Radical Romanticism

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An artistic avant-garde is interested in the landscape once again.[1] The last time that a North American artistic elite evinced a similar interest was during the late 19th century. For those romantic era artists and designers, the landscape provided the best context for making synthetic and universal artistic statements. There are some important historical parallels between the Romantic Era and our own time, parallels that are discussed below in an attempt to explain why many artists and designers feel the same way today.

But as part of this discussion a distinction must be made; two diametrically opposed tendencies are vying for allegiance in this discourse. Adherents of both tendencies seek to illustrate the essential nature of our relationship with the landscape through their work. Both tendencies have been labeled "avant-garde" in the design press. But adherents of only one of these two tendencies—variously known as "Post Structuralism," "Deconstruction," and "Deconstructivist Architecture"—maintain Modernism's basic tendency to elitism and abstraction while admitting that modernist principles cannot "explain" the world we live in; nothing can, they say.[2] Adherents to the other tendency, a tendency I am calling "Radical Romanticism," reject most modernist principles for a very different set of principles. As a consequence they feel that their "representations" *can* attain universal significance. What follows is a brief attempt to distinguish between the two tendencies and to render some opinion as to which of the two is the more defensible.

According to Wojciech Lesnikowski (1982), author of *Rationalism and Romanticism in Architecture,* a major change in design epoch is usually precipitated by a shift in cultural adherence from one basic philosophical paradigm to the other. The two philosophical poles he identifies are Rationalism and Romanticism. In his view *Rationalism* can be summarily defined as the world view based on the notion that a complete understanding of all phenomena is theoretically possible by means of a rigorous analysis of observable events. *Romanticism* is the world view based on the conviction that an understanding of life's most important phenomena is incomplete unless the role of the nonexpressible and invisible is acknowledged. In Lesnikowski's view, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the modernist period can be considered design eras that parallel "rational" epochs, while the Gothic, the Mannerist, and naturally the romantic period itself can be numbered among the design eras that parallel the "romantic" epochs. A major swing from a rational epoch to a romantic epoch occurred in the late-18th through the mid-19th century, when the era of the Enlightenment gave way to the Romantic Era itself. While the particular causes of such an intense paradigm shift are naturally complex and even at times contradictory, the Italian architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri sees global colonialism as a central cause—a cause that produced some important changes in landscape design:

> [I]n the English pastoral garden . . . there is embodied an implicit attempt at the reunification of the entire linguistic experience of mankind, at least in its figurative expression. In the microcosm of a "nature educated to be natural," little chinese temples, greco-roman ruins, gothic memories, magical and arcadian settings, symbolic organisms, enchanted places add up to an evident aspiration to the synthesis of human customs. (Tafuri 1987, p. 39)

Significantly, for Tafuri the Romantic Era is the one historical period wherein the landscape was an important context for the expression of a world view or, said another way, the expression of a metalanguage of environmental meaning in form. Also significantly, he suggests that it was the unfathomable relativity of language and custom, the absence of cultural absolutes, brought home to England as the conceptual booty of colonial expansion, that created a thirst for universality and synthesis that only the landscape seemed capable of quenching.[3]

As Irving Fisher explains in *Frederick Law Olmsted and the City Planning Movement in the United States* (1988), the artistic and design avant-garde of the romantic era rejected the rationalist enlightenment era notion that life's most important phenomena could be entirely explained as a consequence of matter in motion, the universe as a "great watch" in the metaphor of Sir Isaac Newton; conceptions broadened by colonial-age exposure to the globe's

extraordinary physical and cultural complexity called such a simplified conceptual model into question. For 19th-century Romantics, the physically and culturally complex world now opening up seemed far more complex than Newton's watch; no metaphor short of the miracle of life seemed an adequate descriptor: the world was "organic" they said. In the same way that any organism is a manifestation of the particular *relationship* between the *material* stuff of the world (carbon, water, calcium, and so forth) and the *ethereal* force of *life* that organizes and invigorates the organism, so too is the world constituted, albeit with infinitely greater complexity.

