

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.



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."