

Domesticate

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Art Gallery of Nova Scotia



Dumb Luck 1998
bucket, trophy parts
41.0 x 30.0 x 30.0 cm

TRAINING OURSELVES

*I SUBMIT THAT MAN IS AN ANIMAL WHO DOES NOT SIMPLY ACCEPT THE NATURAL GIVEN, WHO NEGATES IT. IN THIS WAY, IT IS TOOLS AND MANUFACTURED OBJECTS THAT FORM A NEW WORLD, THE HUMAN WORLD. CONCURRENTLY, MAN NEGATES HIMSELF; HE TRAINS HIMSELF...*¹

GEORGES BATAILLE

THE ARTISTS in *Domesticate* have made works that deal, in various ways and in varying degrees, with human separation from the natural world. Whether they address the chasm between humans and animals, the various systems humans need in order to physically survive in the world, or with the way that we try to remake the world in our own image, these artists can't forget that we are, in large part, as much products of our technology as we are of our biology.

We live in the world but we aren't *of* it. This paradox has informed Western culture since its inception – even our origin myth, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, is a tale of losing connection, of trading harmony for the knowledge of good and evil, gaining individuality at the cost of the inevitability of death. Human evolution also tells a story of

separation, of growing away from nature towards culture. Where would one look to find the natural habitat of a human? Is there anything *natural* about humans at all? Bataille says *non*, and I tend to agree with him. Our habitat is our culture, and our culture is manifested in the world through technology.

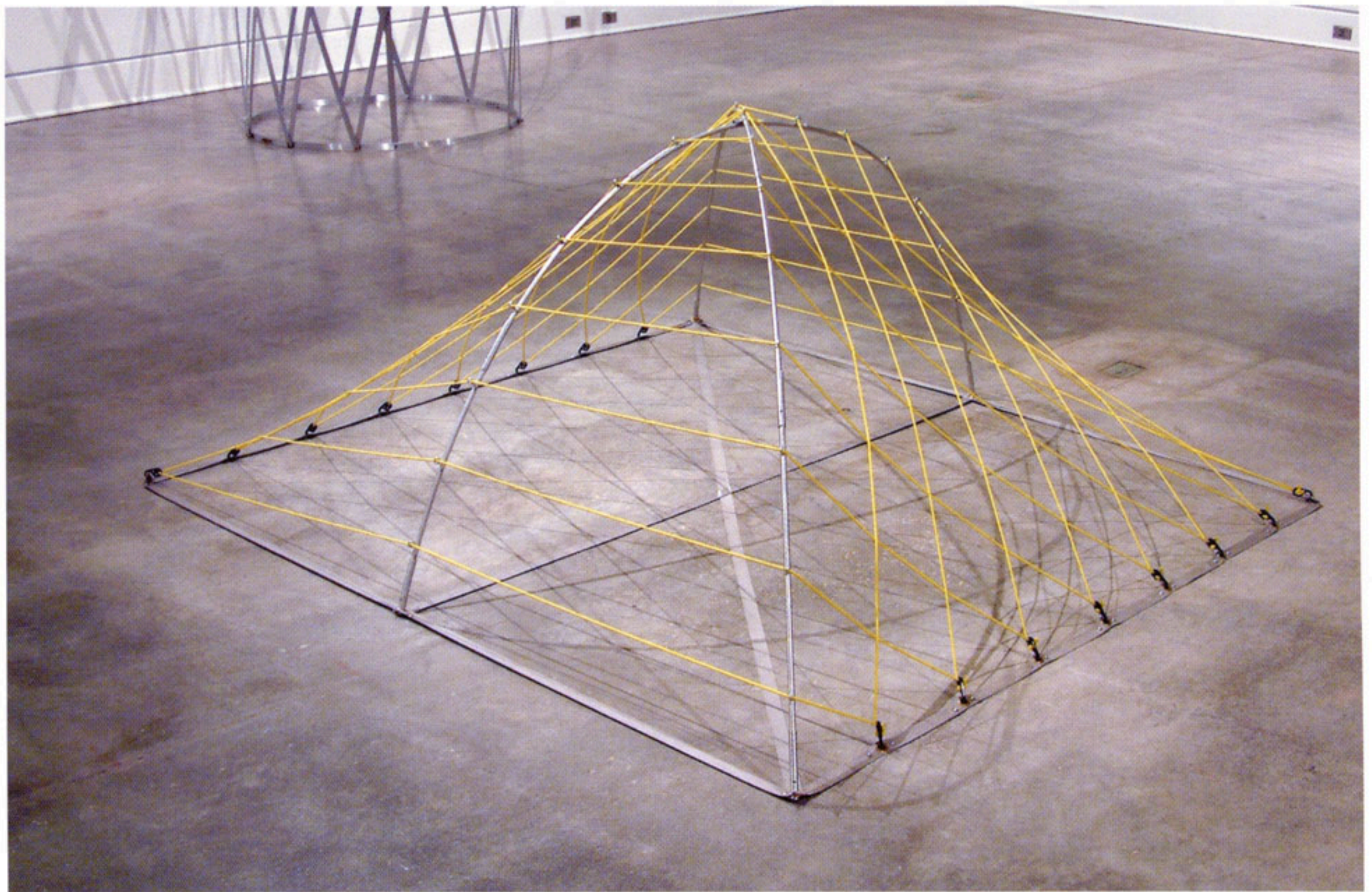
Technology allows its wielders the illusory comfort of creating new worlds, but this comfort comes at a price. We need money in order to access the technologies through which we define ourselves as human; somehow we in the West have allowed ourselves to be defined by our access to things. We have traded the individual freedom of agency for the illusory freedom of consumerism.