Humans, because of their self awareness, enjoyed a special status in the romantic philosophy because only humans could *contemplate* the relationship between the physical material of the earth and the ethereal vitalism of life's invisible creative forces. The avenue for contemplating the relationship between the material and the ethereal was through human sensuality (as opposed to human rationality). The destination for this avenue was the human subconscious, wherein the synergy between ethereal life force (the life that I experience inside my mind as consciousness, which is part of all life) and the world's physicality (the world out there that I can see and touch) could be experienced directly (Fisher 1988). The highest manifestation of this synergy was therefore the miracle of consciousness. Consciousness was therefore akin to God. Naturally, romantic era poets, novelists, painters, and designers gravitated to the landscape when seeking this sense of fusion between the material and ethereal realm. They sought the combination of mental state and landscape setting where nature's physical complexity was greatest and where it was therefore most saturated with life's ethereal spirit. In short, they were seeking an appropriate location to experience some sort of an epiphany.[4] Olmsted, Cleveland, and other romantic era landscape designers were in fact designing settings where a landscape-based epiphany was available to all. They shared the democratic belief that these experiences had a therapeutic function for the park user and by extension had a similarly therapeutic effect for the culture at large (Cranz 1982).

There seem to be clear historical parallels between the romantic era and our own time that might help explain the renewed artistic importance of the landscape and the consequent "romantic like" transformations under way in landscape design. The same incongruous cultural booty that in the 18th century was brought home to England in ships is now brought home by an all-pervasive communications network. Words and images from all over the world are felt immediately but remain uninterpretable. Because the grouping together of these words and images is consequent only to their simultaneity, not to their similitude, they are necessarily disconnected and relative in the meanings that they convey. Many design theorists suggest that this merging of disparate cultures into the global media melting pot is eroding the shared presumptions upon which Western ideas of art and design have traditionally been based, making universally valid artistic statements more and more difficult.

In light of this parallel between the romantic period and our own time, the return of the postmodern avant-garde to the subject matter of the landscape seems natural and welcome. Rationalist Modernism's collapse was due in part to its impotence in maintaining one conceptual structure in the face of the contemporary deluge of words and symbols. The romantic view, since it is less dependent on language-based rational thought for its insights and consequently more dependent on the sensuous and the physical, can resist and even ignore this semiotic onslaught. The recent reemergence of a "romantic like" view is, if anything, more ideologically driven than it was during the romantic-industrial era; the impending postindustrial ecological catastrophe has greatly increased the stakes. Because of the heightened political and ethical content of this work, I am herein referring to this new romantic tendency as Radical Romanticism. Its radicalism will be brought to light in the discussion of exemplary works, which concludes this essay.

But before turning to the discussion of that work, I must admit that the radically romantic tendency does not have the field of creative action to itself. In the ongoing discourse surrounding the possibility of an avant-garde of the landscape, significant attention has been given to design work exhibiting a poststructuralist tendency. Without a doubt the most intentionally didactic, the most aggressively polemic, the largest, and the therefore most discussed example of this tendency is Parc de la Villette in Paris. Designed by a team led by the building architect Bernard Tschumi, the park is designed in conformance with principles that are diametrically opposed to those that informed Olmsted's Central Park. The Parc de la Villette site was "deconstructed" to illustrate that the sense of revelation that Olmsted's parks facilitated was pure illusion:

> For today the term "park" has lost its universal meaning; it no longer refers to a fixed absolute, nor to an ideal. Not the *hortus conclusus* and not the replica of nature. (Tschumi 1988, p. 35)

In this, Tschumi preserves the view of the earlier modernist avant-garde designers who, choosing to deny their historical progenitors in the romantic period, dismissed the aesthetic of romantic sensuality, inserting in its place an aesthetic of the brutally logical (Jencks 1988).[5] For the Modernists, the hard realities of technological change were more poetic than were romantic images of fecundity and fertility. The following extract from F. T. Marrinetti's infamous "Futurist Manifesto" is illustrative of the invective common to these early modernist era salvos; the quotation also illustrates the similarity in style and content between Tschumi's Poststructuralism and its modernist antecedent:

> We declare that the world's splendor has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed . . . a roaring motor car, which looks as though running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. (Taylor 1961, p. 124)

