

ALAN SONFIST

NATURAL HISTORY, 1965–1989



March 29 – June 12, 2016

ARTIST TALK: March 29, 6:30 pm, Reed Chapel

DOUGLAS F. COOLEY MEMORIAL ART GALLERY REED COLLEGE
3203 SE Woodstock Blvd., Portland, Oregon | Free and open to the public: Tuesday–Sunday 12–5 pm

COOLEY

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Exhibition curators: Robert Slifkin, Associate Professor of Fine Arts, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, with Assistant Curator Allison Tepper, Curatorial Project Assistant, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Alan Sonfist (b. 1946, Bronx, New York) is among the first generation of 1960's artists who began to explore the natural environment as both the site of, and the material for, creative practice. Sonfist is perhaps best known for his project *Time Landscape*, a handcrafted New York City park located at the corner of Houston Street and La Guardia Place in Greenwich Village. In *Time Landscape* Sonfist researched, cultivated, and planted a park of indigenous foliage that grew on Manhattan island prior to European settlement. The park was developed in 1965, planted in 1978, and continues in perpetuity. *Time Landscape's* evolving, open-ended interaction with New York's bustling urbanism epitomizes the artist's attention to the evolving and contingent dynamics motivating our understanding of the natural world.

Unlike many of the most well known artists associated with the Land Art movement—Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria—Sonfist's work is distinguished by its sustained and multifaceted investigation of humanity's interaction with nature. While other Land Art artists journeyed into the landscape to explore its magnanimity and symbolism in spaces largely devoid of human presence, Sonfist investigates nature in the context of human habitation, literally bringing nature back to the urban environment and the museum.

By focusing on Sonfist's work created between 1960 and 1980, *Alan Sonfist: Natural History* expands our awareness of Land Art's broader ecological and historical implications, particularly its influence on the development of installation and social practice art. It could be argued that today, when many of the aesthetic innovations associated with Land Art and conceptual art more generally have been thoroughly integrated into contemporary artistic and museological practice, it is the content and biocentrism of land-based practices that have become most crucial to contemporary culture.

From the beginning of his career, Sonfist extended the aesthetic implications of Land Art by bringing its ecological significance to the fore, engaging—or

perhaps reengaging—the long tradition of artistic representations of the landscape and the natural environment in relationship to its own fragmented history within urban culture. For Sonfist, nature presents an infinite number of viable subjects for artistic reflection.

Despite the fact that his work has been collected by many major public and private collections, including: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Ludwig Museum in Aachen, Germany, Sonfist has not received the same level of attention as some of the other artists associated with Land Art. *Alan Sonfist: Natural History*, brings a renewed attention to Sonfist's extensive and multifaceted oeuvre, in particular his research-based and performance practices.

The exhibition includes rare photographs and films, as well as drawings, and assemblages. The exhibition also provides the first extensive consideration of Sonfist's performance works in which the artist ventured into nature to “become one” with the environment's inhabitants. The exhibition presents a nuanced understanding of the artist's early career, situating his work within some of the most important artistic tendencies of the past thirty years, and demonstrating the increasing relevancy of Sonfist's exploration of humankind's relationship with the environment.

A Companion Edition reader accompanies the exhibition. Companion Editions is a special publication imprint of the Cooley Gallery Reed College, designed by Heather Watkins. The reader features two essays by the show's lead curators Robert Slifkin and Stephanie Snyder, and an essay by the show's assistant curator Allison Tepper. The book will be an essential reference for anyone interested in exploring Sonfist's work, and the history and legacy of the Land Art movement. Publication date: May, 2016.

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery,
Reed College
3203 SE Woodstock Blvd.
Portland, Oregon 97202
reed.edu/gallery
503-517-7851
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Exhibition hours: 12 to 5 p.m.
Tuesday–Sunday (closed Mondays)

Alan Sonfist, Beginnings:

My life began in the teeming jungles of the South Bronx. On the way to school I passed smoldering fires and packs of dogs eating garbage. There were no trees anywhere—the few that had existed were long dead—there were only concrete streets and brick buildings. The streets were divided into between local gangs and each gang controlled a section. Each day my walk to school was a passage through terror and my survival depended on my urban instincts. This was my first experience with nature.

