



# The Natural Spirit of Art

A Creative Path to Connecting with the Earth

by Christa Hein

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*Gate built by Chris Byerly and Christa Hein*

With gratitude for my supportive, loving, and incredibly talented  
husband Chris,  
my creative, affectionate, and inspiring daughter Sequoia,  
and my parents, Dorothy and Karl, who never stop believing I  
can grow up to be anything I want.

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# Connection

Art is everywhere! It's the sweater on your chest, the meal in your belly, and the song playing in your head. There are as many art forms as there are cells in the human body. Every one of them is derived from Mother Earth.

The human spirit longs for a connection with the creative forces of our world. Some seek this connection through meditation, some through excursions into the wilderness, and some by creating art with a mindful attention to the Earth. Regardless of how one seeks connection, the act and feeling of connection to the Earth is essential in our modern world.

A fascinating and progressive science has developed within the last several decades called ecopsychology. Fundamental to the understandings of ecopsychology is the knowledge that humans have an intrinsic need to bond with the Earth; so crucial is the need for connection that mental well being is dependent on it. It is obvious, with modern society's dysfunctional relationship with nature, that an alliance with the Earth must be sought in all human endeavors. It is critical to our personal, societal and collective well being - and imperative to the health of our planet.

Akin to the study of ecopsychology is the philosophy of deep ecology. Deep ecology is the study, not just of the ecological systems that hold the Earth in balance, but of the undeniable links that attach humans within the ecology of this world. Within deep ecology there is the understanding that all individual species upon the Earth are important to the whole of Earth. This

dramatic realization seeks to change the common perspective of humans as 'top-of-the-pyramid consumers' to a more ecological perspective of humans as partner and steward of the Earth.

These two fields of study seek to clarify where we are as a society and where we need to go to find our ecological balance. As human understandings of our relationships to the Earth continue to unfold and grow, the human mind can begin to recognize that we are just one of millions of species living together on this planet. Through that realization, we can nurture our relationship with the Earth. With our own creative spirits, we are equipped to use art to make the statement that we are indeed members in the community of nature. Because art is a deeply personal expression of the inner landscape, it makes a perfect breeding ground for intentions of connection and grounding with the Earth.

From an ecopsychological perspective, nature can be used to transform one's relationships, mending the psyche through primal connections. From a deep ecology viewpoint, a richness and diversity of life are vital and, like art, valued not for their usefulness, but for their existence. When one connects to nature through art, there is the capacity to both heal our minds and enrich our human experience, opening up our perspective to the richness, diversity, and beauty that exists all around us.

In this work, we will explore several ways that art can be used to bond the artist, and the art lover, to a meaningful connection and appreciation for the Earth. The arts included herein are by no means conclusive, as nature exists in every art form if only one knows how to look. For there is nowhere on this delicate blue/green ball that nature does not exist, nor a place where beauty can not be seen, if the world is looked at through an artist's eye and touched with an artist's hand.

# Fiber Arts: Spinning, Felting, Weaving and Dyeing



Natural dyeing class at the Stratford Ecological Center



Wool that has been naturally dyed using plants



Shearing sheep with a student audience

My weaving loom;  
scarf in process



Felted wall hangings I've made



Spinning at an Earth Day festival in Columbus, OH

# Fiber Arts: Spinning, Felting, Weaving and Dyeing

Working with wool can be a sensual, grounding and meditative experience. Becoming a fiber artist can begin long before any fibers enter the artist's hand. The lucky artist has the opportunity to know the source of their wool. At Stratford Ecological Center, where I worked for 15 years, we raised Tunis and Dorsett sheep. My wool came from a sheep named Francesca. I picked Francesca out on the day we bought her, driving her and another ewe, Rosalita, home to the farm in the back of my Jeep Wagoneer. I watched as Francesca was sheared the following year, passively on her back, and happily scooped her wool into a bag. The shearing was a necessary annual event; the heat of summer was beginning and she needed her wool off as much as I desired having it.