However, Tschumi and other poststructuralist landscape designers transform the rationalist modernist paradigm into something less than it was by *rejecting* the possibility of an absolute "statement," while stopping short of abandoning Modernism's

method for making these "statements": language-based rational thought. Tschumi criticizes rationalist modernism's presumption that the built artifact could ever be a pure statement, completely free from the effects of a constantly changing linguistic milieu, and therefore could be a world unto itself, something solid, something true:

> In consequence there is no absolute "truth" to the architectural project, for whatever "meaning" it may have is a function of interpretation: it is not resident in the object, or in the object's materials. (Tschumi 1988, p. 39)

In place of the elusive "truth," Tschumi's work at la Villette intentionally celebrates "madness." For Tschumi, who appropriates his design theory from the poststructuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida, madness is a mental space of disruptions and disjunctions; therefore, he says that his park was designed to be fractured and disjoined because

> in disruptions and disjunctions, their characteristic fragmentation and dissociation, today's cultural circumstances suggest the need to discard established categories of meaning and contextual histories. (Tschumi 1988, p. 33)

Although Tschumi's work is open to criticism from a number of positions, one seems most important to our discussion of the avant-garde and the landscape. Tschumi, like his touchstone Derrida, elevates the question of true versus false (epistemology) to the level of right versus wrong (ethics) (Schulte-Sasse 1984). For Tschumi, any "text," any cohesive description, any message or meaning incorporated into the work of art, any self-conscious act of composition is propaganda. Such texts, because they represent not self-evident "truth" but rather the "ideology" of a particular group (that is, their values), are necessarily "wrong" since they are not "true." Implicit in this notion, and understandable in the context of a school of criticism that until recently had confined itself to literary criticism, is the assumption that "truth" can only emerge from language-based sources and that, because language itself is tainted, the closest one can ever hope to get to truth is to "stop the story," so to speak, or to

