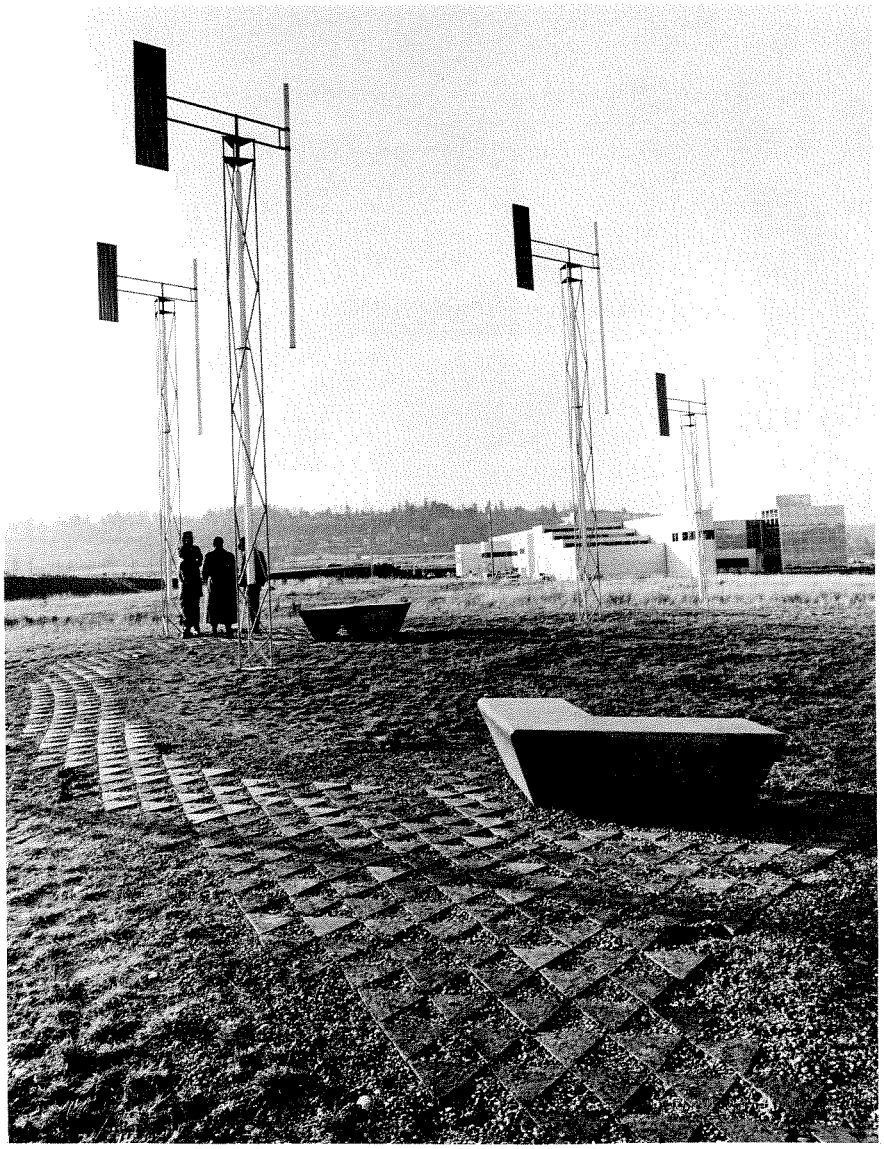
Conversation with Douglas Hollis

Jeff Kelley



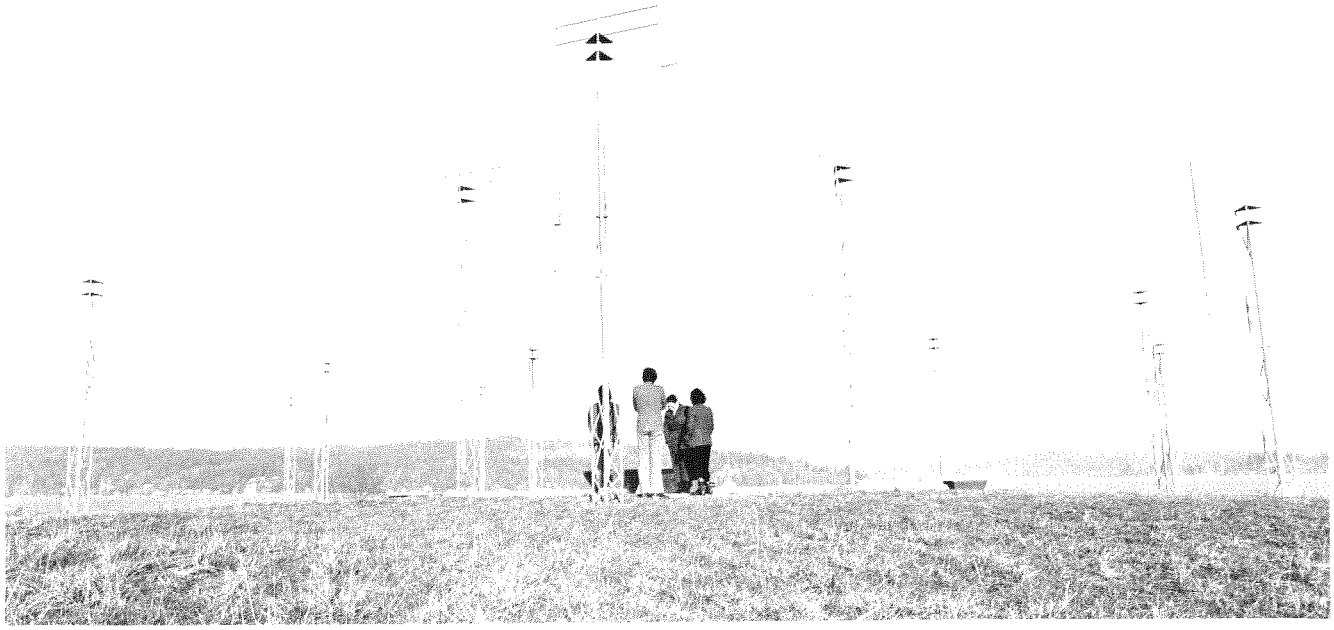
1 **A Sound Garden**, one of five orchestrated environmental works along the 2,000-foot Lake Washington shoreline, is composed of a grove of twelve steel-truss towers that support twenty-four aluminum wind-organ pipes mounted on vanes that reorient the pipes as the wind changes direction. They are located atop a gentle rise of land and are approached via a 600-foot meandering path of triangular brick pavers. Three perforated steel "tetrabenches" are located around the garden center. (The other four works are by Siah Armajani, George Trakas, Scott Burton, and Martin Puyear.) Photographs by Doug Hollis except as noted.

Doug Hollis is an artist who works with sound. His works usually consist of wind harps and wind organs installed at various outdoor locations. But the sounds they create, which range from the celestial pitch of the harps to the oboelike moan of the organs, represent just one of the wave phenomena that are drawn into the perceptual net of Hollis's concerns. His quasi-architectural structures (he prefers "structures" to "sculptures," even though it is from the recent tradition of site-sculpture that his works emerge) also activate wind waves, water waves, sight waves, and even the wavelike contours of the landscape. In effect, Hollis's site-instruments catalyze and extend human perception in terms of the inherent properties of a place; they manifest the indiscernible, celebrate what is already present, witness but do not judge. One thinks of the parable about the tree falling in the forest; Doug Hollis's pieces wait for that moment. They are listening.

The following text is excerpted from interviews conducted in August and November 1984, at, respectively, the Sun Valley Center for the Arts and Humanities and at Hollis's San Francisco home. Of course, the interviews became a conversation.

JK: You've spoken of your work as an architecture of sound. Can you describe the components of that architecture?

DH: I work with natural phenomena. I use acoustic sound



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as opposed to electronic sound. There's a strong distinction in my mind about that; acoustic sound has more architectural or ambient quality than electronically generated sound. It's not judgmental to say that; it's just that electronic sound seems to have a different spatial quality—one that does not evoke the kind of place or enclosure made up of itself that acoustic sound does. The sound that is produced, as well as the thing that produces the sound, which in my work has tended to be the wind, provides a volumetric and temporal aspect to my pieces. The sound then gives a sense of enclosure without there physically being an enclosed space; it's an implied volume.

