One of Buster Simpson's "river Rolaid's"—42.5-pound limestone disks—dissolving slowly in the Seattle water system. These "anti-acid" pills slowly break down to neutralize the acidity of the water, thereby bringing it back to health. Photo: Roger Schreiber.
Buster Simpson WORKS

In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, will give visitors a better understanding of how an environment—particularly that of a museum—can be an active component in the creation and experience of contemporary art.

Originally from Michigan, Buster Simpson has lived and worked in Seattle for more than seventeen years. His aesthetic concerns merge social and ecological issues, and his art has long engaged the community surrounding the public market in downtown Seattle. Many of his previous major works have been realized in public spaces, not as official commissions but as self-initiated projects focusing on the environment.

The following text is edited from a February 6, 1989, interview with the artist.

_Ned Rifkin, Chief Curator for Exhibitions_

**Rifkin:** Your art primarily involves recycling, the environmental aspects of certain materials, and the attendant social and political issues. Why?

Simpson: Art may be one of the most effective avenues for social change—nonlinear thinking applied to public works. My approach to social and environmental concerns stems from a belief that we should act in concert with the planet rather than assume we are the beneficiaries of all its riches. We are only one of its components, unique in our intelligence.

**Rifkin:** In 1969, you made artworks for the Woodstock Music and Art Festival in Bethel, New York. As I recall, during the festival many of those structures were used as raw material for other things. Please explain what happened and how the experience changed your thinking about art.

Simpson: For the Woodstock festival, I was one in a team of artists hired to make environmental pieces, what we called at the time "agrarian art," responding to the rural nature of the site. Because the festival drew more than four hundred thousand people, exceeding everyone's attendance expectations, the facilities were inadequate, and our art was reappropriated for parts—used for bedding, shelter, and firewood. It was a jolt to me and my academic art training. It taught me the relative worth of art in the real world.

**Rifkin:** How does your current work relate to your past work?

Simpson: In 1978, I installed a clothesline made of nine lines that spanned an alley and connected a fixed-income housing project to a luxury condominium in downtown Seattle. To the urban designer, the hanging clothes suggested banners of reoccupation; to the sociologist, the piece represented the healing of a downtown neighborhood; to the scientist, it was an example of passive solar energy at work. Everyone heard the Aeolian harp resonance in the lines on windy days.
That year, I also did a project at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. The project, which continues to this day, was seminal. An earlier visit to Artpark in 1977 had made me aware of the developing Love Canal story, which had not yet made national news. Here was landfill of a new toxic magnitude. Using as models disposable picnic plates, the ones that look like faces (similar to an aluminum TV dinner tray, c. 1955, in the Smithsonian's collection), I cast an edition of plates in concrete. Then I placed them in a sewer outfall that emptied into the Niagara River as an acknowledgment of our digestive cycle. In 1984, I was able to cast plates in vitreous china at the Kohler factory when I participated in Arts/Industry [a resident art program of the Kohler Co. and the John and Michael Kohler Arts Center], casting my plates alongside workers casting toilets. I have since placed groups of plates at outfalls using the title "When the Tide Is Out the Table Is Set," a reinterpretation of the Salish Indian description of the abundance of food at low tide. As the plates steep in the outfall's effluent, they collect contaminants that flux to form a glaze during kiln firing. The irony of this process is that I hope for white plates rather than a colorful glaze, which indicates toxins.

In 1987, I introduced the composting commode to downtown Seattle. This project involves siting a public toilet accessible to street people and the patrons of two missions. The portable commode is placed over an empty tree pit and remains until the pit is full. It is then moved and a tree planted in the enriched urban hardpan soil. Important safeguards for health and sanitation had to be worked out and approved by the county, state, and city health departments as well as the Seattle Engineering Department and the Board of Public Works.

My urban arboretum project, which began in 1978, has also made me aware of acid rain, which is compounded by the city environment. I started working with limestone because it sweetens and neutralizes acidic water. I administered large limestone disks, "river Rolaids" or "Tums for Mother Nature," to several watersheds in order to neutralize the acidity of the river water. These large pills have become a stopgap solution—the bigger the problem, the bigger the pill.
BIOGRAPHY
Born in Saginaw, Michigan, May 29, 1942.
Awards include Special Projects Grant, National Endowment for the Arts, 1980; Individual Artist Fellowship Grant, National Endowment for the Arts, 1981; Urban Arboretum Project Grant, National Endowment for the Arts, 1984.
Living and working in Seattle.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1969 Editions Gallery, Ann Arbor.
1979 and/or, Seattle, Review of Projects Based on Art Park Residency by Buster Simpson.
1980 Western Front, Vancouver, British Columbia, Buster Simpson.
1988 Spaces, Seattle, Buster Simpson: West Sixth Streetscape.

INSTALLATIONS AND PROJECTS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN
1973 98 Yesler, Seattle, Selective Disposal Project.
1977 2001 First Avenue, Seattle, 7-7-77.
1980 First Avenue, Seattle, Street Benches and Trees (ongoing); Pike Place Market, Seattle, Crow’s Nest (no longer extant).
1988 First Avenue, Seattle, A Poem to Be Worn; Downtown Crossing, Boston, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority: Arts on the Line; Situations.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1963 Flint (Michigan) Institute of Arts, Flint Area Exhibition.
1965 The Detroit Institute of Arts, 55th Exhibition for Michigan Artists.
1974 and/or, Seattle, Artist Books.
1979 and/or, Seattle, Seat and Read; Seattle Art Museum, Andrew Keating/Buster Simpson.
1980 Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, Sculpture 1980; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, West Coast: Art for the Vice President’s House.
1981 Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, Two Schools of Fish.
1983 Teatrocirco Spaziizzeri, Rome, Italy, Oono Home, Permanent (a collaboration with choreographer/dancer Steve Paxton); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, Outside New York: Seattle, and tour to Seattle Art Museum.
1985 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Artist As Social Designer: Aspects of Urban Art Today; Buffalo Bayou and Houston International Festival, The Bayou Show Presented by the Houston International Festival; Mercer Union, Toronto, Reconstituted Elements; Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Artists & Architects: Challenges in Collaboration.
1988 911 Contemporary Arts Center, Seattle, Homes for Art II.
1989 Seattle Art Museum; 2-D/3-D: Sculptors’ Drawings.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Howe, Peter J. "MBTA Hopes Riders Will Be Transported by Art." *Boston Globe*, April 27, 1988, pp. 21, 35.