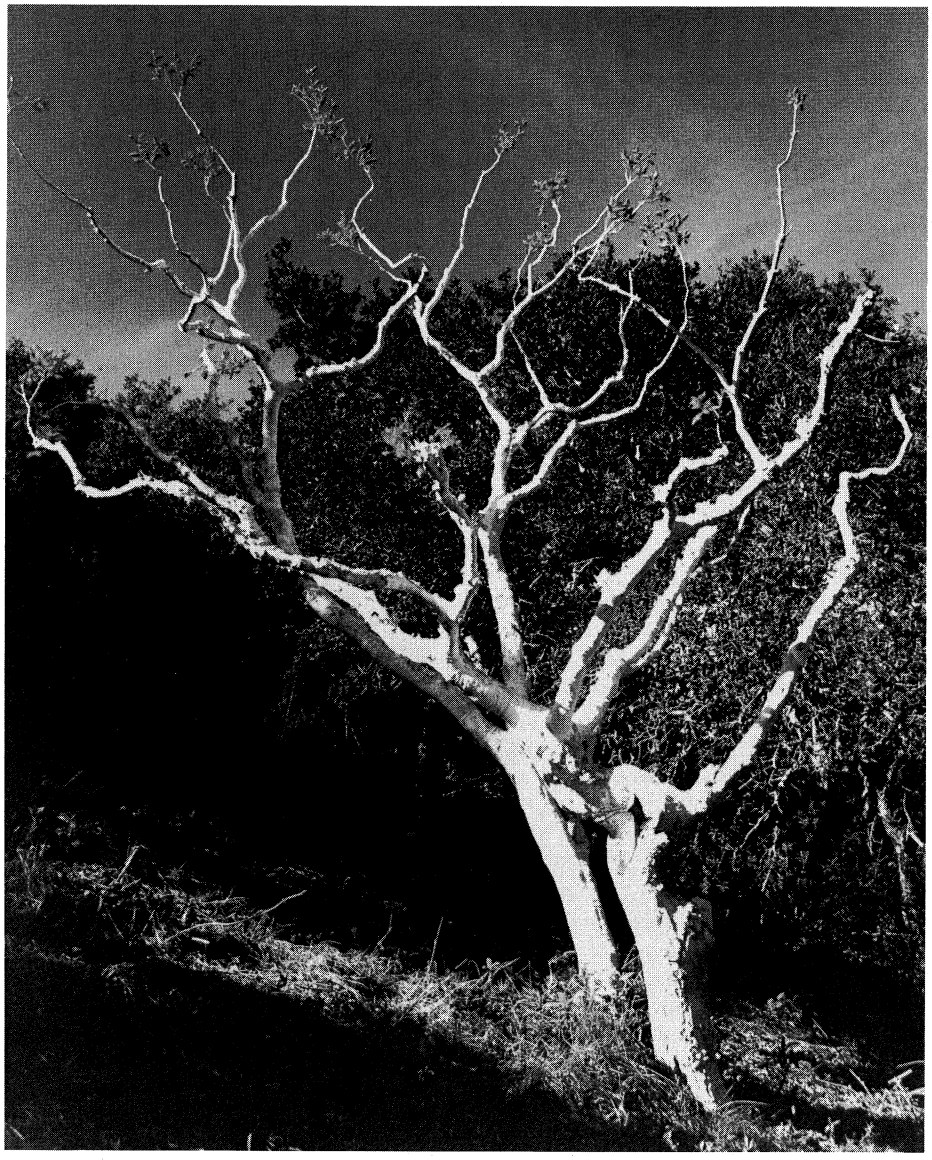

Figure 1. Gary Dwyer: *Sacrifice.* San Luis Obispo California. Photo by Gary Dwyer.

"open up a rupture" in the discourse to show the "truth" of nonmeaning. But what if, as Schulte-Sasse allows, there is an alternative to the language-based realm of experience?

> Post-structuralism excludes from the start the possibility that there might exist a material organization of social reality external to language and imprinted on our psyche (and physical being), written into our existence via the mechanisms of material as well as cultural reproduction. (Schulte-Sasse 1984, p. xxvii)

According to this hypothesis, material experiences are a natural part of being a human animal. They are experienced in the extralinguistic realm of the subconscious, the sensual, and the intuitive. Dominant cultural institutions seek to appropriate this sensual realm for their own ends[6] but are only partly successful.[7] Artistic production that reveals and heightens these material experiences for the public can undermine this insidious appropriation and retake the terrain of material experience. This aesthetic retaking has a radical ideological motive and is therefore avant-garde: it forcefully resists the manipulative thrust of culture's principal institutions. In making this argument, Schulte-Sasse invokes the French play-

wright Antonin Artaud (ironically a man from whose work Derrida draws very different lessons), who said that "it is a matter of substituting for the spoken language a different language of nature, whose expressive possibilities will be equated to verbal language" (Schulte-Sasse, 1984, p. xxviii).

It can safely be said that these material experiences, in the language of nature described by Artaud, are in essence identical to the ones that were revealed and heightened by the romantic era designers of yore. It can also be safely said that it is just as true today as it was in the 19th century that landscape is the obvious context for exploring these experiences. In addition, it follows logically that it is now *more* important to take back this sensual terrain from the cultural institutions that have appropriated it than it was in the 19th century; the plethora of signs and symbols emanating from the media are now much more pervasive; the proliferation of "theme parks," which supplant actual landscape experience with a symbolic "theme" referent, is just one example of the extent to which symbolic experience is subsuming actual material experience. This suggests that the aesthetic strategies adopted by those who would resist culture's attempt to appropriate the material experiences available in landscape must be commensurately bold. The discussion of some representative examples of radically romantic work that manifests this potency, already too long delayed, ensues below.

The late artist Robert Smithson, best known for his *Spiral Jetty* in Nevada's Salt Lake, can be credited with the first modern re-evaluation of the Romantic. For him, as for the Romantics, art's true realm lay where the material met the ethereal as manifest in experience (Holt 1979, p. 133). To get to this realm he allowed himself to drift into a "surd" state of heightened sensitivity. In this state the mask fell off nature's horrible beauty:

> Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas. Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun. All was enveloped in a flaming chromosphere. . . . Swirling within the incandescence of solar energy were sprays of blood. . . . Perception was heaving, the stomach turning, I was on a geologic fault that groaned within me. Between heat lightning and heat exhaustion the spiral curled into vaporization. I had the red heaves, while the sun vomited its corpuscular radiations. Rays of glare hit my eyes with the frequency of a Geiger counter. Surely, the storm clouds massing would turn into a rain of blood. (Holt 1979, p. 113)

Figure 2. Gary Dwyer: *Mea Culpa.* Photograph of a section of the San Andreas Fault near San Luis Obispo. The photo was altered by Dwyer for the purpose of illustrating his hypothetical proposal to write ogham lines on the landscape.

