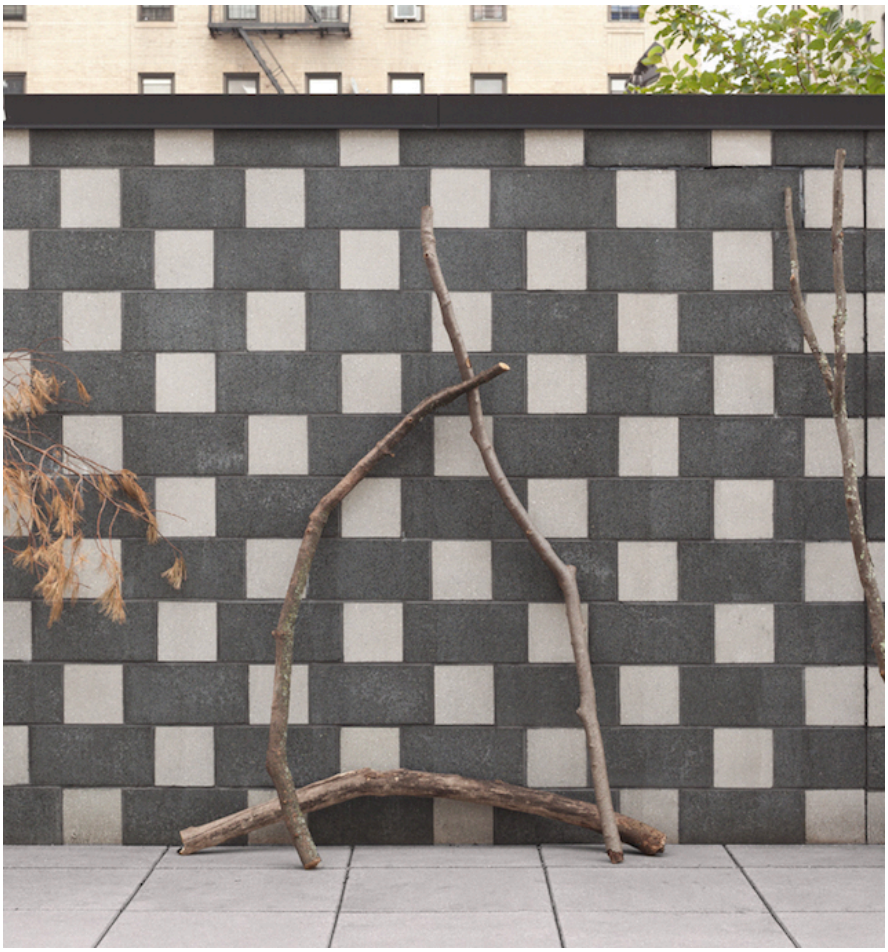
HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

# X Marks the Spot: E. J. McAdams's Sculptural Nature Writing

Louis Bury November 15, 2015



Installation view of E.J. McAdams's "Trees are Alphabets" (2015) at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (all photos by Kevin Noble)