When the day came to work on her wool, I laid the whole fleece out on the floor in front of me, knowing exactly the source of this treasure. Sorting a fleece is challenging; one has to define the areas of the fleece as they relate to the sheep. Which part was on her back, her sides, her haunches? The individual sheep is not forgotten. As the wool is bagged, it is sorted and labeled "Francesca's back", "Francesca's sides", etc., as each sheep is different, and each part of each sheep is different. If one wants a consistent article, one needs to be consistent with the wool chosen for the project. When I'm washing and combing wool, parts of the sheep's life become evident: forays in the mud, close encounters with briars, matted hair on her chest from when she



had hoof rot and knelt to eat. Each of these encounters needs to be washed out, combed out, or hand picked out until the fibers are clean, shiny and tangle free. All of this is consciously done by human fingers to sheep hair, connecting the two in an intimate way; the same way I connect myself to my little girl or my mom by lovingly combing their hair. Washing and combing something is a caretaking effort, a show of respect and value. In this way the fiber artist honors the sheep, the plants that sheep encountered, and the sun that grew the plants and bleached the sheep's hair. The parts are all connected, and we can feel that connection through every blanket, blouse or teddy bear we share our daily lives with.

Not every fiber artist is conscious of this connection, but one can be. If one chooses to make their clothes from scratch, there is usually a more intense value of the materials than is common when one solely shops at Wal Mart or the mall. The source is consciously chosen, and in that way, consciously honored.

How one approaches their fiber art is important to the experience they will take away. My spinning teacher, JoAnn Powers, a passionate spinster, taught that Gandhi believed there were three levels to spinning: the first level was spinning for profit or necessity; the second level was spinning for the sheer pleasure of it; and the third and highest level was spinning as meditation. I remember the first time I achieved the third level, where my hands and the fiber became one and I ceased thinking, experiencing the strands flowing through my hands in perfect balance. I was spinning hemp that day, forging a connection with the forbidden plant, feeling ecstatic in the way the fibers fluidly flowed through my fingers, loving the plant hard to make up for all the negativity that gets sent its way. Outside under some trees, hours had passed without my notice and I had found a focus and relaxation I had

not before known.

Despite its benefit and appeal, working in meditation is not essential to feeling a connection - appreciating the source is. When one sits down to work, a simple 'thank you' is enough.

The same experience of connection can be had when felting, weaving, or when using natural dyes. In each of these instances one is creating something beautiful from the Earth in a very primitive and private way. When felting, one is using wool to create 3-D pictures or sculptures, or fabric that will be sewn into shapes. Wool is chosen for its texture, its crimp, its lustre - all aspects of certain breeds of sheep and individuals within a flock. What began as a coat of wool turns into a scarf, covering my nose in the wind, smelling slightly of the ewe who wore it before me. Of her hair becomes a doll, a ball, a magical mushroom house, or a favorite wall hanging. What was once living growing hair turns into art. Gratitude is inevitable.

Weaving utilizes finished yarn to create patterns and symbols within a woven garment. Fibers once twisted are mathematically calculated to string onto a loom. Shuttles made of wood flow across the warp in time, creating a fabric with each toss back and forth. This recalls the rhythm of the tides, the cycles of the seasons; back and forth and back and forth, creating the fabric of our lives. Metaphors abound when one is slipping silently into an artistic rhythm of connection.

Natural dyeing involves harvesting plants for their colorant properties and then boiling them to produce color. Mystery surrounds the dyeing process because nature's colors are not necessarily transferable to the dye bath. In dyeing, one learns the inner characteristics of plants, their colors underneath their colors. There is awe in this discovery, as if one has been let in on a secret known only to those that investigate the inner world of plants.