As this passage makes clear, the experiences that Smithson found in landscape were not made up of puffy white clouds, shade trees, cool breezes, and grazing sheep. This was a landscape that both bred and killed in a chaos of fecundity and entropy. This was a real world with all its sublime complexity acknowledged and thereby revealed.

Smithson himself located his work as the heir to the tradition established in North America by F. L. Olmsted, calling him "the first earth artist" (Holt 1979, p. 123). Smithson adhered to the same romantic era philosophy and attendant aesthetic theory as did Olmsted. More importantly, he updated this romantic tradition by developing his "Dialectical Landscape" aesthetic theory:

> Inherent in the theories of Price and Gilpin, and in Olmsted's response to them, are the beginnings of a dialectic of the landscape. Burke's notion of "beautiful" and "sublime" functions as a *thesis* of smoothness, gentle curves, and delicacy of nature, and as an *antithesis* of terror, solitude, and

> vastness of nature, both of which are rooted in the real world, rather than in a Hegelian Ideal. Price and Gilpin provide a *synthesis* with their formulation of the "picturesque, which on close examination is related to chance and change in the material order of nature. The contradictions of the "picturesque" depart from a static formalistic view of nature. The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. (Holt 1979, p. 119)

For Smithson and the romantic era designers, the beautiful appeals to the ethereal *mind,* which loves order and logic. The sublime appeals to our *physical self,* which instinctively understands that our mortal life is maintained within the context of an indifferent, chaotic, fecund, and therefore sensually stimulating physical world. When the order of the mind and the "chaos" of nature find a shared expression in a work of landscape design, you have, again in the words of Schulte-Sasse, a depiction of "a material organization of reality external to language . . . written into our existence via the mechanisms of material as well as cultural reproduction." You have, in short, the Picturesque. For Smithson, the *Spiral Jetty* was picturesque in precisely this way.

There are many who followed in Smithson's wake, too numerous to discuss here. I will therefore conclude by remarking on the work of only two. I do so without meaning to limit the interpretation of this work, but only to identify specific works that seem to reside at the same intersection between the ethereal and the material that both Smithson and Olmsted explored.

The first example is Gary Dwyer's *Sacrifice* in San Luis Obispo, California (Figure 1). In this work the dialectical interdependence between the ethereal mind and the material world, as manifest in experience, is shockingly expressed (the tree was killed, a literal sacrifice). By focusing on the removal of a tree, something that goes unnoticed and for the most part unlamented in the modern world, the horrible necessity to kill living things so that human life can endure must be confronted head on. The sublime horror of the act requires a beautiful ritual to purge our conscience; the work is consequently both horrible and beautiful in the manner of the original Picturesque.

Figure 3. Michael Van Valkenburgh and Barbara Staufacher Solomon: *Scrims.* Cowles Conservatory of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photo by Thomas Hysell.

Dwyer's work also consciously seeks to take back the terrain of material experience from the onslaught of signs and symbols that threaten to overwhelm it. His hypothetical San Luis Obispo County, St. Andreas Fault work, *Mea Culpa,* gains back this ground through the tactical use of ogham, an ancient Celtic writing system (Figure 2). The written language of ogham is formed by combining short lines that cross a main stem. In Dwyer's hypothetical proposal, ogham lines were to be writ large on the line of the St. Andreas Fault in anticipation of the next land shift. The shifting earth would then rewrite the "words," allowing the earth to "speak" in a language that we, as humans, might understand. For Dwyer, this device allowed the work to back out of being "trapped in the chain of signifiers" (Schulte-Sasse 1984, p. xxi), a trap that Poststructuralists see no way out of: backwards in time to the birth of language itself. Ogham is used metaphorically as a way to "engage in a dialogue with the earth" close to the common ground at the junction of ethereal thought (language) and material substance (the landscape). "I know the earth moves, I want it to speak," says Dwyer (1986,

p. 15). The work is aimed at breaking through the cultural noise that passes for reality so that we can truly hear "the thunder of the universe."

