

Summer 2025

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Repository Citation

Cusick, Christine. "On Joel Weishaus' *Forest Park: A Journal*." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* vol. 5, no. 3, 2025, pp. 1–4. <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/reconstruction/vol5/iss3/12>

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On Joel Weishaus' *Forest Park: A Journal*

Joel Weishaus. *Forest Park: A Journal*. 2005

Review Essay by Christine Cusick

<1> I tend to have an often stubborn suspicion of the convergence of art and technology, language that loses and finds us in the throes of new and unbound understanding somehow, seems diminished when the materiality of its record cannot be felt, when visceral responses cannot make a palimpsest of the text through the marginalia of an earnest reader. And so, when I first heard mention of a highly respected poet and thinker chronicling his time-felt ruminations and intuitions on cyberspace, I was initially hesitant to pursue the encounter. However, my hesitation quickly turned to humble engagement as I accepted the invitation of Joel Weishaus's *Forest Park: A Journal*. Through innovations of form, intense intellectual conversation with past and present minds, and intimate self-awareness, this journal is courageous and honest.

<2> The "Introduction" to Weishaus's pages immediately positions this journal as a text that enacts a visual and verbal storytelling; a storytelling that relies just as much on the reader as it does the teller. The word "Site" takes on many meanings throughout Weishaus's pages, for it is a location of the physical, the historic, and the spiritual. The website immediately situates itself within a context of place. Weishaus describes the physical reality of Forest Park in Portland, Oregon that unexpectedly exists in spite of the teasing and taunting of urban life, a Park that was envisioned by a thoughtful Unitarian minister by the name of Thomas Lamb. Invoking the memory of American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, Weishaus situates his own dwelling in this city on the edge of this forest, within a larger history, a larger existence that is propelled forward through a continuum of deliberate dwelling. And yet, the journal successfully resists linearity, of time, of age, of ideas. By its very nature, it is a creation of process, an ambulation of the places of the natural world, of self, of memory, of time, of received and shared ideas-all of these existing as the same fluid whole.

<3> In addition to the historic and personal locations that introduce the site, Weishaus also carefully maps his formal and technical apparatuses. He makes clear the optimal settings for the viewing all components of the site. Moreover, he explains the method of synthesis through which he integrates and attributes the ideas and writings of other sources. Weishaus's uses metalogues, which he defines as "monologues that extend beyond the singular voice," and hidden links that open text boxes of clear attribution. The shift from his own writing to the quotation or paraphrase of another source is thus subtly indicated through a mere change in font. This process works at two levels throughout the pages: first, it allows ideas to unfold without the artificial and sometimes awkward break of formal citation methods. Secondly, the process allows the reader to visually experience the layers of conversation that are the lineage and mirror of the reflection. The changes in tone and meaning are often slight, and so the reader is brought to see how one's self-understanding is continually transformed by one's perceptions and awareness.

<4> The breadth and depth of Weishaus's philosophical integration humbly reveals that these pages are the craft of an erudite writer whose understanding of the mind is simultaneously an experience of the body and of the spirit. He writes: "A poet experiences the world as language; there is no separation between one's sense and one's style" (Page 1). And so it is that the sensorial experience within these pages is highlighted by Weishaus's incorporation of visual images that are never far removed from the frames of language. While the majority of these images are of the natural world and ancient symbol, which serve as exegesis of the surrounding text, there are also visual representations of verbal messages, replications of pathway placards including a sign designating a restorative project and a memorial for a long dedicated caregiver to the birds. Such layers of word upon image, image upon word, give these pages aesthetic and rhetorical dimension, forcing the reader to create through active listening.

<5> Genre shifts also serve as a sort of visual tool for Weishaus. Prose, poem and short aphoristic reflections blend into one another, the shift in form often signaling a turn inward from interpretation to introspection. At the same time, the arrangements of the words on the page enact a sort of linguistic sculpting, with broken words and lines creating a rhythm for the verse. Throughout the journal, Weishaus sensitively uses visual, linguistic and the rhetorical conflation therein to create a site that becomes its own literal and figurative place.

