

l'île de Vasseviere, France

La Source

**“...and on his dreams like ships we knew,
we’d sail, in time.”**

Judy Collins



WATER: TO MAKE A SILENCE

By Gary Dwyer



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



Stone and landscape hold up a perpetual mirror to society. Above: The 18th-century basin for the freshwater spring on the Isle de Vassivière. Top right: Symbolic earth rim and lithic stone newly fix this place.

I WAS ASKED RECENTLY BY THE FRENCH government to make a large stone sculpture for a new outdoor museum in the center of France. The museum was to have a very unique setting on the grounds of the Chateau de Vassivière — a 100-acre island in the middle of a 3000-acre lake. This exciting opportunity came with a substantial number of strings attached, not the least of which were the technical difficulties relating to craft and transport of materials and equipment.

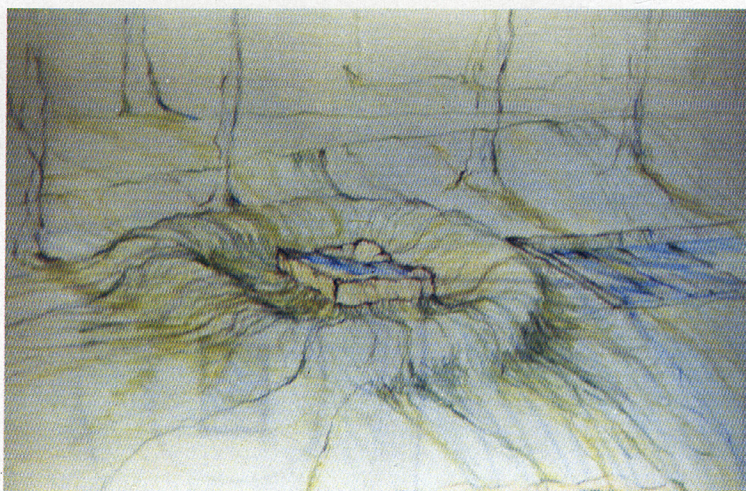
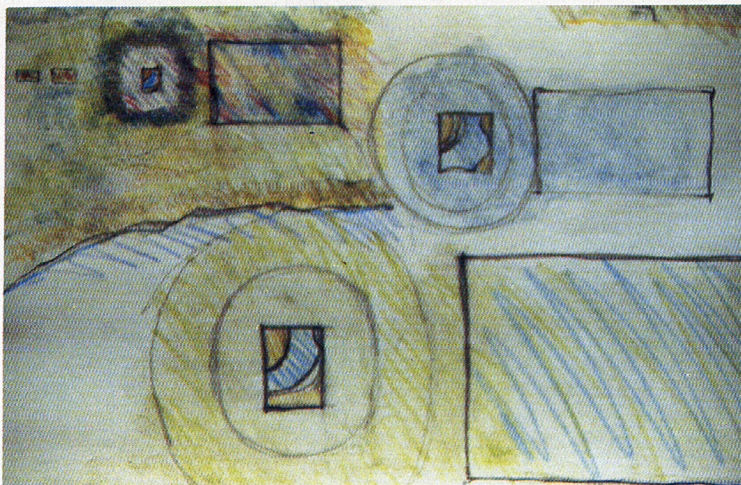
The initial idea behind this invitation was a symposium where certain sculptors from all over the world would come to the island and produce large works in the yellow granite of the region. The sculptors arrived, forming an artistic United Nations with all of the cultural, nationalistic and artistic stereotypes one might expect.¹ With few exceptions, each artist was expected to execute the

sculpture in the public eye at lakeside in the small villages which had contributed financially to the symposium.

It was an "in-process" tourist attraction: "Come watch the sculptor carve (and if you spend any tourist money in our town, well, so much the better)." Difficult, yes, but artists have always worked under circus conditions. I am quite sure that the question, "Qu'est-ce que vous allez faire?" — "What are you going to make?" — was asked of the carver of Notre Dame's gargoyles in very nearly the same way it was asked of me in a remote town square some five centuries later. Art can be central to a culture, but it still is performed like a circus, doing unusual things in unusual places and then moving on, having changed the place, the people and the time.