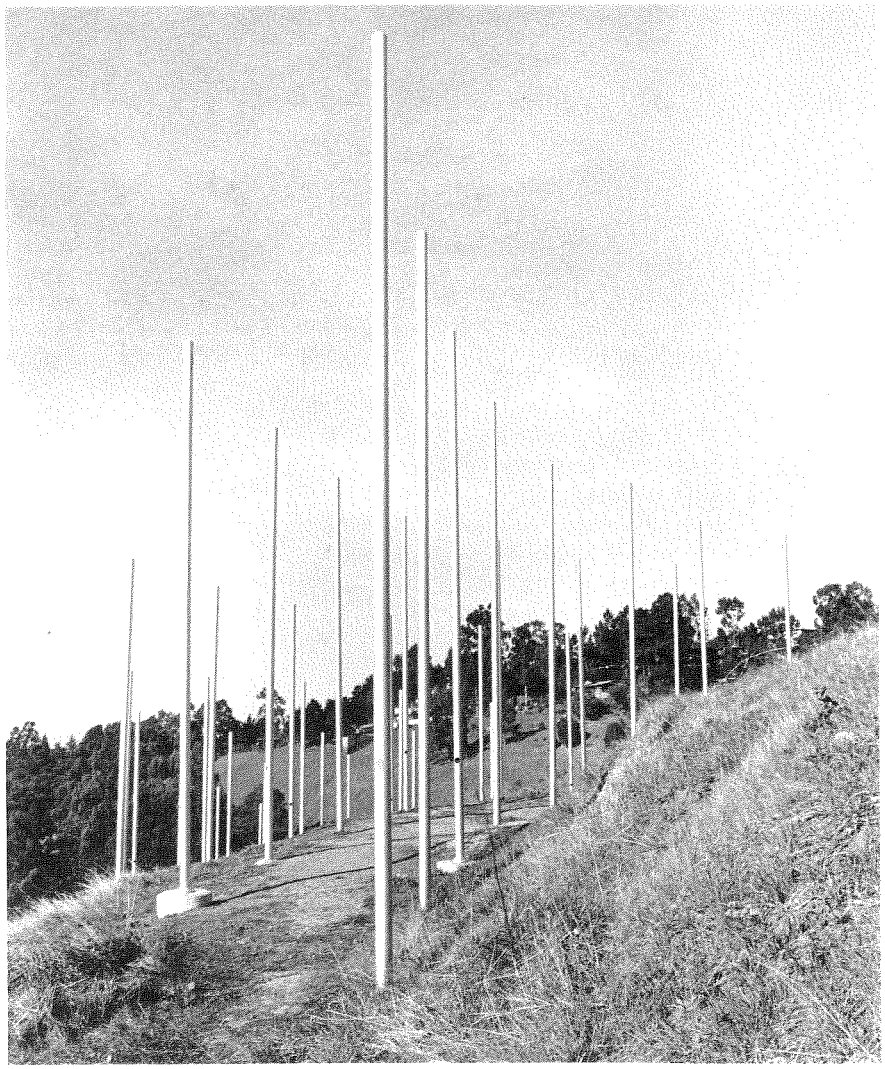
JK: Is it an implied volume, or is it in fact a *sensed* volume?

DH: It's not implied, you're right. I mean it's there, but it's ethereal in the sense that it doesn't have four walls and a ceiling, so it isn't an acoustical space, like an abbey or a cathedral, or a kind of architecture devoted to what sound sounds like *in* it. What I've been trying to do is use sound to define experiential space within a broader environmental context in a way that amplifies perception. Sound has a terrific influence on our perception, but we aren't necessarily conscious of its effects upon us. It actually physically vibrates upon your body. I find that I'm extremely aware of my sonic environment, and that I navigate in space accordingly. I tend to stay away from high-density sound. It's not merely an avoidance behavior but a functioning navigational device.

JK: What do your sculptures look like?

DH: Well, I don't refer to them as sculptures but as sound structures. I've always tried to imply a sense of music in them, to make them function as visual supports for the kind of sound that they produce. The wind organs are made from various kinds of pipe, quite often aluminum pipe in diameters of about three inches. They're tuned in specific ways. I also work with various kinds of stringing material, including monofilament, racquet line, and cable, designed to function as aeolean instruments. Aeolean instruments have to do with resonance phenomena or the ways

2 **A Sound Garden**, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration N.W. Regional Center at Sand Point, Seattle, Washington, 1983.



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things vibrate when driven by a particular vehicle.

JK: And that vehicle is mostly the wind?

DH: Yes. And the various materials become the component parts with which I structure a piece; I think of them as a vocabulary. I've always tried to distill those components down to the simplest forms possible so that they're not objectified in and of themselves but work as mediators, or as instruments. They tend to take on a configuration that suggests, or echoes in some way, the place that they are. In my Lawrence Hall piece, for example, there's a topographic array of thirty-six pipes that's organized on a kind of warped grid that seems to echo the contour of the site. The way the hillside rolls is then amplified by the fact that the pipes at the top of the hill are taller than the ones at the bottom. You get a secondary contour.

JK: So the network of pipes is one kind of physical structure, and the sound it creates is another kind of physical structure?

DH: There are two kinds of structures: there's the passive structure of the physical, the so-called . . . I never know how to make a differentiation between the object, the aluminum pipe, and . . .

JK: Call it a pipe. My point was that they're both physical structures.