<6> Throughout what is now completed eight site pages, Weishaus figures Forest Park as a participant in his reflections, his analyses, and his meditation. He uses this place in Portland, Oregon as a metaphor for a nonlinear, inclusive journey toward self-understanding. A well-known student of Zen, Weishaus's explorations are often figured through the lens of Eastern philosophies. And so, the place of Forest Park resonates not just as material context, but rather, as an active

player of the script; he is surrounded by the paradoxical fragility and strength that is the natural world, of the indisputable interconnectedness of all life. This is the very concrete reality of these chronicles. Of just as much importance, however, is Weishaus's invocation of these pathways as guide for and metaphor of what it means to live in this city, at the edge of this forest, at this particular time in his life's time. The wildness of the forest enables a navigation of the mind so that a quest for self-understanding is akin to an exploration of the living natural world. Ultimately, and in the spirit of what in the academic world has been termed ecopsychology, Weishaus connects problems in the wild with spiritual wellness, and citing R.P. Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, suggests inscribes the forest as a "'correlate of human transcendence'" (Page 1). Through ambulation and introspection, then, Weishaus calls upon the forest as a vehicle of meditation. In our experience of this forest, however, he insists that one must resist the temptation to bestow human systems upon the natural world:

As one walks the path and sees how everything grows as it would, the concept of "God's plan" becomes naive. One sees a process of sorting out-competition, Social Darwinism, Capitalism, don't apply here-between and within species. But there is no order imposed from outside. Nature's logic is "just is," Fundamentalism a misreading of the Void. (Page 3)

Thus, for Weishaus, the lens through which we perceive and receive the natural world is bound to our ability to understand the intrinsic worth of its existence:

The trail is muddy today. Rocks pop up, evergreen leaves show slick wet faces; puffs of breath mix with low-hanging clouds, the creek below hardly heard. I climb higher, brightened by chips of redwood bark, darkened by detritus of this year's fall, then down slippery steps thoughtfully adzed, stopping for a moment to write. Deeper in the woods, there is no Yahweh to scold, no Christ to bless, no Buddha to guide. Like death, this path is one-person wide. (Page 6)

Weishaus's map thus suggests that understanding of this forest is gained only through a letting go of the confines of a system, of an order.

<7> While Weishaus's spiritual exploration is one of theosophical proportions, his quest is guided by impressions of both Judaism and Christianity, which he considers with an astute eye that ultimately finds their paths inadequate, though voices of their traditions, such as Martin Buber and Thomas Merton, are gracefully integrated into his unceasing questioning. Through mnemonic returns to his childhood on Brooklyn streets, considerations of self-exile and displacement, through wanderlust and close observation of an expanding Forest Park, a changing cityscape, and an explosive distant horizon, these pages

are a place for many forms of movement. Spiritual understanding comes through an ambulation of paths, of thought, of the poetic. As Weishaus writes at the close of Page 3, "The sense of a transcendental God, a stand-in for what is beyond the range of our brain, what we take on faith, doesn't have to be based in the temporal lobe." A microscopic image of a slug follows these reflections, reinforcing this notion, reminding us that perception is multitudinous and malleable.

<8> In keeping with Weishaus's reflections on perception is his Jungian notion of the dream state. He writes:

Dreams are not on a different level than wakefulness, the unconscious is here, there are no levels of consciousness, only stages of awareness-it's all happening at once. Nor is there a shred of distance between reality, dreams, enlightenment and ignorance. Being is a simmering stew. (Page 5)

The journal records dreams, marks their influences on current moment, and Weishaus interprets their significance with as much rigor as his interpretation of the gritty pathways beneath his feet.

<9> The layers of Joel Weishaus's poetic amblings cannot be explicated in a mere Review Essay, and this, it seems, is as how he would have it. His intellectual agility allows him to place his words against thinkers from the Ancient Greeks to contemporary nature writers, to gather understanding from the sparseness of Basho to the layers of Foucault. A sincere reading of his pages requires patience and a willingness to trust the path of inward turns upon which he invites us. In an online interview with August Highland, Weishaus reflects on his mentors: "[T]eachers are about overcoming them in order to find your own unique packets of expression. The more influential the teacher the greater the difficulty. Teachers are people who make things difficult." Yes, there is meaningful difficulty, unquestionable influence, in these pages.

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