That question comes full circle when the artist asks, "What am I going to do?" In the case of a small

Viewed in plan and perspective, the stone and earthwork proposed to mark the site of the spring.



easel painting, that decision may have emotional consequence. But when a sculptor decides what to make, it is with the brutal awareness that the decision also will require blood and sweat in addition to tears. Dostoevski said, "Ideas have consequences."² The consequence of having an idea in stone is pain. This is not about the macho artist who believes more muscle will solve all artistic problems, but rather about the very real pain of bone disease, caused by the vibration from pneumatic tools, and the constant threat of silicosis and other respiratory diseases. The glories of the ancient tradition of stone carving fade quickly when your fingers can no longer respond and must be pried away from the hammer at the end of the day.

This is not new information, nor is an occupational hazard endemic only to sculptors. The ancient Romans, when speaking about the chariot races, said, "Palma non sine pulvere" — "The palm (crown) of victory comes not without the dust." Unlike the chariot track, art is uncharted, and the decisions of an artist finally come down to a personal philosophy or posture.

Artists live in and reflect their culture and rightfully are expected to predict, and to mirror, that culture. In western culture, the dominant philosophy of abundance has resulted in the objectification of everything. To address a "thing" is much easier work than dealing with relationships or *no* thing. To make a sound is much less difficult than to make a silence.

The challenge of making sculpture on a French island was not to do the obvious — not to make an object, but to make a silence. It was a cerebral,

quasi-religious posture, not physical or acquisitive, which allowed me to make a responsive contribution to that place.

The name of the chateau and the surrounding lake was taken from the Family Vassiviere, which, it turned out, had used the ancient name of the hill on which the chateau stands. I discovered that the name originally meant "the high pasture of the virgin sheep." This fact, little known even to the natives, was to become central to my sculpture. I wanted to produce a work that would come from the land, not from some formalist ideology, but from a special place and time. France has been home to so many peoples for so long that the tapestry of its history is difficult to unravel. At best, you may be able to view a single thread and find its position in the pattern.

The thread that provided the focus for my sculpture came from the French

language; it was my window through which to view the site's history. Near the granite quarry and the lake is a region known as the Plateau de Mille-vaches. A contemporary French person would probably translate that as the "plateau of the thousand cows," which summons accurate visions of fern-covered heath and moorland on a high plain, very sparsely populated, descending to lush pine forests and river valleys. The true meaning, however, of "millevache" comes not from "a thousand cows," but from a dialect of early settlers called Langudoc; an accurate translation is "the plateau of a thousand springs." Well, perhaps not a thousand but very many; in fact, the headwaters of many of the most important rivers in France, including the Lot, the Dordogne, the Vezere and the Loire.

The cave paintings of Lascaux and the Dordogne Valley indicate that this



was one of the earliest inhabited places on the European continent. In fact, the hill of the chateau Vassiviere was surrounded, just after the last ice age, with water, as it is today; only then, it was salt water. It was my challenge, as a sculptor, to sort all of this seemingly unrelated information and to make a link with the distant past. I wanted to make visible the memory of the landscape.

Subsequent visits to the Chateau de Vassiviere gave me the opportunity to roam the island and to discover the landscape reference for my sculpture — the island's fresh water source. In our contemporary world, we occasionally forget the importance of fresh water, but the Greeks named their special spring "Omphalos" to signify the navel of the earth.

The spring, or as it translates in French, "le source," was a sacred place of ceremony and ritual. Therefore, my sculpture would be a symbolic mark for this sacred place on the island of the virgin sheep. To its ancient inhabitants, survival meant food and clothing from the sheep — which could survive only with fresh water from the spring. Thus it seemed appropriate and necessary to re-awaken the importance of the spring.

In the 18th century, a stone basin was built at the spring which I cleaned and re-established. Next to the original basin, I excavated a symbolic earthen basin for a single carved stone to mark the place of the spring. The stone was selected from the granite quarry at Quinville because its original position in the earth would be the same horizontal position in its final location. The stone's alignment and position on-site are the same as

those of the old basin, which is similar in compass bearings to many ancient recumbent stones. The rude, rectangular stone tablet has a hand-carved surface topography that indicates the island and the location of the spring. At the top edge of the stone is a series of carved grooves — from the Celtic Ogam alphabet — which spell the word "spring." The top is very smooth, polished in a way that is possible only by hand — and necessary by hand to demonstrate value, care and passion.

