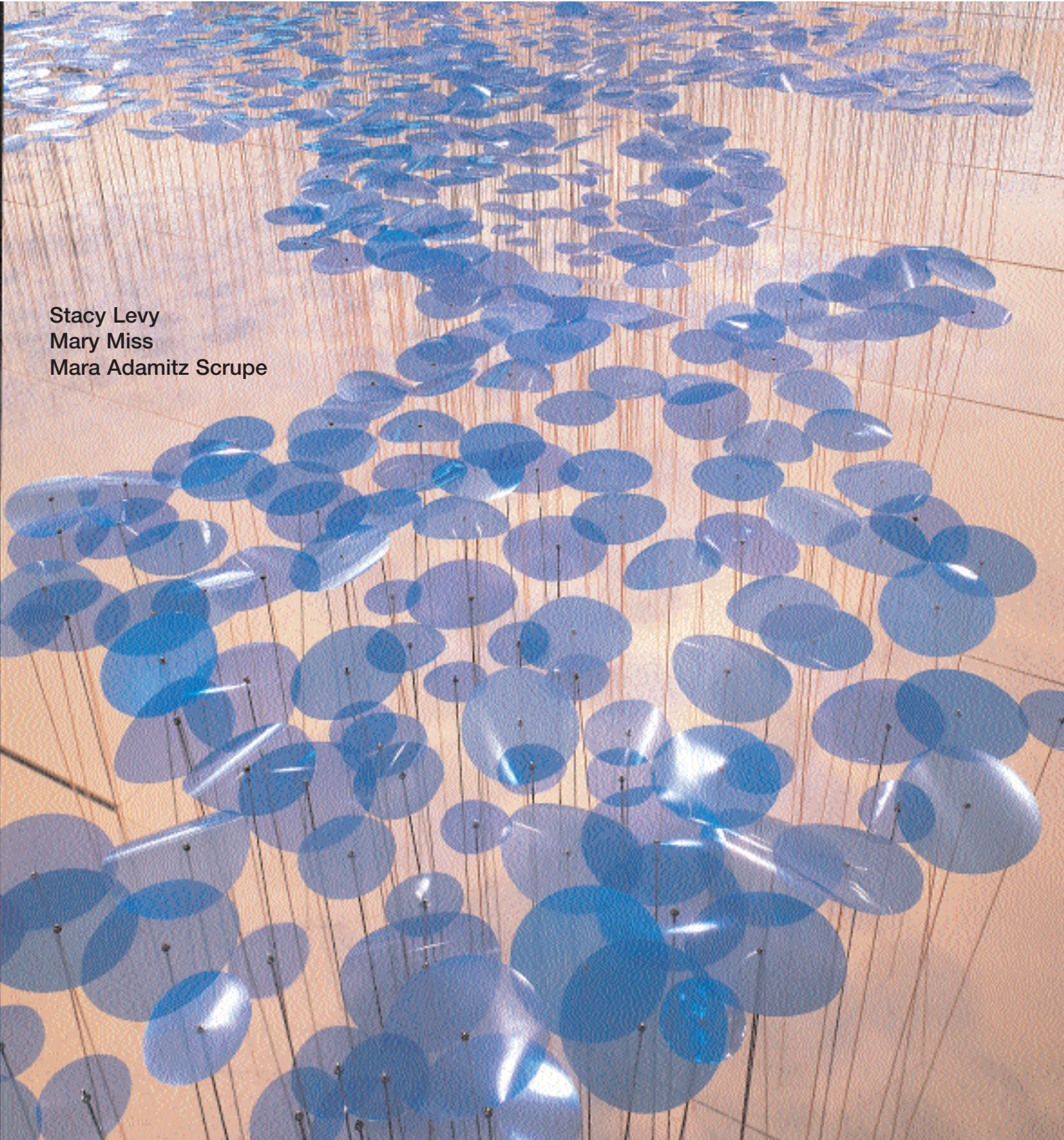


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Stacy Levy
Mary Miss
Mara Adamitz Scrupe



*Acid Mine Drainage & Art, Project
for Vintondale, 1995–2005.*

Two views of collaboration with
Julie Bargmann, T. Allan Comp,
Bob Deason, and community
volunteers, 40-acre excavated
site in Vintondale, Pennsylvania.

