

The
(Un) Making
of

Installations by Michael Peha

Nature

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris

May 16–July 11, 1990

Controlled

Michael Paha's installations simulate ecosystems. He calls each one an "orsarium," from the Latin *ars* (art) and *arium* (place or housing). These dynamic works are elaborate networks of terrariums, aquariums, and vivariums. Within each controlled environment lies a certain unpredictability: the plant and animal life inside cannot be programmed, nor can the functions of the environment itself be entirely foreseen. This dialectic between the human desire for control and nature's resistance to such control informs all of Paha's work.

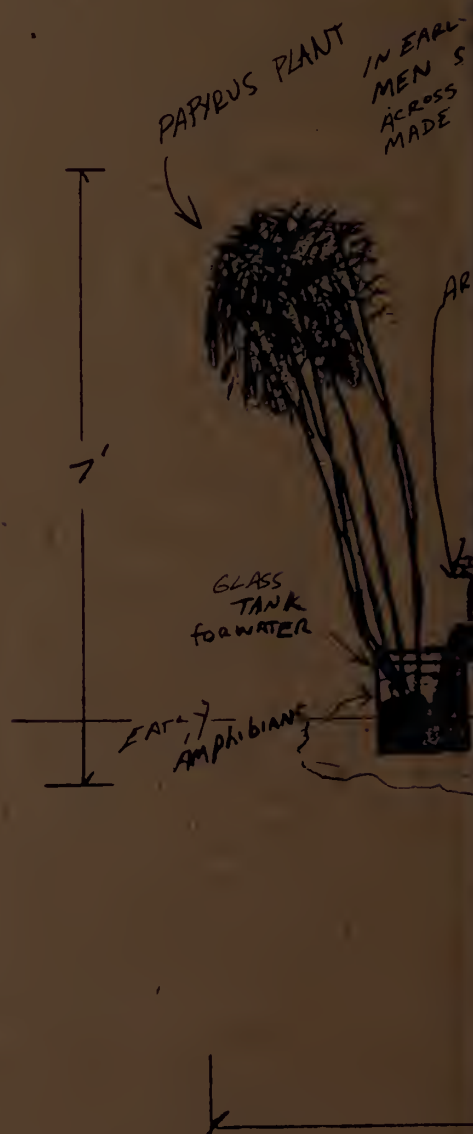
A native of Chicago, Paha (b. 1957) studied art in the early 1970s in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was introduced to the rural landscape of the region as well as to the Earthworks movement. When he returned to Chicago at the end of the seventies, he began to rethink the position of the "natural" within the context of the urban environment. More recently, his role as a preparator of displays at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has encouraged him to create living ecosystems as vehicles for the investigation of control and fantasy in relationship to nature.

Paha's orsariums suggest the many different ways in which human and natural systems interact. Whereas his contemporaries, among them Ashley Bickerton and Clegg and Guttmann, posit a romantic union of industrial and natural elements, Paha questions the position of power over nature that technology permits us to assume. Indeed, he is interested in how technology disrupts natural processes. His work highlights various natural systems, such as the geological process of streambed erosion, which compensates for this often violent interaction.

In *Timeline* (1985, reinstalled 1990) Paha re-presents a historical narrative of the technological exploitation of nature by Western civilization. The work begins with large stalks of papyrus, which the Egyptians used for sailing vessels. As the piece continues, a miniature formscape in the form of a rigid line of plants alludes to the modern industrialization of agriculture. The section representing the nuclear age—our contemporary investment in nuclear technology and genetic engineering—is interpreted through "low-tech" scientific equipment such as the bunsen burner, test

tubes, and flasks. The work concludes, however, not in the familiar terrain of a post-apocalyptic dystopia, but rather in an affirmation of the regenerative powers of nature in the formation of the new ice age. The result of this civilization, Paha asserts, may be the end of human life but not of natural existence.

