
THE EVOLUTION OF DARWIN

Description of the Art Installation at Boston University

Images emerge from rust. Artist Esther Solondz has been working for several years with a variety of ordinary materials such as salt, water, and rust to create her art. Combined, these materials change and grow in conformance to the conditions of a given piece. Salt mixed with water transforms into crystals, wicks and travels, forms mounds or stalactites. When salt is mixed with iron, rust forms in all its many guises and colors, sometimes eroding other materials, or leaving the accretion of marks behind.

In her current work, Solondz renders images of faces using iron filings sandwiched between a two pieces of cotton gauze and placed on concrete elements of outdoor spaces. On top of each image she puts a sculpture made of compressed salt bricks that are in various states of crystallization, growth, and dissolution. Over time the salt will dissolve and the filings will rust and leave an image. How long does the transformation take? That depends on the elements and how long it takes to break down the salt. Salt that covers the iron filings changes form, some of it building up and obscuring the images, some of it dissolving and vanishing. The iron filings rust, creating both an image on the fabric and a residual image on the concrete surface. Even after an outdoor exhibit is “over,” an image remains as a haunting but permanent record of the process.

Science courtyard as art gallery. In September 2006, Solondz will create an installation in Boston University’s Metcalf Courtyard which is surrounded by science buildings and which is one of the most successful public spaces on the campus, drawing thousands of people each week. The concept for the piece is to create “rust portraits” of Charles Darwin and other evolutionary scientists on the courtyard’s concrete benches. Over time, the iron filing-created images will emerge and change, metaphorically mirroring the concept of evolution. The work emphasizes the idea that although “The Origin of the Species,” was published in 1859, it was not the last word on evolutionary biology. The portraits that emerge on benches will be the images of people who have contributed to the evolving scientific understanding of evolution. The experience of the piece will be one of discovery, of people passing by everyday and slowly becoming aware of the changing materials. The pieces will be out in the open and will evolve organically by exposure to the weather, unimpeded by human intervention.

The Education/Art/Science Connection. The link between art and science is quickly becoming one of the most readily accessible keys to gaining a fuller insight into both disciplines. When each is viewed through the lens of the other, the similarities in process, depth of possibility and range of outcome creates a new space in which art and science may co-exist and educate. According to Stephen Wilson, Professor of Conceptual Information Arts at San Francisco State University and author of *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology*: “History shows that there are many other potentially fruitful models for art/science integration than our own. Cultures flourished when activities we now call science or art were pursued in a unified way. Although not yet a dominant theme in mainstream art or science, there are increasing calls from within both for cross-fertilization. Some in the sciences realize that research can be enriched by infusion of new questions and new interpretative frameworks.”

Signage and a website will be used to educate viewers about the identity and significance of the scientists whose heads are represented, as well as about the art installation and the artist. They will also provide information about the chemical processes taking place. A free educational program for the public will include Solondz’s presentation on her methods and the concepts behind the piece. She will invite the viewers to use iron filings and salt to create their own pieces that they can take home. As part of this program, John Straub, Professor of Theoretical and Computational Chemistry and Biophysics at Boston University, will explain the science behind the pieces, how they are formed, and the chemistry of salt, crystallization and rust. This project has several overlaps with the curriculum at Boston University. Solondz’s work shares with science a fascination with experimentation and observation that is based in the visible changes of the material and the physical world. “The Evolution of Darwin” is an artistic bridge between various aspects of evolution, some of which can be explored in classes in the basic sciences: Physics, Chemistry and Biology. As part of their involvement, students will be asked to make use of their knowledge of fundamental concepts in science, and to see those concepts as applicable to situations beyond those routinely treated in their coursework. Interested students will be invited to work with the artist by suggesting chemical and physical alterations to the process that could affect the resulting work. The installation will provide learning experiences for both public viewers who happen upon it and the students who will study its progress.

Funding Request. We are seeking \$6,000 for materials and for printing and installation of labels, signage, website, and other educational materials.

About the Artist. Esther Solondz is a visual artist who lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. She received an MFA in Photography from Rhode Island School of Design in 1980, and did raduate work in film at New York University from 1985-86. She has been the recipient of several grants and awards, including three Rhode Island Arts Council fellowships (Photo 1981, Painting 1996, Sculpture 2002) and a New England Foundation for the Arts regional National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in Painting in 1992. Her work has been widely exhibited and reviewed over the last 20 years in one person and group shows at museums and galleries throughout the Northeast. She is currently a part time instructor at Rhode Island School of Design.

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