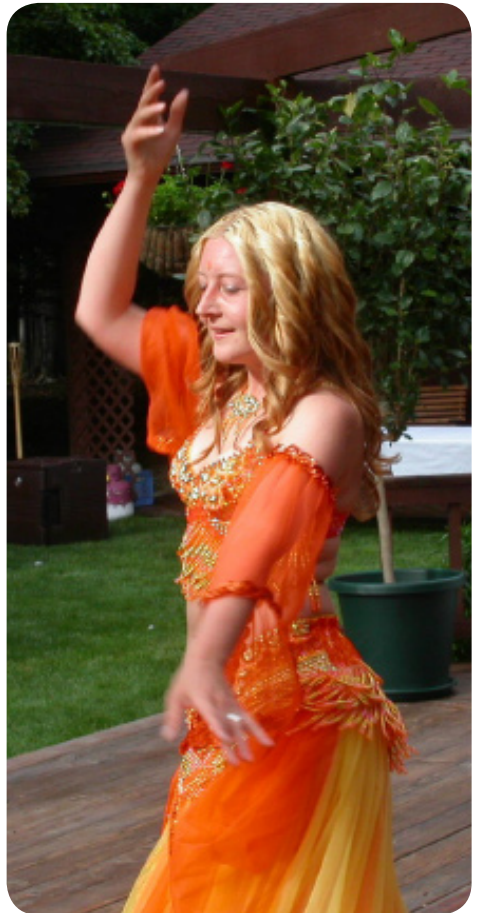
These ancient arts connect us to our ancestors and to the Earth as the source of the products. This knowing how to create from raw materials creates a sense of liberation and freedom. The feeling of freedom is an important connector, as we are freed from technocracy and through the skill of creating for oneself, liberated. Taking care of our bodies – clothing and warming ourselves – brings about a feeling of true humanness; beneath our clothes we are just naked animals.

# Belly Dance: Dancing the Rhythms of the Earth



My first performance in 1999

Performing at my mom's 60th  
birthday party in 2003



# Belly Dance:

## Dancing the Rhythms of the Earth

Humans are animals. The female body cycles with the seasons of the moon, moving in rhythm to the Earth as the tides do. Our ancestors believed that the female represented Mother Earth herself, birthing from her body new life as each spring is birthed from the Earth. Each transition of the human, and each change of season, was respectfully revered through ritual and ceremony. The whole of the body can be used in ceremony; in belly dance, the dancer's body is used as the conduit to communication.

The drum is central to the dance. Animal skin and wood coalesce with human hand to create sound that instinctively makes the body move. The dancer dons bells that chime, alerting attentive spirits to the worship of the whole Earth through the dance. Clapping cymbals celebrate with each pulse all that is. Hips sway, rocking the birthing cavity to the heart beats of the drum. The dance is an expression: one of gratitude, or sorrow, or sensuality, or any of a myriad of human emotions. With the body, the human experience can be expressed in ways beyond what words can speak. The arms become branches of a tree swaying in the wind, the hands gift and receive; the belly rolls like waves, the hips pulse and cycle, the bare feet connect and dance upon the Earth. All expressions of the body connect the dancer to the full experience of living in a human body; and within that, experiencing how each body part, moving individually, is still connected to the whole.

This understanding is essential to perfecting the dance.

Without isolation, the dance doesn't exist. But in isolation nothing exists. It is a balance between the whole and its parts. The best dancers blend the isolations seamlessly into one another, connecting the paths into one cohesive whole. As it is with the Earth; individual parts are never truly separate from the whole. The dance is a symbol for this intimate connection between all parts of ourselves and all parts of the Earth symbolically swaying in rhythm with one another.



"Self portrait"  
assignment in pottery  
class at Kent State in  
1992

# Sculpting, Pottery and Straw-Bale Construction



Corn goddess  
sculpted by a  
friend



Sculpting a pea  
plant on the  
"spring" side of  
Stratford's straw-  
bale garden shed  
while wearing my  
daughter Sequoia  
in a sling



A cob/bottle  
chicken house under  
construction at Blue  
Rock Station in Ohio



Sculpting with clay at the  
Women of the Earth retreat



"Summer" side of Stratford's straw-bale garden  
shed; almost completed

# Sculpting, Pottery and Straw-Bale Construction

Holding Earth in hand, the worker creates something of intention. There is no doubt that clay is Earth; moist squishy remembrances of mud pies, pond edges and wet gardens. When taking clay in hand, one is invited to put to picture whatever rests beneath the surface of the mind, and set free the intention. At times the creation may reflect peace, or spiritual fulfillment, or longing. Other times the creation may reflect anger, hurt, or feelings of inadequacy. Both scenarios bring the within out into the light of day, ready to be seen and dealt with. Creations of serenity magnify and soothe, while creations of despair release and reveal. The hands have the ability to sculpt what the conscious mind can not put to words, and in that way a pathway is opened up between the mental reality and the physical reality, connecting mind and body outwardly through the creation.