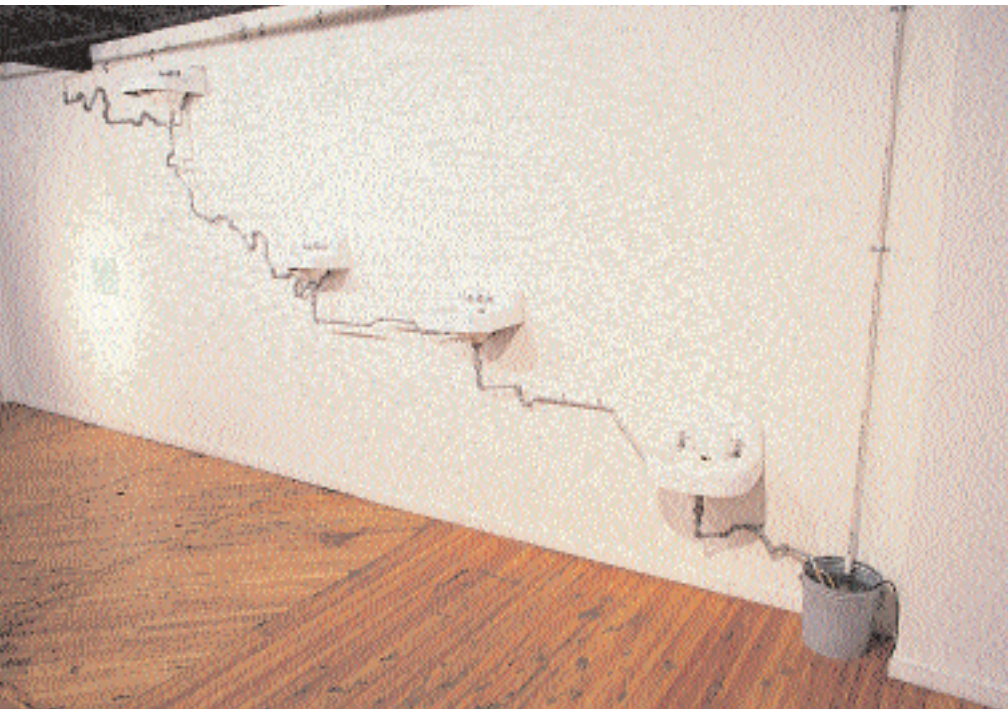
Stacy Levy



Understanding Nature

COURTESY THE ARTIST

BY KATHY BRUCE



Left: *Hidden River*, 1990. Galvanized pipe, porcelain sinks, running water, and sandblasted glass, 10 x 22 x 2 ft. Right, top and bottom: conceptual renderings of *Tideflowers*, 2004–08, showing the forms open and closed.

Stacy Levy transforms the invisible aspects of nature into visually seductive forms by acquainting us with the underlying structures of the natural world. Following in the footsteps of 1960s Land artists, she brings a fresh approach to her art-making, guided by her dual background in forestry and sculpture. Levy comments on nature in a way that is not just about gesture, information, ecology, or the landscape. At its best, her work redefines the categories of science, landscape art, and sculpture.

While in art school, Levy was intrigued by the structure of seedpods and sculpted dozens of variations on them in varying sizes and materials. As a result of this early work and her experience in forestry at Yale, she gradually came to realize that she was more interested in the natural progression of life than in static objects. But she found that the field of sculpture allowed her to deviate from the ecological constraints of forestry. The daily progression of seasons influenced her desire to make art about the processes of nature rather than in imitation of it. As a result, her practice of depicting natural processes through

her work has been informed by her training in sculpture, environmental science, and landscape architecture.