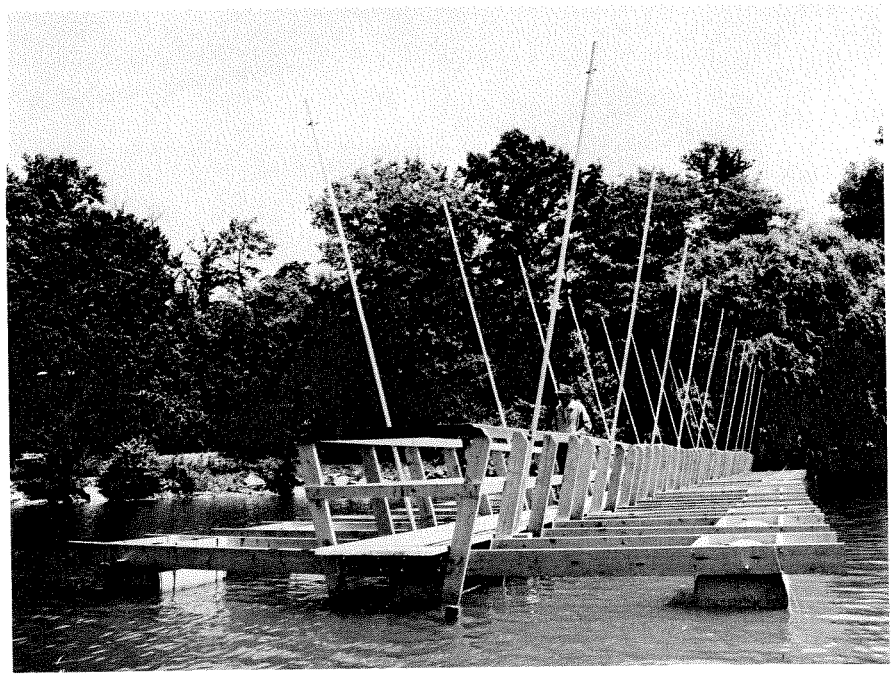
DH: I think of the pipes as fairly passive components. The sound

3 Wind Organ, Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

that's produced, the recognition of atmospheric motion, is a much more dynamic physical structure. I try to make the visual structures harmonious in some way; I like the idea of them looking musical—not looking like musical instruments but having an inherent visual harmony that speaks to the idea of architecture. The Greeks referred to architecture as "frozen music," and I often refer to my work as "thought architecture." But it's hard to talk about what these things look like. I could say, well, the wind organs look like a field with pipes sticking up from it, which is true, but it really has much more to do with what it feels like when you're within that field. So what the elements do is describe a field. They're less like the space of a cathedral and more like the order in a grove of trees. Whereas a windy hillside is an undifferentiated situation, the presence of these sound-producing instruments creates a specific sense of volume, a kind of domelike sonic ceiling, so that you feel like you're within the sound.

JK: Describe your first artwork.

DH: The first seminal piece was called "Sky Soundings." It had to do with kite experiments and culminated in a series of night events, or celebrations. The work utilized eight large box kites with light sources attached to them, so that they created custom constellations. At a certain point, I realized that the kite strings were creating an audible frequency and that by altering the character of these lines I could produce different sounds.



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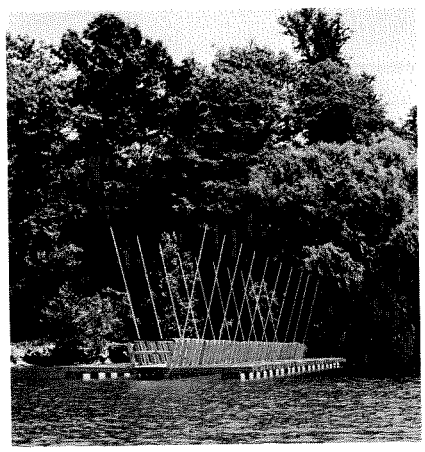