The ability of clay to mold into shapes is symbolic of the human resilience to a myriad of situations. One can pound and flatten clay in one moment and then scoop it up and turn it into a round orb or a beautiful flower. The clay doesn't care what shape others try to impose it into – it always remains clay. Occasionally the clay starts to dry and crack, losing its flexibility, as we ourselves may feel at times. Yet water can bring the clay 'back to life', as water nourishes us physically and metaphorically (cleansing, baptism, washing away). Cracks can be soothed, pieces rejoined, new shapes taken on. Yet clay is not infallible. When it is fired, put into commitment and promise, it can not again change its shape.



Often the shape has been correctly chosen and a thing of beauty remains always. Often too, the shape is not meant to be and the article breaks, as is true of relationships, jobs and dreams. At times the pieces can be glued back into shape, hardly showing the break. Other times it is necessary to let go, scoop the pieces into the trash and begin again with a fresh new ball of clay.

Working with clay can be a creative or metaphorical experience, but may also be an experience born of pure practicality. To eat and drink, one must have something from which to eat and drink. From the desire to create for oneself comes pottery born of Earth in the practical applications of plates, platters, bowls and cups. A potter's wheel spins around, as the Earth rotates on its axis and circles the sun. In its spinning, a ball of clay is transformed with human touch into a useful object full of energy, Earth, and practicality. With each use, the user is reminded of the Earth and the potter, and the energy given by both to make the meal or the drink one of beauty and meaning.

The practical uses of clay extend beyond the dinner table and to the structure in which the dinner table resides. Clay can be used together with sand, water and straw to create a straw-bale structure that is warm, strong, renewable, biodegradable, and alive with the energy of the Earth and the creativity of its creators. Building a straw-bale structure is a community affair, as it is not possible, nor desirable, to build one alone. Partnering hands stack bales of golden straw one on the other and weave twine back and forth through the bales with a needle, literally sewing the wall into place. Hands then become immersed in a tub of water, sifted clay, sand, and once that is mixed, chopped straw. Fingers squeeze and squish the mixture, pushing and pulling the heavy weight until it is consistent and appropriately sticky. Then bodies move to walls rubbing the Earth plaster into the bales, slowly over time, building

the walls into a level flatness. The project could conclude there, with brown-gold walls of pleasing straightness standing ready to house whatever will reside inside. Or the project can continue, adding curve and roundness, hands sculpting inspiration into the very walls. Pebbles and gems can be embedded, adding rays to sun, eyes to maidens, or spelling out the name of the place. Inspiration is continual – sourced through the soul and fingers of the builders and sculptors and gifted to all that pass by or enter the abode. The Earth stands ready to shelter, transformed by communal hands into a place that stands proud, showing off its source.

Practically, or for no known reason, when clay enters the human hand, transformation happens.



Mat made from cattails; basket made from pounded ash strips



Fairy house made by a friend's daughter



Windchimes I made from ocean reeds

## Natural Art: Broom making, Cattail Weaving, Fairy Homes, and More



Handmade brooms; I made the one on the right for my daughter.



Entrance to the Children's Garden at Stratford Ecological Center. Gates are completed with sticks and grapevines gathered from the forest. Made by my husband Chris, myself, and an intern, Mary.

# Natural Art: Broom making, Cattail Weaving, Fairy Homes and More

When one creates art from nature, the personality of the artist and the spirit of the natural materials merge. A stick is still a stick, but gains an identity as a gate, or a coat hook, or a fairy house. Within that transformation, the place that houses the stick is transformed: from just a gate, to a gate made of sticks, or from just a foyer, to a foyer with a stick. That difference sounds minute, but the essence changes considerably. All of what we experience in our human world is made from nature, but few things retain their natural characteristics. We see a wooden gate, but forget that it is made of trees as we see only saw-milled lumber sanded smooth and finished. When the natural character of nature is left intact, the source of the materials is unforgettable. The wood is most obviously a tree, as the bark and knobby ends still remain. Making art with natural elements is a way to bring the reality of our reliance of nature into the forefront of our thinking; and at the same time create natural beauty within our man-made environment. In this way, the artist allows the place housing the art, by way of the art, to showcase the beauty of nature, and the natural spirit of the artist.

When materials are being gathered for a project, details are observed that are usually overlooked. A stick's characteristics multiply in the eye of the observer – the curvature of the limbs, unique features such as knotholes and cavities, predictable details such as bark texture and branching style – all come into the forefront of vision. Details become important to the artist, and

through the details, the limitless beauty all around them becomes evident. When art is thus made from natural items, the beauty of the natural items is highlighted, drawing observers to see the beauty within the materials.