If *Timeline* explores the historical relationship between industrialization and the natural world, then *As We Sleep* (1988) explores the more mysterious and phantasmagoric aspects of this relationship. Large two-by-four wooden beams create a skeletal wall frame containing various nocturnal animal habitats. A community of finches inhabits the top expanse of the work. Underneath, several terrariums housing leeches and catfish are connected by glass tubing, allowing the



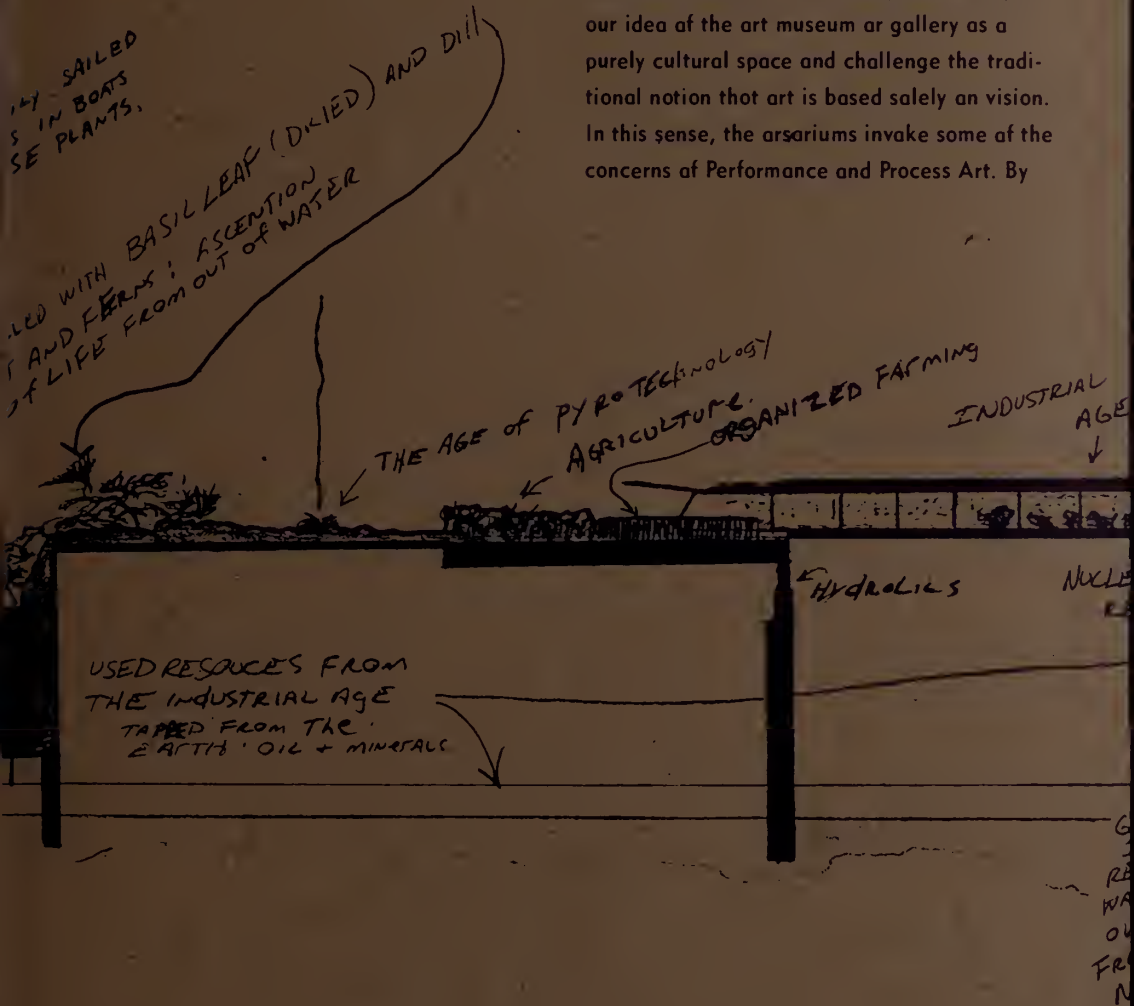
Environments

aquatic life to travel freely throughout the system. And mice run through an elaborate network of wire mesh tunnels that link the entire ecosystem. Through the lens of science, Paha brings into focus aspects of the natural world that usually remain invisible. In addition to the nocturnal life of animals, the continuous movement of water running through *As We Sleep* cuts a streambed in the split-level terrariums.