Levy's work has been linked to Process Art, Earth Art, conceptual art, and performance art, though she considers herself principally a sculptor. Sculpture, she feels "is a medium or field open to any form." Ironically, she has discovered that it is useless for her to use nature to establish a dialogue on nature. Rather than using living materials, she prefers to find man-made materials that contrast with nature to provide an altogether new vision. Unlike sculptors such as Ursula von Rydingsvard (for whom Levy was a studio assistant in 1980–81) who constantly work and rework ideas in one medium, Levy's work typically begins with the site, followed by the idea, and finally the materials. She intuitively allows the unique specifics of each project to dictate the materials required, and like a designer, she scopes out objects with the appropriate emotional intensity for each installation, thus contributing to the ever-fresh visual results of each work. She makes it a habit not to repeat familiar

resources. Closer in sensibility to Judy Pfaff or Sarah Sze in her vast selection of equipment, Levy uses a dizzying array of supplies to convey her ideas.

In *Watercourse* (1996), she used more than 8,000 plastic cups (later recycled) to map the Delaware River and its tributaries on the gallery floor. In *Hidden River* (1990), she installed a pump that circulated running water through galvanized pipes connecting four porcelain sinks attached to the wall. Each sink represented (to scale) a map of the cities of northeast Pennsylvania that receive their drinking water from the Schuylkill River. In *Blue Lake* (2005), Levy installed a room full of waist-high steel rods supporting blue plastic disks to re-create the essence of an undulating pond environment. Consistently cross-referencing manmade and natural materials, she creates a magical overlay between the two. Influenced by Eva Hesse's use of multiples, Levy often employs clusters in her installations to explain the accrual of simple acts or processes in nature. Such is the case in *Tideflowers* (2005) in which Levy re-creates a vast field of flowers by



Above: *Tideflowers* (detail), 2004–08. Marine vinyl, polycarbonate plastic, and steel, each flower 9 x 9 x 9 ft. Right, top and bottom: *River Eyelash*, 2005. 3,000 painted buoys, steel washers, and pink rope, 400-ft. span.



attaching multiple red vinyl “petals” to approximately 40 pylons in the Hudson River. The petals open and close based on the ebb and flow of the tides.

Temporary works act as prototypes, testing materials that may or may not work in long-term projects such as fountains, waterworks, and drainages. Levy uses man-made objects such as spigots or faucets as metaphors for natural processes. Metaphor, she says, is one way to understand how something functions. Domestic hardware, for example the bathroom imagery of *Hidden River*, is a common language that can be used to connect the public to an understanding of a work of art. It also adds humor and lyricism, which is apparent in all of Levy’s work and provides relief from the more scientific aspects. Levy’s use of humor brings to mind *Hudson River Purge* (1991) by fellow land sculptor/environmentalist and mentor, Buster Simpson. Simpson placed soft limestone disks in the Hudson River to dissolve and neutralize the water’s acidity. Dubbed “River Roloids,” the result was visual, humorous, and environmentally restorative. Likewise Levy, as part-