Several blocks away there was an isolated forest where no one played. It was deep in a ravine of the Bronx River near an abandoned icehouse where they used to make ice from the river water. There were cliffs and a bridge across the river so I played on both sides of the ravine. The smells of the freshness of the earth were in direct contrast to the smells of the overcrowding and urban decay. Instead of gang members there were turtles and snakes. Instead of wild dogs that could sense my fear and that would attack if I entered their territory, there were deer and fox that were curious and gentle and would let me enter their world. The forest became my sanctuary. My wise oak always answered the questions that I had.

My fascination with the living animal spirit was overwhelming. I tended to imitate them by recreating their markings and movements in my play and artwork. Photographs and drawings were my first documentations of flora and fauna from early childhood. I was especially interested in the human transformations of living animals into sculpture. I spent many hours in the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Bronx Zoo. I created maps of my travels. My parents gave me my first camera when I was seven years old. Immediately I went to photograph my wise oak in all its magnificent beauty from top to bottom.

As I grew older, more people from the neighborhood spent time in the forest. Little by little the undergrowth was trampled down, garbage was everywhere and fires were set. Later, when someone drowned in the river, the city decided the forest was a dangerous place. So they cut down the trees and poured concrete over the roots. The bedrock cliff was buried under the gray monotonous carpet of our city. My forest had disappeared.

Alan Sonfist Natural History



March 29 – June 12, 2016

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College

Alan Sonfist, Natural History

Alan Sonfist (b. 1946, Bronx, New York) is among the first generation of 1960's artists who began to explore the natural environment as both the site of, and the material for, creative practice. Sonfist is perhaps best known for his project "Time Landscape," a handcrafted New York City park located at the corner of West Houston Street and La Guardia Place in Greenwich Village. In "Time Landscape" Sonfist researched, cultivated, and planted a park of indigenous foliage that grew on Manhattan island prior to European settlement. The park was developed in 1965, planted in 1978, and continues in perpetuity. "Time Landscape's" evolving, open-ended interaction with New York's bustling urbanism epitomizes the artist's attention to the evolving and contingent dynamics motivating our understanding of the natural world.

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Interview with Alan Sonfist
Summer 2015, New York City

ALAN SONFIST: My tree drawings began when I was a child. There was an oak tree in the hemlock forest near my home in the South Bronx, and I could fit myself into the hollow of the tree. I started to transform myself into the fantasy of the tree. My art begins with the essence of my childhood tree and evolves into a contemporary understanding of our world. My art bridges my childhood dreams with contemporary science.

COOLEY GALLERY: When does the dreaming happen—when you're making work?

AS: My drawings begin when I initiate a dream walk in the forest—that's when I'm more consciously aware of the changing environment. The repetitive images create a clear echo of the past into the present.

CG: It seems like a natural thing in your work, meditation—you returning to the tree, to the experience...

AS: Exactly. I feel a sense of oneness with the tree. As I'm talking to you, I can still smell the inside of the tree, and I can still feel the inside of the tree in the same way as a child. The memories are locked inside of me. All I have to do is close my eyes to become part of the ancient forest. It's a natural part of my process when I make an artwork—I become part of the tree looking out into the woods and its future.

CG: Did your parents let you wander?

AS: My father would take me for walks in the woods, and he would be completely silent. We would walk in the woods for hours, and he wouldn't say one word to me. For me, it became more about sensing the forest and how we were connected to the woods. We had a common understanding of nature. My mother was interested in experiencing culture, so she would take me to museums; we did not make a distinction between the natural history museums and the art museums. Both my parents introduced me to the mother tree. Part of our Sunday ritual was to place me inside the hollow of the mother tree.

CG: Why do you call it the mother tree?

AS: It's a spiritual connection. When I became a little older, whether or not my parents were present, I would walk into the forest and repeat this ritual on my own. I could eventually climb the tree and I would experience the natural forces between the tree and me. I experienced the changing seasons with the tree.

