofit status with its attendant demands for visibility. And there is a long history of private creations meant to alter the public realm. There is no better lesson for the moment than that art is made here, despite its fragility, within this looming world.

Stephen Vincent Kobasa is a writer, curator, and contributing editor to *Art New England*. His work has been published in *Big, Red and Shiny*, the *New Haven Independent*, *Artes Magazine*, and the *Hartford Advocate*.



Ted Efrehoff, *Domesticating the Wild: Glass Bottom Living Room*, 2008, mixed media, at I-Park. Photo: Stephen Vincent Kobasa.