

Marilyn Arsem

LOCATION AND PREPARATION OF THE SITE FOR "RED IN WOODS"

RED IN WOODS was located on a private site in Concord, MA. The narrow strip of land was behind houses along a road, overlooking a marshland area. The land sloped down from the houses, which were heavily screened by trees, so that they couldn't be seen. An old apple orchard was situated between the houses, and one edge of it could be seen up a path leading away from the site. The site had clearly been 'disturbed' at some point in the last several decades. There were only a few sections with large, old trees; the rest was dense shrubbery and vines, and areas of small saplings. Two small fields were cleared, with the remains of a hedge between them. A kind of ditch and small hollow in the land existed at one point. Perhaps it was dug for a cellar? If so, it would have been a very small house. At one end of the site, a small stream ran down the hill into the marsh. The marsh extended out in both directions, and could be seen from many points on the hillside. It was a large area of grassy hillocks interspersed with wet pockets filled with snow. In the distance, the water formed a kind of river and pond. In the furthest distance could be seen houses on a cleared slope. When you stood on the hillside, overlooking the marsh, you were facing a large expanse of the western sky.

Each December, after the first freeze, we went into the site to prepare it for the performance. Many of the trees in the area were covered with large poison ivy vines (hence beginning after the first freeze...). Each season also produced a new crop of dense brambles in the open areas. I created the path by creeping along and cutting the brambles at their bases in order to clear the way. I also pruned trees and bushes, and removed fallen branches, to make the path in the wooded areas. The path looped up and down the hillside, doubling back on itself, so that it was at least twice as long as the actual length of the site.

The route of the path was chosen in relation to the features of the land. I walked throughout the area, noting the hills and hollows, rocks and stumps, fields and trees. The images arose in relation to the site. Given the idea of an exploded version of the story of Red Riding Hood, I knew I would be working with domestic objects and materials. I was assisted in this early stage by Owen Furshpan, noon coda and Meredith Davis, who spent time walking over the site with me, and talking about possible images. I haunted stores in Boston, examining red objects and contemplating their possible uses.

Work with that story had manifested itself earlier, with a performance entitled "Throw It in the Fire," and some of the images for 'Red in Woods' were evolutions of ones that we worked with in that piece, such as the red four poster bed and the white-covered table of red food. The red flowers growing out of the ground were related to another fairy tale that I had loved as a child, in which a girl meets the Twelve Months sitting around a fire in the woods, and June makes strawberries grow up out of the snow. I initially tried to find a plant of fresh strawberries to be picked, but finally had to settle for red flowers.

Interesting, probably the most tension (and expense) was around the red flowers. While it is easy in February to find potted blooming red flowers, it is much more difficult in January and March. I was never sure if I would find one, and it was always at the last moment that we even knew whether we were actually going to do the piece. One year I tried to force tulips, religiously planting several bulbs in successive weeks in early fall, tending them in the dark, bringing them into more and more light. I was able to use some, not all, because the timing of their blooming was never quite right.