CG: Is your mother tree still there? What's in the hemlock forest now?

AS: The community didn't have any regard for the forest and they would leave

litter. Eventually there was a forest fire, and then the city manicured the forest. The city started removing ancient species, and the more they removed the less it became a primeval forest. This is why I felt compelled to create the *Time Landscape*. It's more about respecting nature, as it exists, as opposed to the idea that humans always have to impose themselves on the land. If the tree is aging, and shifting into its decay stage, why not just leave it? Why do we remove those trees? From my point of view, I try to respect the integrity of the forest. My artwork is about the complete lifespan of the forest—to allow the forest to generate its own self.

CG: *Time Landscape* offers itself to the public. I'd like to ask you about other works such as *Autobiography of Dreams* (1974) that enclose and protect their messages like reliquaries. The piece is very elusive, because only the owner can know its message, right? Would you tell me what's inside?

AS: Inside the box of dreams are relics from my childhood to the present that connect to the stories about the forest.

CG: So the box is filled with objects?

AS: Absolutely. You project your idea of what's in the box, and that's equally as important as what actually *is* inside. The box becomes a blank canvas allowing the viewer to project their fantasies of how they would see their relationship to the forest. The idea is that it then becomes your dream. There's a secret way of opening it. It's a locking mechanism. It's like the pyramids, which have essentially become a cultural understanding of the world, and this is my cultural understanding of my world.

CG: This feels very connected to the transformative energy in your *Animal Fantasy* actions performed on the Caribbean island of Saint Croix in the early 1970s. You completed the performances when you were rehabilitating your nervous system after your terrible fall in Panama during the army ant expedition. How early do you locate the idea or vision of "performance" in your work—or your life?

AS: I didn't photograph myself as a child, but as a child, when I became a tree, or I became part of the animals I identified with the species that I was observing, and I became part of that world. Almost every day as a child, I would spend hours in the forest, witnessing deer, fox ... and then I went to the zoo and there was also that magical quality. The animals were unfortunately caged, unlike the animals within the forest. It gave me a certain sense of their communication, their dialogue, and all I could do was to project my dreams and my fantasies onto who they were. When I dreamt, I became the animal. The dream state is in between what we call wakefulness and sleep. Dreaming, I'm actually physically wandering in the woods. As a child, I would experience the same transformation acting as the animal within us. When I completed the *Animal Fantasies* in the 1970s, I transported myself back into my childhood and became the animals of my childhood. Later I photographed myself as a part of the animal within nature. Later I photographed myself as a part of the animal within nature.

CG: On Saint Croix, why did you decide to photograph yourself, to capture your actions on film? The works now seem to hover between documentation and something else...

AS: At that moment I didn't know if I would survive. I've always taken pictures of nature. I felt a need to document the natural animal within me and reflect on my past. I created the photographs over a very intense period of time, and then later, almost by chance, I showed them to a friend and he wanted to exhibit them. The photographs only capture a short moment of time, but the performances were a daily event—different forms of exorcism. They were also a methodology of transforming myself after the fall—back into nature. My entire body had been completely damaged, and becoming an animal lifted me up; I could think beyond the idea of the dangers I had encountered.

CG: In 1977 you “consciously” performed for an audience in a German zoo...

AS: Yes. When I was in Aachen, Germany, I lived in the zoo there for a week. I was commissioned through the Ludwig museum [Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst]. I thought it opened the door for people to question our philosophical tendency to separate ourselves from our environment. We are essentially animals living on our planet. The idea of the work was to explore how we treat animals by putting them in cages. It connects to my childhood, of feeling sorry for the animals in the cages in the Bronx Zoo, seeing how their behavioral patterns were so limited. I would project into those fantasies. Also, the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History opened a fantasy of how the taxidermy animals might roam in Africa or Asia. So I think the performance in Aachen was a collage of those ideas. I was saying: “OK, I'm the diorama in the zoo, I'm the caged animal.” The performance in Aachen was received very intensely.

CG: Negatively?

