

BY DESIGN

The Unique Value of Seeing Works in the Wild



For “If the People Have No Bread, Let Them Eat Cake” (2002), Henrik Plenge Jakobsen dyed sheep pink and set them to graze in a pasture. The piece was restaged at Wanas this year and will be on view through early November. Federico Ciamei

By Gisela Williams

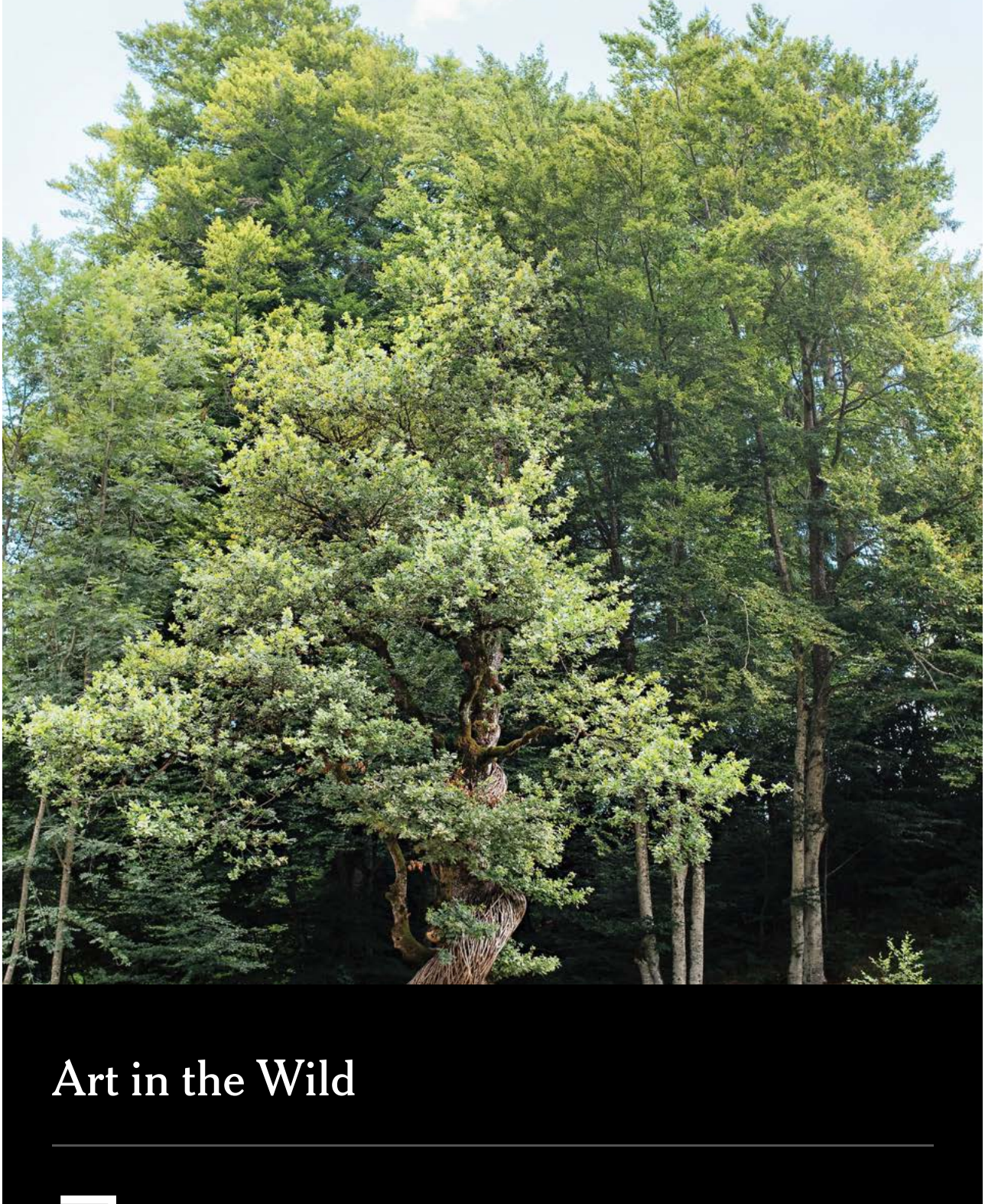
Sept. 21, 2017



IN 2002, Jenny Holzer was invited to create a piece at [Wanas Konst](#), an 80-acre sculpture park tucked behind a romantic 16th-century step-gabled castle in the wilds of southern Sweden. She spent two days just wandering the grounds, where contemporary sculptures (a monumental steel chair covered in antlers, a tiny wood house in a clearing) by the likes of Marina Abramovic, Robert Wilson and Maya Lin stand amid tall beech trees and, in some cases, grazing cows. (The art foundation shares the land with a working dairy farm.) Deep in the woods, Holzer found herself thinking of “fairy tales light and dark.” Then she came upon a waist-high stone wall that dates to the 1700s. “I started following it and knew it was the site,” she says. Her contribution to what is now known as “Wanas Wall” was to carve a different phrase or truism from her past work into a stone block every 20 feet or so. “all things are delicately interconnected,” reads one.