Art can by all means be useful. By using traditional handicraft skills to make items of function, one can gain a daily appreciation for the natural materials used in the creation of products necessary for daily life. Brooms are a wonderful example. What joy to feel the broom corn tassels sweeping across my kitchen floor as I remember the seedling and the beauty of the stately plant growing in the garden. Even when using a broom made by another's hands, the plant remains obvious, calling to mind its growth and harvest prior to connecting corn to stick in the form of a broom. The practicality of the art fills a space where a previously denatured object may have existed; a natural bristled broom in place of a synthetic broom adds a living energy to a home.

Creating art from natural materials teaches the artist about the nature of the form. When working with cattails, one learns that cattails prefer their natural state of wetness, cracking when dry, but weaving and bending when moist. One notices the thickness of shells, the empty space of reeds, the splintering capacity of wood. Visually, one sees the differences; tactilely, one feels, not only variations, but also the texture, density, and preferences of the form, revealing the inner character of the natural material. The artist begins to know their medium like a good friend.

Sometimes art need not be manufactured at all. A piece of gathered driftwood set on a table brings the spirit of the outside world into a place, as does a collection of rocks on a windowsill or a seashell as a soap dish. Placement of natural items within our living environment is itself an art form and can change the feel of a place from one of empty coldness to one of warm invitation.

Natural items have within them a spirit and a beauty. When we surround ourselves with such beauty and spirit, we can feel more a part of the world in which we were birthed, and thus more grounded in our own naturalness. In recognizing the beauty in all of the natural world, our eyes are opened to our ability to create beauty within our surroundings and within ourselves.

# Using Plants: Cooking, Preserving, and Making Herbal Preparations



Sequoia and a plentiful harvest of beans



Fresh, dried, and tinctured herbs; hand-made soap and lotion



Our pantry



Cutting wheat to thresh and grind for baking bread at Sequoia's preschool



Sequoia helping us make ketchup with tomatoes from our garden



Flower and leaf salad with homemade herb dressing

# Using Plants: Cooking, Preserving, and Making Herbal Preparations

Plants are beautiful. With their very bodies, plants share that beauty with innumerable other species. Starting from the smallest life form, plants are consumed to sustain life on planet Earth. They are breathed in, eaten, and rubbed on our bodies. When taken internally or externally to heal and nourish, they have the ability to create beauty and balance within the human body. If done consciously, using plants can nourish the human spirit and can intimately connect us with the web of life.

Modern life gives us many choices; an endless selection of foods and medicines. When one chooses that which is alive, the energy in plant can be transferred, feeding and healing the user. Creating the space in daily life for fresh and preserved plants can be transforming!

Starting with the source, when grown or harvested with our own hands, there is the opportunity to come down from an anthropocentric perspective and creatively thank the plant. It may be a verbal thank you, a soft touch and a nod, or a physical offering of gratitude. To some it may sound or feel silly to thank a plant. But the effect is large. "Thank you" acknowledges the life in the plant, the physical energy that is being gratefully accepted as a gift. The act of thanking plants is humbling and links us to the realization that we are consuming another in our quest for life; it balances the taking. Thanking is prayer in motion.

When we preserve or prepare foods or medicine, we are opened to an amazing opportunity for choice and play. Meals



can be made simple, inviting a modest elegance, or they can be complex, feeding our senses in multiple dimensions. The chef is the artist, taking one and transforming it into another, making a temporary art, meant to please for an instant before, and while, it is consumed.

Just as a visual artist transforms a canvas, so the cook transforms the plate, adding color, texture and symmetry. However, the chef can go a step further, delighting the senses through aroma, pleasing the palate through taste combinations. In this way, both the cook and the epicure experience the plant personalities, delighting in their combinations and solo styles.

Having a world of ingredients at one's disposal can enlarge one's perspective of the world, allowing the food artist to experience different cultures and places. By focusing on local and seasonal fare, the artist begins to understand their own biome, discovering the growing season of certain plants, experiencing the plate through the cycles of the Earth's rotation. When one creates a meal that was grown within 100 miles of their location, there is a feeling of groundedness that ensues, and an appreciation for the place where one is from. As with other art forms, sometimes the artist chooses to stay within boundaries so as to make a statement of purpose or intent. Other times those boundaries dissolve so as to reach a broader audience or to make a bolder statement.