AS: Well, people in the 1970s did not want to identify themselves as animals. We're one of many species, and we're still unraveling our understanding of being human animals, not to mention our understanding of other animals—or even plants for that matter. Everything has its own intelligence. So, it's up to us to try and tap into their intelligence, and to respect their intelligence. This is how we will gain a greater understanding of the whole universe. That's the essence of my artwork. I am going through my personal understanding of my own life and how we are connected to everything.

CG: You've collaborated directly with animals, bringing them into “human” spaces, to help us gain this understanding, and also to explore the deeper associations that we share with plants and animals, as opposed to making the reductive argument that animals and plants mimic our social behaviors or vice versa.

AS: I made a variety of artworks exploring human interactions and how we

relate to animals. The mimicking myna bird is really asking: “Who is talking to whom, and who is learning from whom?” I installed an orchestra of crickets in a museum. Crickets will respond to humans, and they will respond to temperature. As you got closer to the room, they would become silent. When they were alone, they would start chirping. I created a series of artworks dealing with the cycles of life. In *Running Dead Animal* (1973) I collected road kill and placed it in perfect plaster “minimalist” rectangles reflecting the cycles of life. The essence of the animal would visualize itself on the surface of the plaster. The artworks would then project the essence of the dead animal. I also created a series of DNA sculptures representing that there is very little difference between human and tree.

CG: That’s so beautiful. Also: what a great and cheeky comment on minimalism’s relationship to audience. Do you still perform in front of a camera? What is your relationship with your body like now?

AS: The mother tree is always within me, so no matter what project I’m working on, the mother tree finds me. If I’m in the forest by myself, I project the animals. The reason I often travel to ancient forests is because it becomes my home, so it’s easy for me to transform myself. As the sun rises and sets in the forest I can feel the changing temperature and it echoes a different understanding of the land. I just let myself go in the forest. That’s really the only opportunity I have to conjure repetitive images, and hopefully through those images—some nuance within an image—something that I didn’t see as clearly the first time will become clear as I’m walking under autohypnosis. I am learning more about going back into dreamlike states.

CG: As we conclude this interview, I’d like to return to where we began, with your childhood and your family, and the hemlock forest.

AS: Toward the end of my parents’ lives, they were very proud of my art. Before they passed away, we had a series of conversations about how my childhood contributed to my art and they told me how proud they were. We did a series of recordings and photographs, transforming us back to my childhood days.

CG: Did you share them with the public?

AS: I did show them—at 112 Greene Street in New York. But again, this was early on in my career, and people would question: “Is this art?” I call the material autobiographical because it connected me to my parents. We did a series of photographic essays where a lot of the images were of my childhood—photographs of nature, which I took as a child—and then we would discuss them together. I asked them: “What do you think?” And my mother’s first response was: “You never took any photographs of the relatives.” I’ll never forget that comment [laughter]. I explained to her that she was pointing out these beautiful trees to me, so I photographed them.

CG: Thank you so much, Alan.

This interview was condensed and edited for publication by Alan Sonfist and Stephanie Snyder, from recorded conversations conducted by Stephanie Snyder and Allison Tepper during the summer of 2015.

The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York
May 20, 6:30–8 p.m.

The Museum of Modern Art library, New York, and the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, warmly invite you to a private soirée with artist Alan Sonfist to celebrate his newest book—*Alan Sonfist: Natural History*—a Companion Editions reader published on the occasion of Sonfist's current exhibition at Reed College.

Authors and exhibition curators Robert Slifkin, Stephanie Snyder, and Allison Tepper, and book designer Heather Watkins, will be in attendance.

The soirée will include short readings and remarks, and all guests will receive a complimentary copy of the book.

Refreshments will be served.

Please enter at MoMA's Cullman Research and Education building at 4 W. 54th St. A staff member will escort you to the library on the sixth floor.