Wanas Konst was founded in 1987 by Marika Wachtmeister, an art-loving lawyer who married into the aristocratic family that’s presided over the remote Wanas estate for eight generations. It’s one of several parks in out-of-the-way places throughout Europe, from Arte Sella, in an Alpine valley in northern Italy, to Refuge d’Art, in southern France, that collectively compose a second wave of art parks. If the first generation — [Storm King Art Center](#) in New York, founded in 1960; [Yorkshire Sculpture Park](#) in England, opened in 1977 — were pioneers, disrupting where and how large-scale work should be seen, this second group, born in the late ’80s and early ’90s, emphasized truly site-specific pieces, ones inspired by the properties’ history and landscapes, and are significant for the equal emphasis they place on the art and the environment in which it’s displayed. Gone — or, at least, reduced — are overly manicured lawns and excessive groundskeeping; these parks celebrate their wildness, sometimes so much so that the works within them are obscured, either partly or wholly. This makes their eventual encounter feel like discovering a secret — and the thrill of seeing art outside a museum is compounded by the unpredictability of its context.

Every art institution — no matter how nontraditional — takes time to mature: Collections have to be built. An aesthetic has to refine itself. At Wanas Konst, [Arte Sella](#) and [Refuge d’Art](#), one realizes the apotheosis of not only an idea, but of a space; here is a marriage of object and place, of the artificial and the natural — a fully realized collection in a fully realized environment.



Art in the Wild

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Federico Ciamei

ART PARKS occupy a distinct and, one might argue, increasingly important place within the larger art world. Generally with low admission fees and located outside urban hubs, they bring sculpture to those who might otherwise lack access, or feel unwelcome in a typical museum or white-cube setting. In doing so, they not only democratize art, but challenge us to see it anew. Wanas is in the middle of a poor and rural region of Sweden, which has recently been settled by a number of asylum seekers from Syria and elsewhere. Of the 75,000 visitors the park welcomed last year, about half were not regular museumgoers — but the forest floor, it turns out, is neutral ground. The park is large enough to contain a number of topographies; in touring its 70 pieces, one moves from lawns to fields to forests filled with bird calls and mossy logs. Like the guests, the artists featured here may be from all over, but the land itself is Swedish countryside, ungroomed and unkempt. “I appreciate that [it doesn’t] feel like a wealthy person’s garden, even if it is,” says the contemporary-art curator Diana Campbell Betancourt.

Poring over thousands of documents is worth it.

It is also a refuge for nature-starved city dwellers. Just as the parks bring art to the underserved, they also entice culture-seekers into the wild. In this way, they borrow from the American land-art movement, which was pioneered by artists such as Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson, who wanted to push past the gallery walls and work with natural materials. Land art was inherently anti-institutional — an artistic expression of man’s smallness in the face of expressly inhospitable settings — whereas art parks are, ultimately, curated: meant to attract visitors into what its critics say are simulacra of museums, a partially controlled setting that happens to be out of doors. And yet both movements make the environment fundamental to the act of viewing. Jessica Morgan, the director of New York’s Dia Art Foundation, which has long been associated with land art, says the popularity of parks like Wanas Konst speaks to the need “to escape our increasingly digitized urban reality,” adding, “even the journey is part of the experience” — an antidote to the static encounters we have with art in the modern age.

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But if the experience of coming across works of art in the outdoors is personal — one cannot help but feel they’ve been placed especially for you — it is also physical. A thorough viewing of “Refuge d’Art,” a series of 11 Andy Goldsworthy installations strewn across a remote and mountainous region of Haute-Provence, requires walking nearly 100 miles of ancient footpaths. (The work also lends its name to the site itself.) Goldsworthy, a British sculptor who is something of an art-park star and who is currently at work on a similar project in England, began this one, with backing from the nearby Musée Gassendi, as a single sculpture in 1999, and has added to it over time. A handful of the installations are free-standing egg-shaped stone sentinels that recall ancient burial sites, while in other cases the artist set sculptures (a humble pile of rocks, a maze of stone archways) within the walls of abandoned dwellings that he refashioned to accommodate them. Inside a former farmhouse, for example, a snakelike relief winds up a wall covered in red clay native to the region. Goldsworthy’s intention, he says, was to get “right into the skin of the place” — and of the viewer. The time spent and effort expended to see these works (three of the structures even allow for overnight stays) fosters a deep engagement with both the art and its setting, so much so that a viewer might not know whether to ascribe her sense of wonder to one or the other.

At times, that wonder borders on the spiritual. Most of the sculptures at Arte Sella are made with natural materials and have their own life cycles; they change with the seasons and will eventually decompose, returning themselves to the earth. Patrick Dougherty’s “You Are Free” is composed of a trio of twister-like, shack-size nests of branches; “Transition,” by Luca Petti, is a group of starburst forms made from wooden poles and fastened to tree trunks. But the park’s grandest work is Giuliano Mauri’s “Tree Cathedral” (2001), a towering (40 feet tall and growing) temple to nature, made with reinforced timber columns and a vaulted canopy of sloping hornbeam branches. Walking its grassy aisles, visitors take care to whisper. What a rare gift, in this noisy world, to feel alone with beauty and with one’s thoughts. The mind wanders — out of the real world, and back to fairy tales, to fiction. The work reminds us that these pieces, and the parks that contain them, offer what might be considered a necessary paradox for our times: They give a glimpse of something greater than ourselves while allowing us to remain the protagonists. Here, we’re on an adventure — and something interesting is bound to happen.

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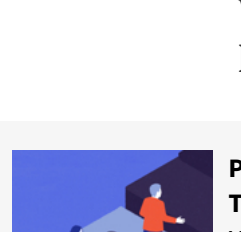


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