While the piece exposes a nocturnal ecosystem, it also creates a familiar tableau—a bedroom, a laboratory, a study. Positioned behind the wooden wall frame is a bed covered by a blanket. Situated between the terrariums

is a bookshelf containing four volumes of *Haw Things Wark*. A desk sits peripheral to the wall structure with a microscope placed on it. The bed (a place of dreaming) and the microscope (an emblem of scrutinizing vision) converge, elucidating our desire for mastery. Underneath the red lighting, things not seen in the world, such as the nocturnal life of animals and the memories of childhood, are thrown into relief. These intricacies invite the viewer into a world of fantasy—to play the explorer, the conqueror, the scientist. However, this childlike fantasy of omnipotence is subtly subverted, for this ecosystem is a self-contained world that insists upon following its own laws.

The sounds and movements of the finches, mice, and water in *As We Sleep* also disrupt our idea of the art museum or gallery as a purely cultural space and challenge the traditional notion that art is based solely on vision. In this sense, the arseriums invoke some of the concerns of Performance and Process Art. By



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S
BODY SAILED
NS IN BOATS
ESE PLANTS,

FILLED WITH BASIL LEAF (DRIED) AND DILL
RT AND FERNS; ASCENSION
OF LIFE FROM OUT OF WATER

← THE AGE OF PYROTECHNOLOGY
← AGRICULTURE.