Healing the body is a temporary thing, as the body is always pushed and pulled out of equilibrium by the forces of modern life. When healing with plants, the herbalist becomes the conductor in the symphony of balance, adding a pinch of energy, a dash of calm, a sprinkle of nourish. Through herbs, the potent energies of a plant are transferred to our bodies, captured in whatever medium the herbalist chooses. Beautiful concoctions are created: tiny bottles of oils and alcohol, pots of steaming herbs, lotions made of

macerated plants; all for the pleasure and perfection of the human body and spirit.

Around food, community is supported; families debrief and reconnect, deals are made, compromises struck, accomplishments honored, and life changes celebrated or mourned. Food is the common coordinating factor between all of humanity. It invites us into communion with our bodies, our communities and the savory sentient beings we share this planet with.



Our garden, 2006

# Gardening: Creating a Sacred Space for Growing



The center of our garden. Four walkways converge from the directions into this center.

A sitting area in our garden; flowers are used as companion plants.



Amaranth growing in the Children's Garden

Compost piles in Children's Garden



# Gardening: Creating a Sacred Space for Growing

To create a garden is to play a part in the creation of magic. Dirt becomes living soil in the magician's eyes. Seeds become sprouts. Dreams become beauty in the garden and dinner on the table. Gardens feed more than the body, they feed the human spirit.

A garden can be a very personal thing, as a painting is to a painter. Yet in the garden, an invisible hand helps weave the colors of the palette together, creating more than the artist ever dreamed. The artist sets the form in motion and watches the results unfold. The placement of materials within the composition is essential to creating a pleasing finished product. Rows need not be rows! But instead let them be spirals and squares, houses and hideouts, borders and boundaries for inner secrets awaiting discovery by investigating sprites. Let the birds come; invite the frogs! How boring, how unnatural, is a garden with straight rows and singularly planted crops, keeping out any outside 'intruders'. Sometimes art seeks such an unbalanced goal to open eyes to injustices or shock with deliberate oversight. But a garden should not have that effect. A garden is a place of birth and growing, a balance struck between the artist and the medium.

A potent garden becomes a living breathing work of art, designed to feed the human body, but in the process feeds the soul, grows inspiration, and creates communion between the elements of the Earth.

# Stained Glass and All the Rest of the World



The stained glass tree I made coincidentally matches the tree outside our window.



Piece in progress.  
Being made as a gift for the  
Stratford Ecological Center



Stained glass piece my husband  
Chris and I made for my parents' 40th  
wedding anniversary

# Stained Glass and All the Rest of the World

The Earth is everywhere, in everything that enters and exits our lives. Sometimes the sources are easy to see, other times one must focus and look beneath to reconnect with the source of the supplies. By practicing Earth-conscious art, one opens themselves to sensing and thus fostering a connection with each and every part of their lives.

I am a stained glass artist. It is easy, when given the thought, to see my works as sand and metal, gathered from seashore and from the layers of rocky Earth. That connection can carry over into all aspects of life; the picture frame becomes tree and sand and rocky core, the couch becomes plant and dinosaur bones, the kitchen counter becomes a layer of Earth. Creating with glass is not as outwardly natural as say, weaving with cattails. But in recognizing the natural within a seemingly unnatural thing, comes the true practice of connection. In this way art becomes similar in scope to an awareness meditation. Once one is practiced in the art of seeing the source of things, the world comes alive and nature is in every brick and mortar. We are no longer walking amongst strangers, but walking connected to every other living thing. This is the connection and balance searched for within the doctrines of deep ecology and ecopsychology.

Art has the potential to inspire and bend the thoughts of humans into new and sometimes uncomfortable ways. It is through pushing past our norms that revelations and resolutions can occur. It is through seeing the Earth in every step of our journey that we

begin to remember our source as living breathing hairy animals treading across the face of Mother Earth. With this insight, our very act of living can become a beautiful and sustainable work of art.

*May your walk upon our Earth be one of beauty and creativity, embedded in a respect and appreciation for the richness and diversity of life around us.*

*With gratitude,  
Christa Hein*



Playing with Earth  
Sequoia Hein Byerly, 2007