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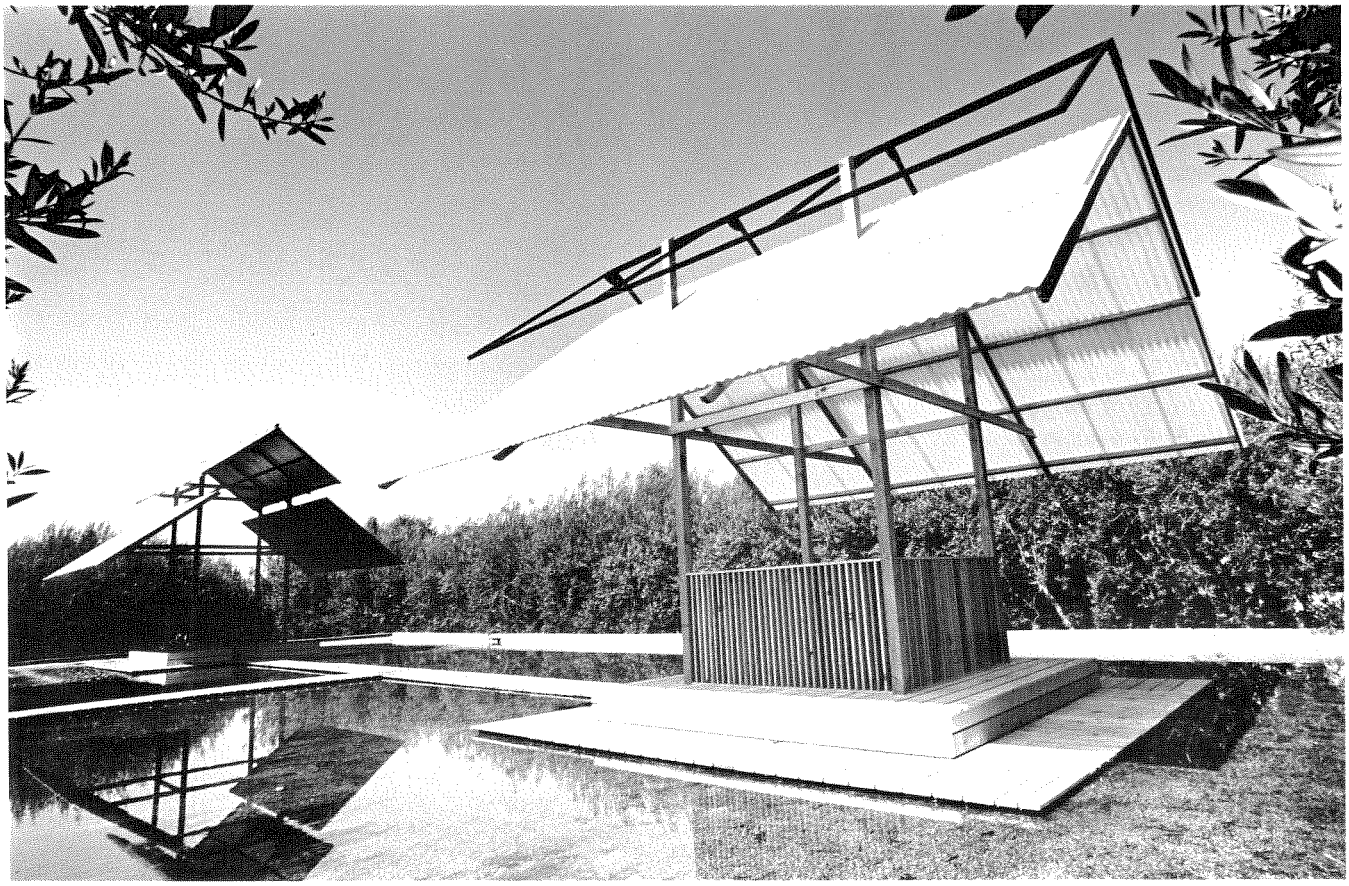
4 A Venue was a wind-activated, walker-responsive, floating sound structure that extended 120 feet from the shore of Delaware Park Lake. It was designed to retune its sounds as the walker moved along it, making it undulate on the water.

5 A Venue, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1980.



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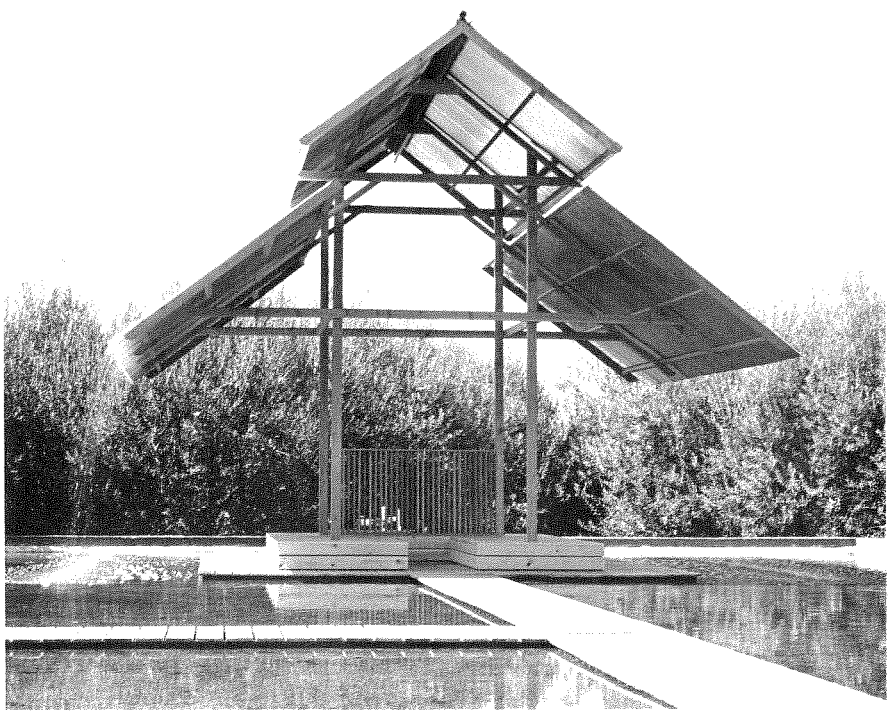

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6 A Talking Garden was built in collaboration with artist Richard Turner for the Oakland Museum, Oakland, California. The flooded roof was occupied by a "Rain Pavilion" and a "Wind Pavilion," which carried on a sonic as well as formal dialogue, creating a contemplative oasis.

7 "Rain Pavilion" from *A Talking Garden* (in collaboration with Richard Turner), Oakland Museum, Oakland, California, 1982. Photograph by Lee Fathersee.