To a passerby I explained, in fractured French, what I was doing with the stone and the spring. At the conclusion of my explanation the man asked how was it possible that an American came to know so much of this remote region. I replied, "It was necessary." His final comment that day was "Thank you, for France."

As a result of this work, I now respond differently to the question: "What are you going to make?" I am going to make history, or rather, make history visible. This is possible through a philosophy of scarcity. The materials of our physical environment are a temporary gift of nature, and work of true value will be produced only when, as designers, we recognize the importance of a place before we arrived.

Making a "thing" or designing another heroic object expresses the philosophy of abundance. I would propose alternative design activities based upon a responsiveness and a reverence for a place, because each site is unique and irreplaceable. By this time, it should be apparent, even to the object makers, that using brute force to impose an artificial order on chaos has been one of the greatest

follies of civilization. *Place marking is more important than thing making.*

In rural Japan, crossroads are marked by small stone idols called "Dosojin." I interpret the Dosojin as dieties of the ancestors of the road and of the earth. Perhaps that is why I like the familiar highway sign, "Food, Phone, Fuel, Lodging: Next Exit," because I see it as a sign of connectedness to the earth. Without words, the little granite markers say "This is the place, like no other place, and I stand here as a reminder." The other, deeper dialogue with the marker states: "This is a time of decision. Which way will you go?" This is the stone, the one that points the way. □

NOTES

1. The sculptors of the International Symposium du Granit de Limousin (sponsored by the Ministre du Culture, Paris) were Constantin Popovichi, Romania; Yanez Pirat, Yugoslavia; Henri Arabedian, Armenia; Michael Prentice, France; Brad Goldberg, USA; Marc Linder, France; Henri Degan, West Indies; Dominique Roland, Canada; Vladamir Skoda, Czechoslovakia; Takera Narita, Japan; and Gary Dwyer, USA.

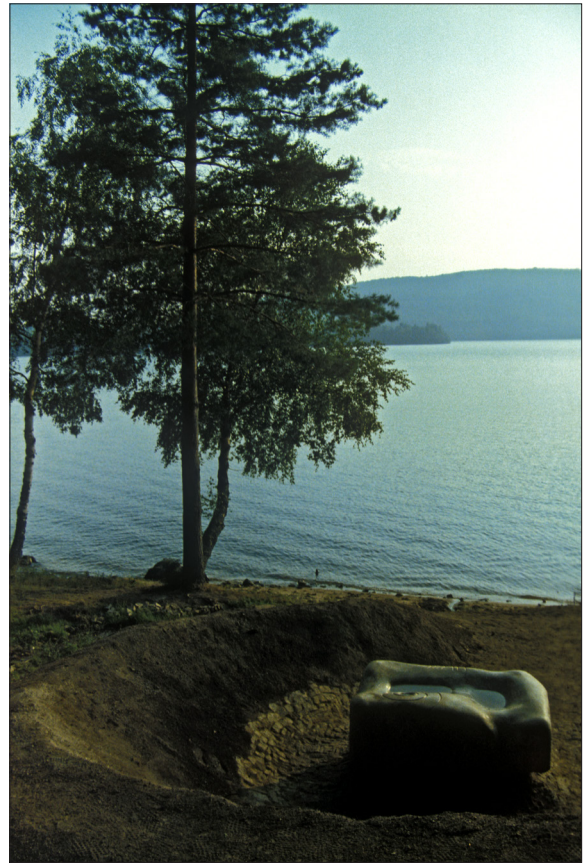
2. Fedor Dostoevski, *Notes from Underground*, Rene Weller, Editor, Prentice Hall, 1964.



Visible memories of the landscape in the author's completed work, before the grass grew in.



This region had been a granite working region for centuries. The villages had a hard time understanding why a foreigner was interested in their cemetery until I explained the link to the sculpture I was producing.



The architect Charles Moore once said, "When they make your work into postcards you know you are finally getting somewhere." (This is a postcard of 'La Source'.)

Aside from the normal hassles of getting a work accomplished, this was a very rewarding project. It was an enormous amount of physical effort and made more so by inadequate equipment and difficult working conditions. That said, I made great friends, worked together with my family on the stone and learned an awful lot about myself and about France.

La source de l'île de Vassivière

Mon père nous promettait toujours que nous irions en France, que nous ferions du bateau sur la Seine et que j'apprendrais la danse ; sur ses rêves comme sur des navires, nous remontions le cours du temps.