Western culture is the extreme case, but all human cultures have evolved away from nature, it's just that some have retained more of a memory of what it was like before the Fall. In these other origin stories, although difference is assumed, the worlds of humans and animals are still parallel, lacking the near total disconnection from the earth characteristic of urban life.

What is the natural habitat of a human? Much like the animals that we have domesticated, our natural environment is a place of our own construction. The natural habitat of cattle is a farm, the natural habitat of a house cat is a house, and the natural habitat of a human is a culture. Bataille was right: *we train ourselves*.

Invisible Cities

Technology has made us nomads and tourists by giving us access to



Lyla Rye
Dome 1999
 110.0 x 180.0 x 120.0 cm

the entire planet. Our experience of each culture is interpreted through the thought structures that we carry around with us. I envision my structures as places where an individual can see the external world and contemplate the mental frameworks that we have constructed. – Lyla Rye¹⁰

As our natural habitat is culture, we no longer have roots. As Rye points out, technology has made us nomads. *Nomadic Architecture* shares with the other works in this exhibition a sense of creating a vantage point. The viewer is invited to engage with this work, to stand inside, to pass through, and otherwise be contained within the sculpture. Their portability lends them a certain seeming fragility, but it is belied by the obvious tensile strength of the objects. Like a cross between a building and an exoskeleton, one of these sculptures offers the illusion of shelter for the body without seeming to separate that body from the world. Like clothing, these objects are meant to travel with us on our journeys. Their evident portability – their nylon carrying

sacks ready to hand, the way that Rye has sanded the joints so that the objects seams are readily visible – suggests that these objects have utility, that they collapse easily for our convenience. But it is just a suggestion – any journey that the viewer takes with these works is a mental one. These sculptures look like tools (like tents and like architecture), but they resist being used. That looking like is important here – these works seem familiar, seem as if one should understand their function, but it is an understanding that slips away as one engages with the work. "As my structures are made up of many identical elements, the final forms have an optical quality that is both mesmerizing and physically unsettling."¹¹ That unsettling feeling is like the tingling as the feeling returns to a foot that was 'asleep,' it's not exactly a pleasant sensation, but you can't walk otherwise.

As nomads we pick and choose from whatever cultures we happen upon. Rye's sculptures mimic this wandering with their melange of architectural styles: a latticework trellis echoes a column



Lyla Rye
Saddleback 1999
 255.0 x 90.0 x 225.0 cm

and a yurt, a Greek temple and a Mongolian tent. "My tents merge many traditional strategies and forms with contemporary materials and Western architectural history to create composite structures that come from an indeterminate place and time."¹²

We are urban nomads, wanderers in our self-styled 'virtual' worlds. Rye's structures for viewing lack anything to make them work as shelters – in them we are always exposed, and never quite comfortable. "We wander in the frame, the absence of the frame, in our bodies, in space... Art is wandering par excellence..."¹³

Back to the Garden?

So we are domesticated – culture-broken, as it were. Technology, the sum of the tools and techniques with which we manipulate things, has allowed us to disconnect from the natural world. However, that separation is based in wishful thinking, for while we live in our heads, and while we all create our own worlds, our bodies are still dependent upon this same earth.

The challenge then, is how to reconnect, all the while recognizing that we are *unnatural*, that we will continue to live in our own, all too human, worlds. This gap between nature and culture is a lack that defines us as human. We have indeed been cast out of the garden, but we did it to ourselves. Whether the taste of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil is bitter or sweet is a personal call.

- 1 Georges Bataille. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. pg. 74. Trans. Richard Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 2 vols., 1988 and 1993
- 2 In 1974 Joseph Beuys created a performance at the Block Gallery in New York where he lived in a cage with a coyote. Beuys is perhaps the archetypal self-described trickster or shaman in Modern art, a reference Diviney purposefully evokes with his coyote.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges. *Collected Fictions*. pg. 325. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1999
- 4 Alfred Korzybski was the founder of the General Semantics Institute and the author of *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, among other texts. He summed up his system with these three basic premises: 1) A Map is *not* the territory; 2) A map does *not* represent *all* the territory; 3) A map is *self-reflexive*, in the sense that an 'ideal' map would include the map of the map, indefinitely.
- 5 Protagoras, quoted in *Early Greek Philosophy*. Chapter 6, pages 224–225. Trans. and editor Milton Nahm. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964
- 6 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*. pg. 53. New York: Bantam Books, 1967
- 7 *ibid.* pg. 57
- 8 Stephen David Ross, *The Gift of Beauty: The Good as Art*. pg. 284. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996
- 9 *ibid.* pg. 285
- 10 From Lyla Rye's artist's statement for *Nomadic Architecture*
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Stephen David Ross, *The Gift of Beauty: The Good as Art*. pg. 287. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996

Lyla Rye
Arch 1999
 260.0 x 85.0 x 85.0 cm