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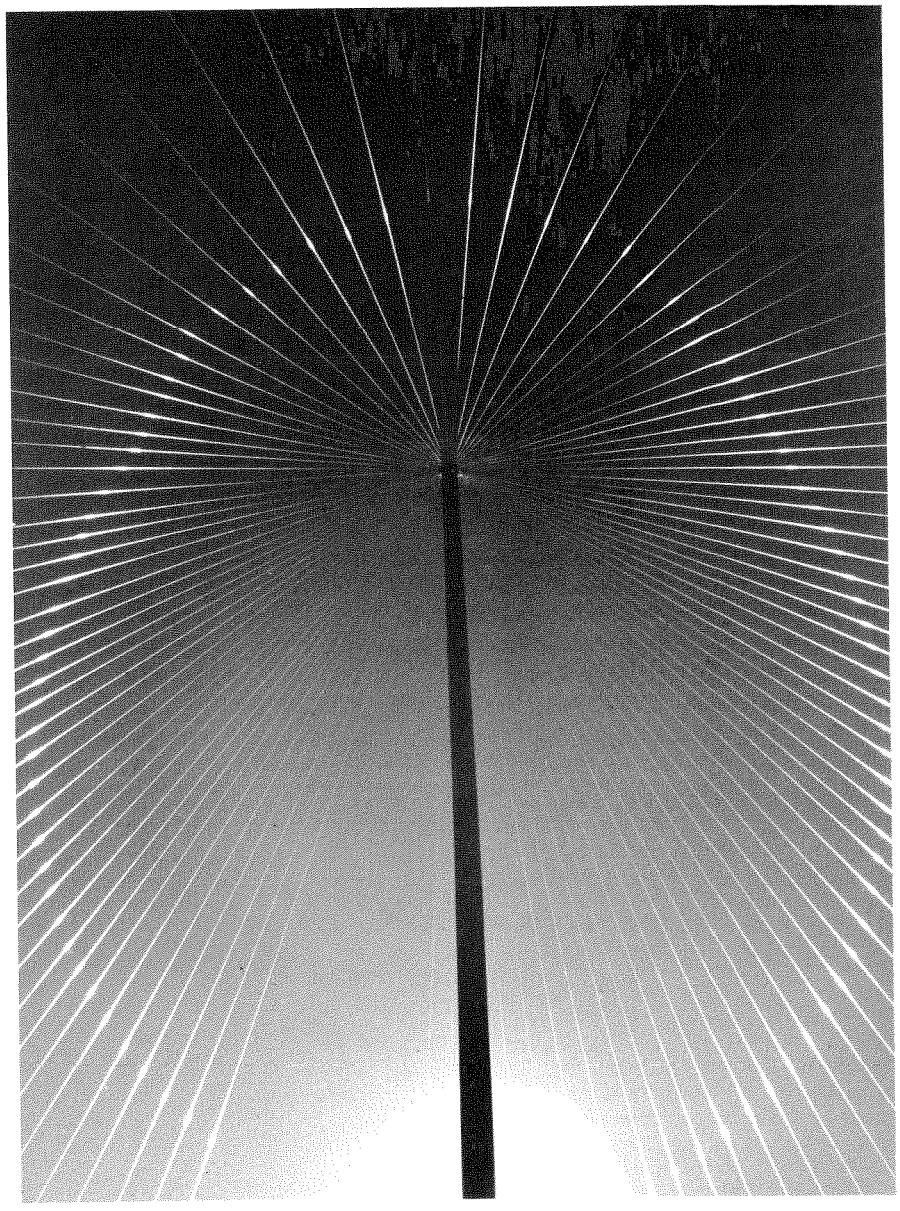
This was really the first time I realized that sound had an architectural quality, that it was possible to create theatres of sound with extremely minimal means. The other important aspect of this piece was its inherent element of celebration, the way in which people were drawn together. With the first performance I attempted, about 120 people met on a rather dark night at the edge of San Francisco Bay, and there was *no* wind; ergo the kites did not fly. And yet people had a terrific sense of reverence for the occasion, and they settled into little two- and three-person conversations in the dark. It was really the quality of those conversations that first suggested to me the notion of sound architecture. When the kites finally did fly, an even larger sense of sonic architecture suggested itself.

JK: Do you think your works occupy public spaces, or do they define private spaces that are accessible to the public?

DH: "Private" is a funny word. I prefer the word "personal" because I think that my pieces are not public in the sense of spectacle, but they become oases in a certain sense, stopping places. Whether those are private places, I'm not quite sure.

JK: What kinds of places attract you?