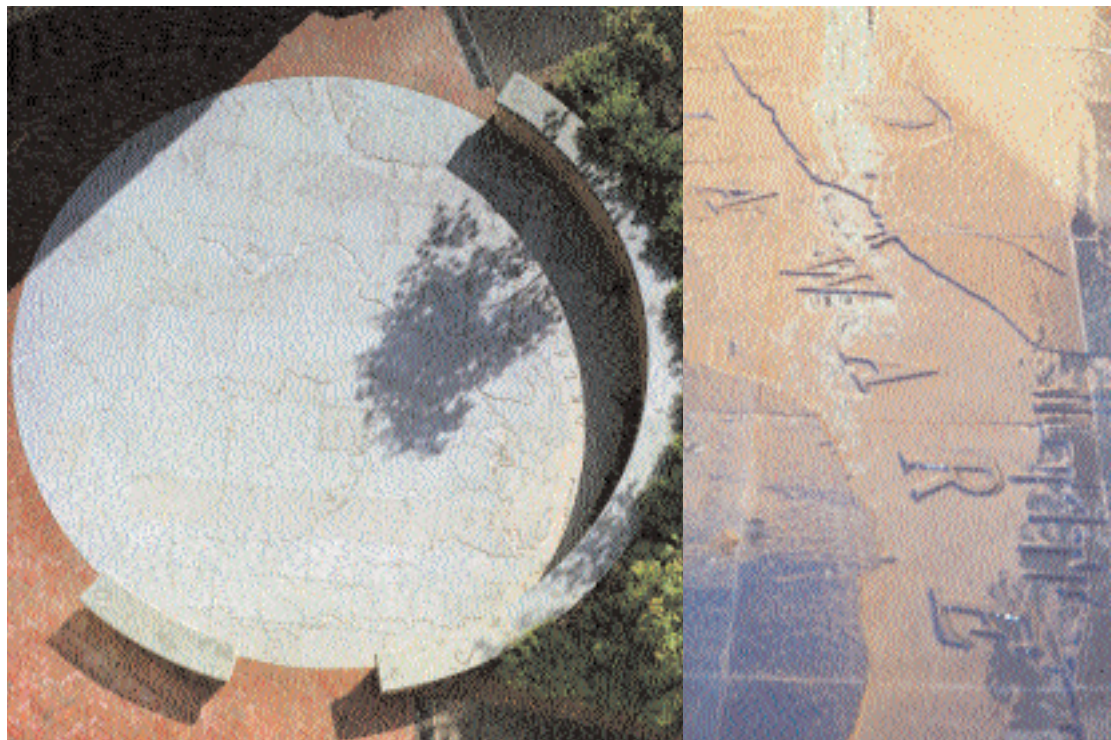
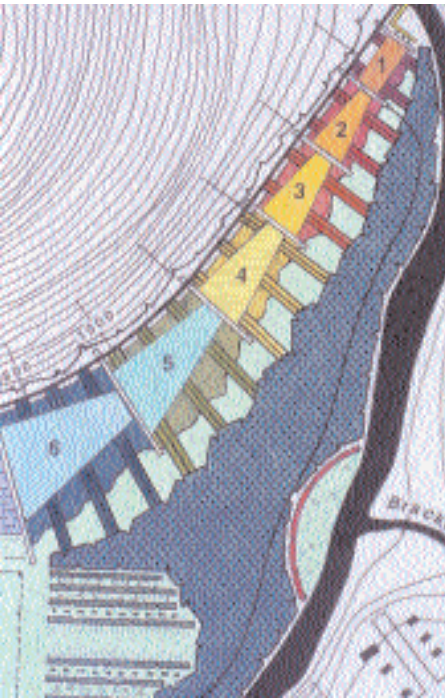
artist, part-scientist, reminds us that it is imperative to look at things from different perspectives in order to appreciate and understand fundamental processes in nature. She states that from her initial hypothesis (solving the problem and explaining it) to the final work (making it visual), she too experiences wonder and amazement at the outcome.

Levy also involves herself in the hands-on, physical side of making. It is crucial, she says, to relate to and learn from the materials she selects, assisting the fabricators to cut templates, to try out how pieces fit into the ground or how the materials respond to air and water currents in their environment. A pivotal moment occurs when the elements get wet or rusty, which informs the next steps of the process. She tested pieces for *River Eyelash* (2005) in her pond before taking 15 strands to Pittsburgh to see how they responded to the wind and water currents there. In the final version of *River Eyelash*, 3,000 Styrofoam buoys were painted and strung on 42 100-foot lengths of rope. The washers inserted between the buoys produced a clinking sound in the

water. *Eyelash* radiated from the bulkhead at Point State Park into the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers. Its shape at any given moment was subject to the prevailing winds, boat wakes, and changing currents of the three rivers.

