A Survey of the National Fine Arts Program

1980

Winter Olympics

Lake Placid, New York

ART AT THE OLYMPICS

horses in shelter

horses arched into the way from position above the

line
landscape, n. 1. A portion of land which the eye can comprehend in a single view, esp. in its pictorial aspect. 2. A picture representing inland natural scenery.

Painting—any painting—can be inhabited only imaginatively. "Tactile values," depth cues such as shading and spatial overlap, as well as compositional devices which direct attention away from the frame and deeper into imaginary space—these are pictorial conventions which prolong the fantasy of inhabitation. It was, of course, this illusion of physically accessible, three-dimensional space that Cézanne and Picasso sought to counteract in their tightly woven canvases, and the history of painting that proceeds from them is in fact a chronicle of the progressive elimination of everything that might suggest the physical penetration, occupation, inhabitation of space. This "reduction," as it was called, was not limited to painting; modernist sculpture followed suit with pictorial works which, through lines and planes that divided or enclosed space but did not appear to occupy it, aspired to "pure visibility."

What differentiates Veiled Landscape from its modernist predecessors, however, is the fact that here the viewer is invited to enter the picture, to explore the space internal to it, to climb over and under fences until he stands at the threshold marked by its gate. This is thus a landscape in both senses of the term: it manifests a portion of nature as palpably, tangibly present and thus open to physical inspection; it also withdraws that landscape from us by appearing to represent it as a picture. Hence the function of the veil. We say that someone's meaning is "veiled" when it is obscure, indirect, impenetrable. A veil is a screen interposed between the viewer and the viewed whose function is both to reveal and to conceal, to expose and to protect. Like the drapery on classical statues, which both discloses the body underneath and covers its nudity, the veil exists, as Mallarmé wrote, "between desire and its fulfillment, penetration and its recollection, at once anticipating, then recalling, the future, the past, under a false appearance of presentness."

If I have dwelt on Veiled Landscape, it is because this work seems to exemplify the concerns of most of the large-scale "environmental" works installed in Lake Placid on the occasion of the XIII Winter
Locations of the works:

Siah Armajani, *Reading House*, Hillcrest Avenue Park.
Richard Fleischner, *Fence and Covered Fence*, Ausable River, near the Olympic ski jumps.
Lloyd Hamrol, Packed snow structure, Lake Placid Resort Hotel.
Doug Hollis, *Field of Vision*, Lake Placid Resort Hotel golf course.

Nancy Holt, *30 Below*, Old Military Road near the Olympic ski jumps.
Robert Irwin, untitled, Olympic Arena Hill.
Mary Miss, *Veiled Landscape*, W. Alton Jones Cell Science Center.
Elyn Zimmerman, untitled, Lake Placid Center for Music, Drama and Art.

However indebted it may appear to the specifics of its site, Fence and Covered Fence ultimately derives from a (remembered) pictorial source: a painting of soccer players in a field by the French naïf, the "Douanier," Rousseau.

Fleischner has not, however, populated his field for, true to the space from which it derives, it can be inhabited only imaginatively. Presenting us with an empty image, the artist solicits the memories and associations of the viewer, through which the image will again be filled.

In an open field on the grounds of the Lake Placid Center for Music, Drama, and Art, Elyn Zimmerman has installed yet a third fence-work. Here nineteen cyclone-fence panels function as screens which frame two massive, sculptural boulders, which are withdrawn into inaccessible pictorial space. When viewed from certain angles, the work also frames itself, each panel seen in turn as a reduced, internal image of the last, thus creating an effect of infinite regress which, like parallel mirrors, compresses real space out of the image.

At the same time, Zimmerman's fences describe the approach to a path cleared through the woods to a large frozen pond. Consequently actual physical passage governs our experience of the work; as the artist notes, "One passes through conditions of openness and lightness (the field), to darkness and closure (the woods), to openness and brightness again (the pond)." The theme of passage, as well as the abstract conditions of openness and closure are primary axiomatic features of architecture. Polar opposites, landscape and architecture are collapsed in this work, not through the generation of a third term from their antithesis, but by a revelation of properties of one as inherent in the other. In Zimmerman's work we experience architectural features directly from the landscape itself.

A number of artists address similar issues in works that are unmistakably architectural in impulse: Siah Armajani in his Reading House, Nancy Holt in her 30 Below, Lloyd Hamrol in his packed snow structure. All of these artists attempt to overcome the antithesis between landscape and architecture by making work which physically merges into its setting. Hamrol, for example, builds a rudimentary architectural structure of snow, that is, directly out of the landscape. His work is in this way continuous with its site at the Lake Placid Resort Hotel; come the spring thaw, it will literally melt back into it.