— Mon père ne m'a jamais rien promis mais cet été j'ai vraiment remonté le fil du temps.

— Paris était chaud cet été-là, comme ils disent (ça cuisait), et au moment où je suis arrivé à la carrière de pierre de Quenouille, à 400 km au sud, la pluie était chaude et le temps orageux.

— Nous nous sommes retrouvés à douze, des sculpteurs du monde entier. Tous parlaient le français couramment mais assister à une conversation entre un Japonais et un Roumain, à propos de compresseurs et de dynamite, était fort intéressant pour ne pas dire plus !

— Chacun devait choisir la pierre avec laquelle il allait travailler au cours des deux mois suivants. Ne voulant prendre aucune décision hâtive, je l'ai différée jusqu'au moment où je visitais le site où les sculptures achevées devaient être exposées.

— La destination de toutes ces sculptures allait être une nouveauté : un musée à l'air libre, situé sur les terres d'un château. L'emplacement du château ne pouvait être plus idyllique : une île au milieu d'un lac. Cela n'a pas toujours été ainsi. Il se trouvait sur une colline qui est devenue une île après la réalisation d'un projet hydro-électrique en 1947.

— Le nom du château et du lac de 1 000 hectares qui l'entoure, vient du nom de la famille Vassivière. Celle-ci à son tour le tenait de l'ancien nom de la colline où se trouve situé le château. Je fus amené à découvrir que le nom Vassivière signifiait à l'origine, « le haut pâturage de l'agneau sans tache ». Ce fait peu connu, même des habitants de la région, devint le thème de ma sculpture. Je voulais faire une œuvre qui répondrait au caractère très particulier de l'endroit, qui viendrait de la terre, pas d'une quelconque idéologie formaliste, mais d'un lieu et d'une époque spécifiques.

— Une étude plus approfondie de l'histoire de la région commença à donner direction et valeur à l'œuvre. La France est le berceau de tant de peuples et ceci depuis si longtemps que les fils qui constituent la trame de son histoire seraient difficiles à démêler.

— Vous pouvez, tout au plus, si vous avez de la chance, repérer un seul de ses fils et localiser sa position dans l'ensemble.

— Mon fil conducteur à moi fut la langue française qui me permit d'embrasser l'histoire du site.

— Dans les environs de la carrière et du lac, se trouve une région connue sous le nom de plateau de Millevaches. Maintenant, si vous demandez à un Français une traduction en anglais il vous

My father always promised us that we would go to France, we'd go boating on the Seine, and I would learn to dance... and on his dreams, like ships we knew, we'd sail in time (1).

— My father never promised me anything, but this summer I did, indeed, sail in time.

— Paris was hot this summer like they say, "when it sizzles" and by the time I arrived in the stone quarry of Quenouille some 400 kilometers to the south, it was muggy and raining.

— Collected in the quarry were twelve sculptors from all over the world. Nearly all were fluent in French, but to see a conversation between a Japanese and a Romanian about compressors and dynamite was interesting to say the least. Each sculptor was to select the stone with which they were to work for the next two months. Not wanting to make any hasty decisions, I postponed making that decision until I had visited the site where the completed sculpture would be located.

— The destination for all of the sculptures was to be a new open air museum on the grounds of a chateau. The location for the chateau could not have been more idyllic, as it is located on an island in the middle of a lake. The chateau was not always on an island. It was on a hill which became an island as a result of a hydroelectric project in 1947.