DH: A lot of the earlier works, up until a couple of years ago, were temporary. They were constructed in relatively short periods of time: two or three weeks for the whole



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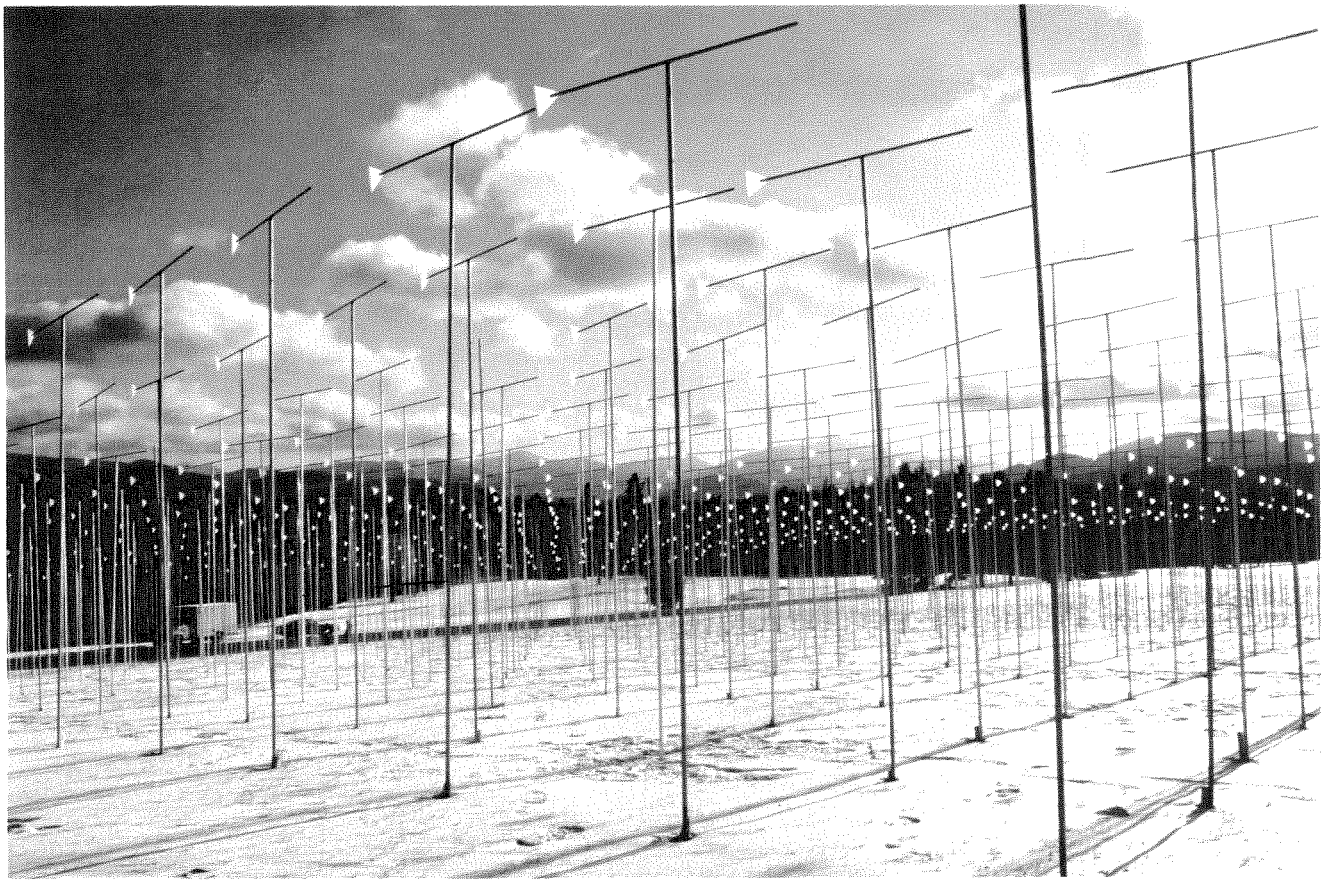
8 OMI was a conical wind harp 23 feet high and 32 feet in diameter and composed of 100 nylon strings. The structure's sound emanated from the center mast, which drew people into the interior of the work.

9 OMI, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, 1978.



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10, 11 Field of Vision (120 feet x 100 feet x 8 feet 6 inches high), National Fine Arts Committee for the 1980 Winter Olympic Games, Lake Placid, New York.

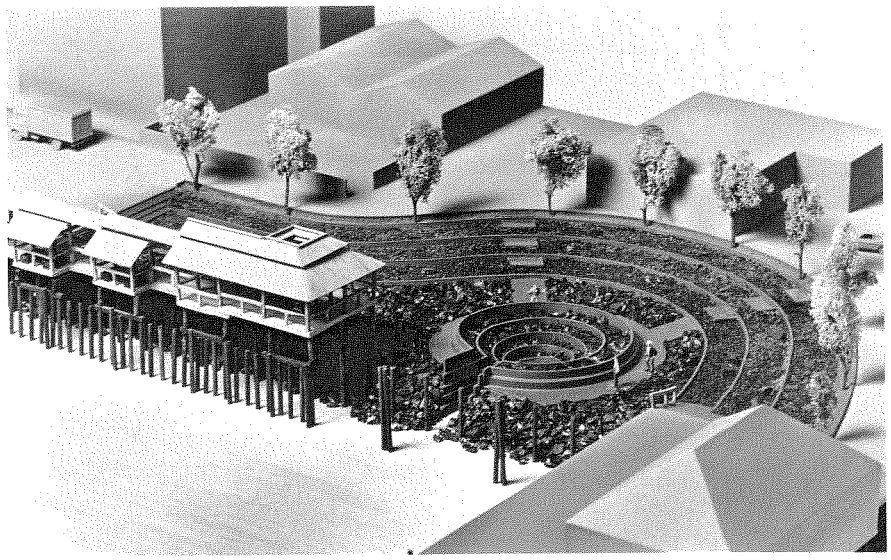
12 Model for Tide Park (in collaboration with artist Charles Fahlen), Port Townsend, Washington, 1984 (in progress). This project will redefine an existing downtown (fig. 13) waterfront site recently retired from service as a ferry terminal. The main elements are a spiral "Tide Clock," which measures tide depth and creates tide pools, and a copper-roofed "Wave Gazing Gallery and Wind Harp Pavilion," connected by a series of curved terraces composed of basalt rock, beach grasses, and trees. Photograph by Peter Lester.