In *Clerestories: Seeing The Path of the Wind* (2000), Levy installed a weather station on the roof of a gallery and filled the indoor space below with eight fans and 1,000 aqua and orange flags that changed speed and direction depending on the signals received from the weather vane above. She was present in the gallery to witness the wind direction and movements in her installation in advance of an approaching storm. In other instances, such as her water collection pieces, she is never certain where or how algae will grow.

Like the environmental artists of the 1960s and ’70s, Levy is concerned with making art that performs a service for the environment. Following in the footsteps of artists such as Robert Smithson, whose *Broken Spiral* (1971) was one of the first works to join art with land reclamation, she explores the environmental possibilities of



Left: plan detail of *Acid Mine Drainage & Art, Project for Vintondale*, 1995–2005. Above and detail: *Watermap*, 1996. Sandblasted bluestone, brick paving, and rain, 30 ft. diameter.

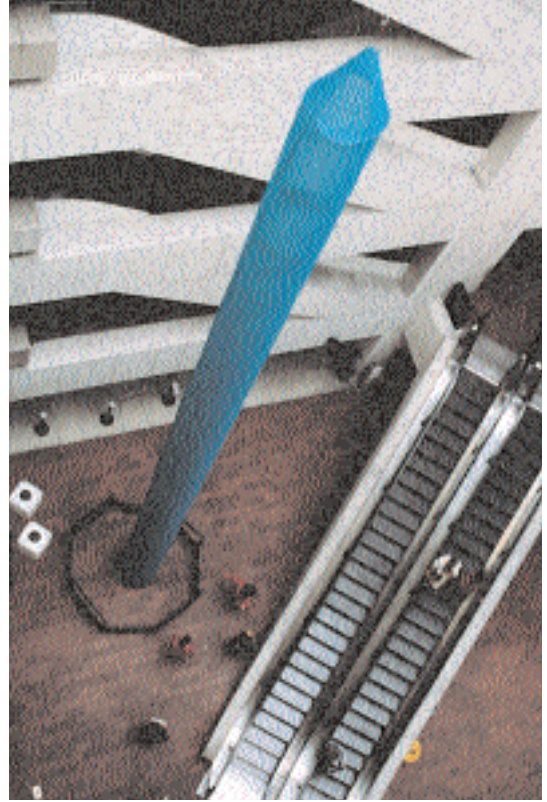
each project and spends more time in discussion with scientists, engineers, and architects than with other artists. Her recent works have brought her to research hydrology, tides, and zoology. She turns to scientists to find the facts of a site and thrives on those interactions. In *Acid Mine Drainage & Art, Project for Vintondale* (1995–2005), she collaborated with a landscape architect, a geologist, and an historian on acid mine drainage in Vintondale, Pennsylvania. Levy explained the effect of the coalmines on the environment, while restoring nature to its pre-industrial state. Though her other recent works have not changed or corrected the ecosystem, public projects designed to serve the environment are at the top of her priority list for future works—a goal that she shares with eco-artists interested in protecting and revitalizing the natural environment. For this reason, she is proud of her work at Vintondale for its positive effects on the health of the land.

As a tool for making art, science draws in the public. Levy presents nature from the gigantic to the microscopic, selecting

elements at both extremes to reintroduce on a human scale. In *Map Quest*, she zooms in and out with works either magnified or miniaturized to allow us to see the mechanical workings of nature at our own scale. In her proposal for the *Hudson Project* (a public art installation scheduled for 2007), she maps the planets and stars through an ellipse situated in the landscape. This engaging and evocative work helps people to find their place in the environment. Like Levy's installations and water maps, *Hudson Project* becomes accessible through physical, bodily understanding: it requires participants to physically enter into its space. Shrinking giant bodies of water down to human scale allows viewers to trace waterways and find their own locations on the map, thus creating a relationship with the diagram. In *Watermap* (2003), rainwater runs across the tilted surface of a 30-foot stone circle flowing into the runnels of the tributaries blasted into the stone. The terrace functions as a watershed in miniature, as runoff flows from small streams to secondary tributaries and into the Delaware River.