← ORGANIZED FARMING

INDUSTRIAL
A ↓

← HYDRAULICS

NX

USED RESOURCES FROM
THE INDUSTRIAL AGE
TAPPED FROM THE
EARTH OIL + MINERALS

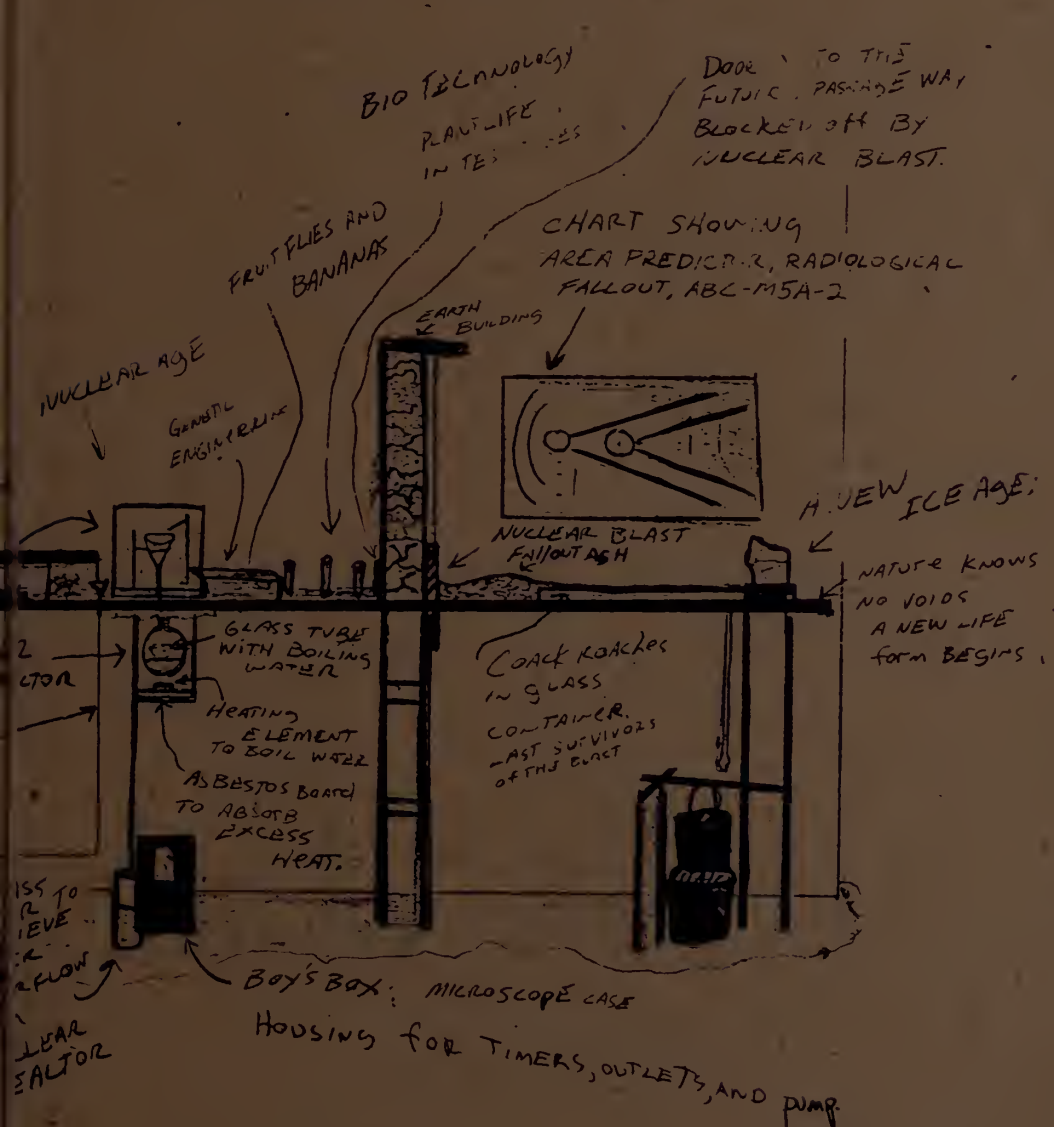
focusing on natural processes, Paha asks us to rethink conventional ideas of time and space.

Paha's installations are part of a larger contemporary art movement that is re-examining our relationship to nature. Unlike the environmental art movement of the sixties and seventies, contemporary artists are not concerned with socio-ecological problem solving. Rather, they seek to activate our fears, fantasies, and desires regarding technology, nature, and environmental endangerment.

"The (Un)Moking of Nature" explores various ways in which artists are engaged in this project, from the reappropriation of the genre of

landscape painting to the reinvestigation of natural materials in sculpture and the direct engagement of environmental issues. Contemporary artists are addressing the forces that construct nature's image and threaten its existence. By confronting many of these issues simultaneously, Paha's installations create an environment that facilitates a dialogue, which, in the face of environmental endangerment, is of increasing concern to all of us.

James Marcovitz
Helen Molesworth



Michael Paha 1985

Installations by Michael Paha

Timeline, 1985, reinstalled 1990

Mixed-medio installation,

dimensions variable

Collection of the artist

As We Sleep, 1988

Mixed-medio installation,

dimensions variable

Perimeter Gallery, Chicago

This exhibition was organized by the following

Helene Rubinstein Fellows in the 1989–90

Whitney Museum Independent Study Program:

Julio Einspruch, Elizabeth Finch, James

Morcovitz, Helen Molesworth, and Lydio Yee

The (Un)Making of Nature

is a two-part exhibition.

Whitney Museum of American Art

of Philip Morris

New York, New York

May 16–July 11, 1990

Whitney Museum of American Art

Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza

New York, New York

May 31–July 27, 1990

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**

120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
Free admission

Gallery Hours

Manday–Saturday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm
Thursday, 11:00 am–7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Manday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm
Sunday, 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Manday, Wednesday, Friday, 1:00 pm
Tours by appointment
For more information, call (212) 878-2453

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Cover: Michael Paha,
drawing for *Timeline* (detail), 1985

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