13 Port Townsend, Washington. Existing site for *Tide Park* by Doug Hollis and Charles Fahlen.

process. So I developed a way of approaching a new environment. I walked in as a kind of blank slate and waited for something to write on me. Because I was working with wind, I looked for locations that tended not to be real sheltered, not deep in the woods. I sought out phenomenologically active places and then constructed pieces that celebrated what was already happening. So it was a kind of tuning process—or an "attuning" process. It's almost like thinking of myself as a dowsing wand. It's hard to intellectualize about why you like a place. Some places just feel good.

JK: You've talked about integrating, and then about disintegrating, the viewer-listener into your pieces. What do you mean?

DH: The idea of the viewer, or listener, is an objectification that I've been trying to work against for a long time. I refer to people that come to one of my works as participants. I try to dissolve the boundaries of "me over here" and "it over there" by making people a functional part of what is happening. My ten-day Omaha project, for example, was a conically shaped 100-string wind harp with a pole in the center, like a tepee. People would walk into it, center themselves, and almost always reach out their hand and touch the pole; it was like they were shaking hands with it. And they became sonic components within the piece because when they touched it, they would hear the structure's vibrations in their bones.



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JK: Your pieces deal with space, but it seems to me that they extract sound from space in order to create a sense of place.

DH: Someone asked me once if my pieces existed when the wind wasn't blowing because when the wind isn't blowing, there is no sound. And I said yes because there's a kind of anticipation built into the structures. I feel my work is as much about suggesting that people listen as it is about making sound. So if they're about sound, they're also about silence.

JK: Describe "Field of Vision."

DH: "Field of Vision" was done in Lake Placid in 1981 as part of the Winter Olympics. It was actually not a sound work. I was interested in trying to amplify a dialogue between the windscape and the landscape, to amplify the dance these two entities do with each other the way a formation of land influences the windflow over it, creating vortexes and areas of calm. It's a kind of visualization of the atmosphere. Of course, the land itself is also formed by the wind; it isn't just a fixed entity. Maybe I should describe the actual piece: it was a square matrix of wind vanes about 120 feet on the side. I put an upright, 8½-foot length of half-inch conduit every four feet. There were about 750 of them. The wind vanes were made from aluminum tubing painted day-glow orange. I was interested in how the snow level would mediate between the windscape and landscape, so that when it was snowed in, the vanes would not be equidistant from the ground at all points. The piece's size was necessary in order to describe the changing patterns of the waves. The field didn't turn as if one; you could see the wind moving through it like it was a field of wheat. It seemed to deal with different kinds of time.

JK: And so, with your work, we have a kind of object that isn't an art object in a traditional sense; that is, it isn't an object that refers to itself or through itself to something else, or that surrounds itself, in the case of sculptural objects, with a kind of metaphorical space. Rather, we have an object that is more along the lines of an instrument which measures some phenomena that wouldn't otherwise be perceived as such.

DH: What I do is represent things; I think of myself as more a representational artist than an abstractionist.

JK: But don't you isolate and abstract certain latent phenomena in a given site vis-à-vis your instruments?

DH: I think of that more as activating potential phenomena, of creating potential for the phenomena to manifest itself. Is that saying the same thing?

JK: I wonder if it isn't. Perhaps representation and abstraction are versions of each other.

DH: My notion of abstraction is to take "out of."

JK: Which is, in a sense, what you do. Your pieces take out of a homogenous environment certain features by representing them, by catalyzing them.

DH: Well, what I feel I do is create structures that use a particular sensory level to make people more aware of the homogeneity of a place. In some ways, I think of my pieces as excuses for conversations on the site about the site. They're not preoccupied with themselves but act as sensory extensions that make the ongoing phenomena more perceptible. They're real analogues, not metaphors. They do what they are talking about. Does that make any sense?

JK: They are what they do?

DH: They are what they do.

JK: So what makes your work art?

DH: That depends on what you think art is. It's always a hard question, and I'm not sure I care whether my work is called art or music or science. But I do know it's an investigation of my perceptions, and maybe that's a pretty good definition of art.