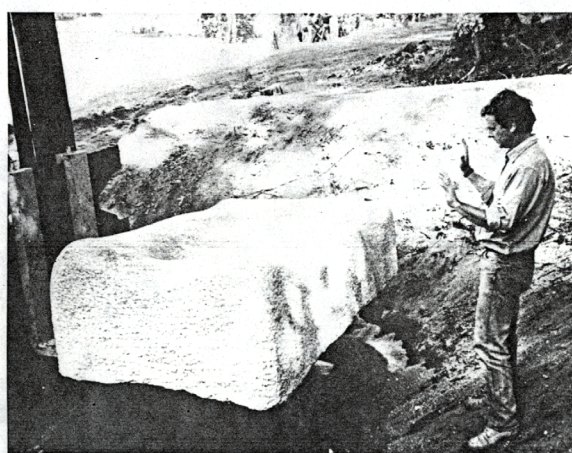
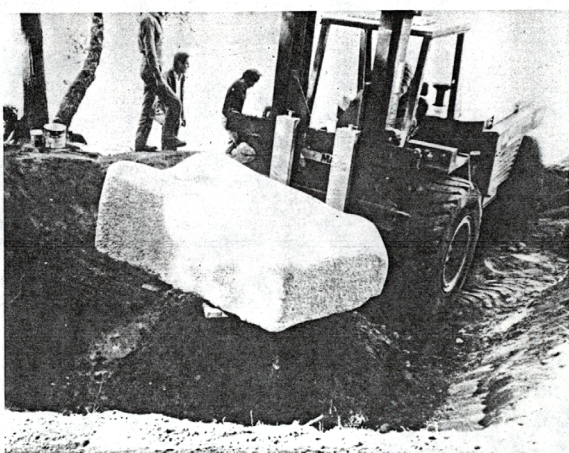
— The name of the chateau and the surrounding 3,000 acre lake was taken from the name of the Family Vassivière. The Family Vassivière, it turns out, had taken the name from the ancient name of the hill on which the chateau stands. I came to discover that the name Vassivière originally meant "the high pasture of the virgin sheep". This fact, little known, even to the residents of the region, was to become central to my sculpture. I wanted to produce a work that would be responsive to the special character of the place, a work that would come from the land, not from some formalist ideology, but from a special place and time.

— Further research into the history of the region began to provide direction and value to the work. France has been home to so many peoples for so long that the tapestry of its history is difficult to unravel. At best, you may, if you are lucky, be able to view a single thread and find its position in the pattern.

— The thread that provided the focus for my sculpture came from the French language as a window with which to view the history of the site.

— Nearby the quarry and the lake is a region known as the Plateau de Millevaches. Now, if you were to ask a contemporary French person for an English translation of the

(1) « My father, Judy Collins, Rocky Mountain Music, © ASCAP.



— J'ai voulu relever le défi, en tant que sculpteur, en éclaircissant toutes ces données qui ne semblaient pas avoir de relations et les faire se rencontrer pour créer un lien avec le passé. Pour mettre à nu la mémoire du paysage.

— Les visites qui suivirent, au château de Vassivière, m'ont permis de parcourir l'île et d'y découvrir le paysage qui servira de référence à ma sculpture. La source d'eau fraîche de l'île. Dans notre monde contemporain, nous avons tendance à oublier l'importance de l'eau fraîche. Les Grecs avaient un nom pour désigner leur source; ils l'appelaient Omphalos, ce qui veut dire «le nombril de la terre». Pas un nom que l'on pourrait donner à quelque chose pris à la légère.

— La source était un lieu sacré. Un lieu de cérémonie et de rituels. Il était donc nécessaire que ma sculpture donne à ce lieu sacré, sur l'île de «l'Agneau sans tache», une note symbolique. Pour les anciens, survie était synonyme de nourriture et habillement, et l'agneau qui leur fournissait tout cela ne pouvait survivre que grâce à l'eau fraîche de la source.

— Au XVIII^e siècle, on construisit un bassin en pierre pour la source. Celui-ci fut nettoyé et réhabilité. Adjacente à celui-ci, j'ai pratiqué une excavation pour donner un bassin symbolique à la seule pierre sculptée qui marquerait l'emplacement de la source.

It was my challenge, as a sculptor, to sort out all of this seemingly unrelated information and make it connect, to make a link with the past. To make visible the memory of the landscape.

— Subsequent visits to the château de Vassivière provided me with the opportunity to roam the island and to discover the landscape reference for my sculpture. The source for fresh water for the island. In our contemporary world we occasionally forget the importance of fresh water. The Greeks had a name for their special spring; they called it Omphalos which means the navel of the earth. Not a name one would give to something taken lightly.

— The spring, or as it translates in French, "la source", was a sacred place. A place of ceremony and ritual. It was therefore necessary that my sculpture would provide a symbolic mark for this sacred place on the island of the virgin sheep. To the ancients, survival meant food and clothing, and the sheep that provided them could only survive if there was an adequate supply of fresh water from the spring, the source of life. With this realization it seemed appropriate and necessary to reawaken the importance of the spring.