Levy selects projects and sites that respond to the changing geographies, histories, and memories of an area. *Urban Oldfield: Diagram of a Vacant Lot* (1998) showed people in an urban setting how to see the intricacy of discarded elements in places such as empty parking lots. In a gallery, she planted over 13,000 artificial sculptural elements fabricated out of steel rods, mylar, rubber, paper, copper tops, and other materials. These forms represented the plants—Queen Anne's lace, yarrow, chicory and St. John's wort, to name a few—that might have grown on the nearby lot had conditions been different. By reconfiguring an abandoned lot in a gallery setting (complete with a sound recording from the site), this installation allowed visitors to consider disused urban spaces in a new light.

Based on simple concepts and clear execution, Levy's work is about inclusion, not exclusion or a hidden agenda. Her projects make for accessible and enjoyable experiences. Many of them, like *Calendar of Rain* (1992) installed in the window of the Larry Becker Gallery in Philadelphia, are



Left: *Urban Oldfield: Diagram of a Vacant Lot*, 1998/2004. Steel, rubber, paper, leather, vinyl, copper, particle board, and sound, detail of installation. Above: *A Month of Tides* (high tide), 1993. Polyester, steel, plastic, timing devices, and motor, 720 x 36 in. (high tide); 4 x 36 in. (low tide).

interactive. Since this work was located next to a bus stop, people getting on and off the buses could observe it 24 hours a day for the duration of the show. With a nod to Hans Haacke's *Biological Systems* (1962–64), in which Haacke placed water in boxes to register cycles of condensation and evaporation, every day Levy placed a glass bottle with the date sandblasted into it on a shelf located below a collection receptacle. When it rained, the water was channeled from funnels situated above the gallery entrance into clear plastic tubes, which drained into the receptacle and then into the dated bottle. Each bottle was placed on one of five glass shelves in the window. At the end of the show, the results were tallied on a bar graph. She repeated this under different circumstances for the exhibition "Drip, Blow, Burn, Forces of Nature in Contemporary Art" at the Hudson River Museum (1999), allowing viewers to look out onto a natural setting and observe the changes of the seasons while watching rainwater collection at work.

Levy cites medical books with transparent overlays and Victorian scientific

diagrams as sources of inspiration for her immersion in art and science. In fact, many of her pieces incorporate visual layers, maps and charts, as a means of communicating processes. She explains, "Before industrialization people had a definite sense of the seasons and the impact of nature on their day-to-day existence. Life was connected to natural time, the seasons, light. [A person in] the 19th century didn't need someone to describe or recondition his or her view of nature as they do in the 21st century." If the visual aspect of science was lost when the 21st century merged into the realm of the virtual and numerical, it may become the responsibility of artists to reconnect us with its visceral and practical foundations. Levy makes apparently difficult and obscure subject matter compelling, reconnecting viewers to the forces of the natural world. For instance, in *A Month of Tides* (1993), an immensely popular piece that visually explained tidal processes, she installed an aqua blue fabric tidal register synchronized with mechanical gauges on the roof of a building. This mechanism

was programmed to ascend slowly into a 60-foot-high atrium and return to the ground again based on the ebb and flow of the ocean tides in the Biscayne Bay several blocks from the site.

Levy loves nature. She believes that that "the more knowledge you have, the more evocative an artwork becomes" and that if she can get people to relate to and understand nature, they will in turn, protect and respect the environment. She is not satisfied with creating a lovely vision of the landscape; she is driven to look beyond the appearance of the landscape to explore and present us with invisible life as it is happening. Rather than capturing a single moment, she presents us with the entire process—the cause and effect of wind, water, and air, thus bringing to our attention the ever-present movement of nature. Her work aspires to stand as a constant reminder of our relationship to the natural beauty of the world around us.

Kathy Bruce is an artist and writer living in New York.