The second example is Michael Van Valkenburgh's *Scrims* (Figure 3), designed in collaboration with Barbara Stauffacher Solomon for the Cowles Conservatory of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In conformance with the formalistic strategies that are characteristic of minimalist sculpture, the piece presents just a few physical elements to the perception of the viewer. Through this device, the work is imbued with the capacity to forcefully focus perception so that the true *subject* of the piece is the perceptual *experience,* the transaction between the perceiver and the piece, that the work engenders. But while formalistic strategies are similar, an important break from minimalist connotative strategies is introduced. Most minimalist sculpture strives to maintain the autonomy and independence of the perceptual transaction from outside contextual and semiotic influence; here those connections seem to be the final meaning of the piece. The simple incorporation of the Night Blooming Jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*) in this work, inexorably mounting higher and higher on the changeless stainless steel wires, opens up a breach in late-20th-century art through which the contingent quality of landscape experience can enter the discourse. Through the juxtaposition of the "sublime" vines with the "beautiful" wires, the work makes the picturesque dialectic that Smithson referred to powerfully present. This presence is manifest in the plant's dynamic change, manifest in the sunshine that strikes the piece at this moment at this season at this angle at this intensity, that is, manifest in any of the myriad of contingent phenomena that are always aspects of any landscape experience. This art grows, lives, and gets burned by the sun—just like us.

In the work of Smithson, Dwyer, and Van Valkenburgh, the re-emergence of the landscape as the logical venue for avant-garde work is apparent. This re-emergence can be seen as part of a more broadly based cultural shift from Rationalism back to Romanticism. Such a shift is timely, because the deluge of language-based information and opinion to which we are now routinely subjected makes many observers despair of the possibility of universally applicable synthesis, of the possibility for meaningful artistic "truth" in a relativistic and pluralistic world. Poststructuralists seem only to recognize the problems consequent to language's lack of solid substance, but they can offer no progressive response, only more alienation and ennui, a sigh of recognition at the brink of the void, then a jump in. Radical Romanticism as discussed here, while cognizant of the problem of interpretation and representation intrinsic to language, breaks free of despair through a rediscovery of a category of experience that is truly substantial: human relations with the earth itself. Through articulate, powerful, and numerous creative efforts grounded in this romantic ethic, a radically romantic avant-garde of the landscape can hold this threatened terrain of material landscape experience and fill that void with Nature's immense light.

Notes

1. A more thorough discussion of what I understand as the avant-garde and how it specifically relates to the discipline of landscape architecture can be found in "On the Possibility of an Avant-Garde in Landscape Architecture" (Condon 1990).
2. In this essay I use only the word "Poststructuralism" to connote all three, since all three of these titles tend to be used interchangeably.
3. According to Poggioli (1968), the first references to an artistic "avant-garde" in the modern sense of a self-conscious creative vanguard group that functioned as "the forerunner and the revealer" to show "where Humanity is going" (Laverdant 1845) occurred during the Romantic Era.
4. According to *Webster's,* an epiphany is a spiritual event in which the essence of a given object of manifestation appears to the subject.
5. Some critics recognize the basic Modernism of Tschumi's work by labeling it "Neo-modern," others by calling it "New-Modernism." Charles Jencks, because he does not see anything particularly new in the practice, prefers "Late Modern." For him Poststructuralism in architecture only develops Modernism's basic tendencies of elitism and abstraction to the point of extremism.
6. In capitalist cultures, the appropriation would be impelled by the profit motive. In totalitarian socialist cultures, the appropriation would have the stability of the state apparatus as its ultimate objective.
7. A blatant example of this attempt to appropriate a portion of the sensual realm was evident in the controversial Camel Cigarette "Smooth Character" advertising campaign of 1989. In this campaign the company consciously sought to appeal to buyers by appropriating the sensual realms of sexuality, natural environment, and physical action all at once. The feminist attack on this campaign was indicative of the sensitivity that institutional incursions into sensual terrain often evoke.

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