Beginning with his first major commissioned work, *Time Landscape* (1965–present), Alan Sonfist has received critical attention for his innovative interventions into urban spaces, redesigning them into natural havens and historical landscapes. After growing up in the South Bronx of New York City near a primeval hemlock forest—a major inspiration for his artistic practice—Sonfist attended Hunter College, where he received his MFA. Prior to his studies at Hunter, Sonfist worked intensively with Gestalt psychologist Hoyt Sherman at Ohio State University. His research with Sherman concerned the language of visual culture and its relationship with human psychology. Sonfist subsequently pursued a Research Fellowship in Visual Studies at MIT, Cambridge, MA. Sonfist's

work has been included in major international exhibitions, including Documenta 6, the Venice Biennale, and the Paris Biennale. Sonfist has completed one-person exhibitions at museums and arts organizations including *The Autobiography of Alan Sonfist*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts; *Alan Sonfist Landscapes*, Smithsonian American Art Museum; *Trees*, High Museum, Atlanta, GA; and *Trinity River Project*, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX.

The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, is an intimate academic museum, located in the Eric V. Hauser Memorial Library. The Cooley was established by a generous 1988 endowment from Sue and Edward Cooley and John and Betty Gray "in support of the teaching of art history at Reed College, as part of an interdisciplinary educational experience that strengthens the art history component of Reed's distinctive humanities program." Exhibitions are curated by director Stephanie Snyder, often in collaboration with artists and Reed faculty across the disciplines, with attention to the needs and interests of the larger Portland and Northwest arts communities. A schedule of three to four exhibitions during the academic year brings to Reed and the Portland community work that would not otherwise be seen in the region. Exhibiting artists include David Reed '68, Wynne Greenwood, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Bruce Nauman, Kara Walker, Sutapa Biswas, Marc Joseph Berg, Fritz Haeg, Gregory Crewdson, Molly Dilworth, Lynne Woods Turner, and Lorna Bieber. The Cooley organizes a K-12 education outreach and teacher-training program, and founded Reed's new Calligraphy Initiative, which is returning the legacy and study of calligraphy and paleography to Reed College, in honor of Reed College calligraphy professor Lloyd J. Reynolds (1902-1978).

Reed College is an institution of higher education

in the liberal arts devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual pursuit and governed by the highest standards of scholarly practice, critical thought, and creativity. Reed students pursue the Bachelor of Arts degrees in 40 majors and programs. The curriculum includes a yearlong humanities course, broad distribution requirements, and a senior thesis. A 9:1 student-to-faculty ratio and small conference-style classes allow faculty members to truly mentor students and engage with them in individual discussions. Reed also offers a graduate program leading to a Master of Arts degree in liberal studies. Reed College is a community dedicated to serious and open intellectual inquiry, one in which students, faculty, and staff can fully participate, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, socio-economic status, or disabilities.

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Stephanie Snyder
John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director
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reed.edu/gallery

I,

ALAN SONFIST

being of sound and disposing mind and memory, and considering the uncertainty of this life, do make, publish and declare this to be my last **Will and Testament** as follows, hereby revoking all other format Wills by me at any time made.

First, after my lawful debts are paid, I give my entire estate to my wife except
Whereas, my body is my museum, it's my history. It collects and absorbs observations - instructions. It is the deciphering of these recordings that I project into the outside world. My boundaries define the world of art. I clarify my own common boundaries in relationship to the outside whether it be the room I exist in, the country I exist in, the universe I exist in. By adding other awarenesses, I am constantly redefining my boundaries and projecting these awarenesses in my art.

My work deals with the idea that the world is always in a state of flux. My art deals with the rhythm of the universe. The pieces are part of that rhythm. A plant grows in cycles - a man moves in cycles - my work tries to bring about awareness of these movements. One has to meditate with my work to gain an understanding. It is not the beginning or the end I am concerned with, but the energy that is given or received through communication with my work. I therefore provide that a list of proposed works of art from my diary should be given to the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, upon my death and carried out for them by my agent on a seasonal basis thereafter.

Finally, because the decay and growth of my body will present the continuation of my work, I bequeath my body in a sealed transparent enclosure to the Museum of Modern Art, New York City to be kept as a work of art accessible to the public.

Robert Jowanski

I hereby appoint
..... to be Executor of

this is my last Will and Testament.