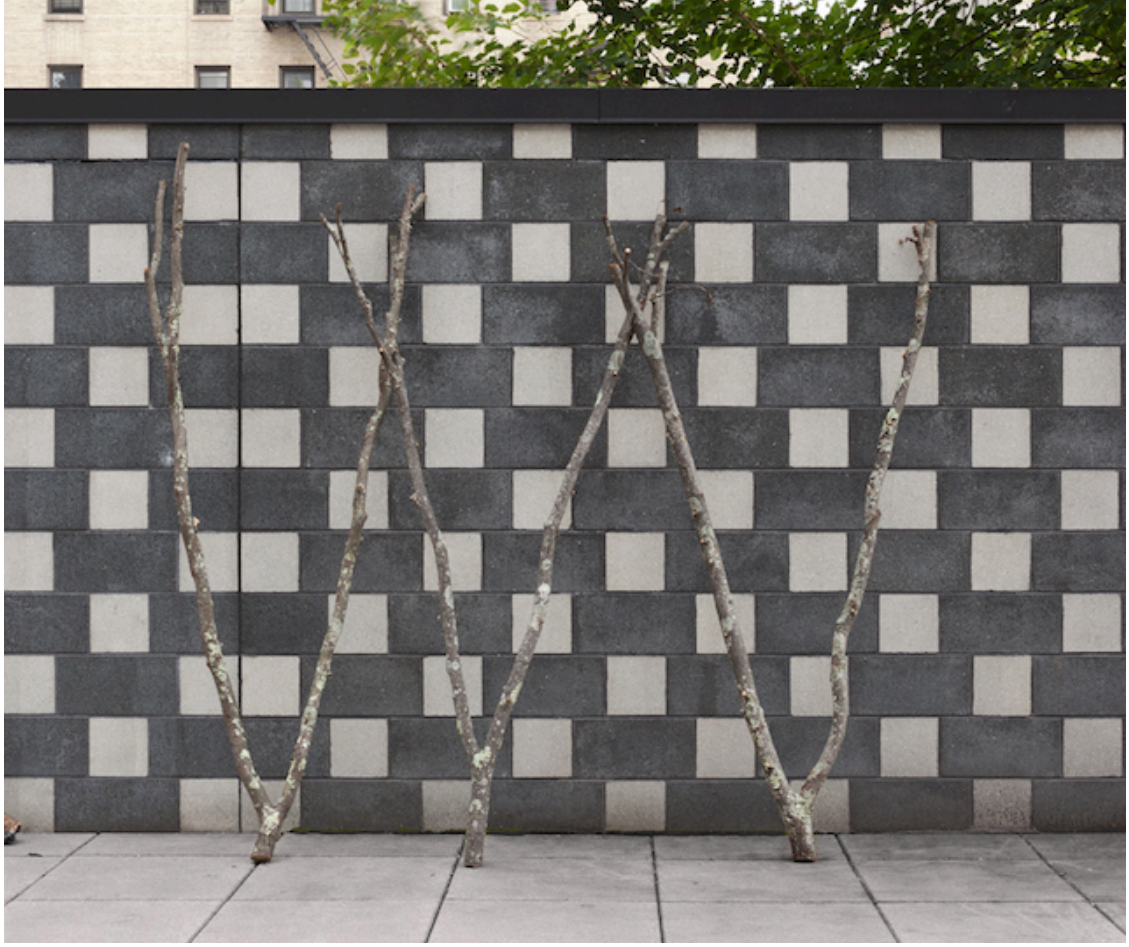
Taking its title from a line in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, E.J. McAdams's site-specific installation, "**Trees Are Alphabets**," consists of salvaged sawed-off tree branches, most about seven or eight feet long, sculpturally arranged on the terrace of the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Bunched together in distinct clusters and propped up against the terrace's high walls, the branch arrangements are intended to evoke alphabetic shapes and thus to constitute an elemental form of writing in the asemic traditions of concrete poetry and visual poetry. A poet and a naturalist, McAdams enacts nature writing in the most literal sense. This effort to write with nature proves

an eerie and unassuming ecological meditation on the limits of human language and on the suggestiveness of analogical thinking in art.

The first thing that strikes you about the exhibit is just how little it strikes you. The terrace walls against which the branches lean are patterned in bold, gray-and-white checks that, as you ascend the stairs to access the terrace, make the branches appear as slight, barely visible wisps of gray line. If you didn't know they were there you could easily miss them. Far from rendering the work aesthetically ineffectual, this inadvertent architectural camouflage actually enhances the show's alien, archaic mood.

As you step out onto the terrace and take in the array of jigsawed branches, now better visible, it feels as if you are surveying the glyphic ruins of a civilization whose import remains just out of reach. That the terrace must be accessed through an unpeopled event space situated apart from the museum's other exhibition spaces only adds to the sense of strange seclusion. It is as though you have stumbled upon a mysterious antique hideaway, some cave or cove treasured away inside the set of *The Goonies* or the Indiana Jones movies.

Such inventive comparisons owe to the exhibit's explicit invitation to search out visual correspondences and conjunctions among the forms in its wooden syllabary. The titular metaphoric trick works best when the evoked letters have something a bit askew in their construction, enough that their alphabetic similitude surprises: an "A" whose bar hews close to the ground, rendering funny the proportions of its negative space; an "X" where one crossing branch rests, as though embraced, inside the wishbone crook of the other; a "t" whose disproportionately small bar makes it look like it has T-rex arms; a trident-like "m" made by a branch that resembles a misshapen bird's foot.



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One of the wittier and more notable lettristic shapes in this version of the installation (McAdams will periodically "re-write" the installation while it is up) alludes to Aram Saroyan's four-legged "m," a seminal 1965 concrete poem. Just as Saroyan added one extra leg to the letter "m," McAdams places three large V-shaped branches next to one another in order to add an extra "V" to the letter "W." The inversions here — flipping the letter "m" upside-down and shifting it from lowercase to caps — seem significant, as if the singular "am" on which Saroyan's poem puns has been collectivized into a letter that evokes an expanded *W*e rather than an individualistic *m*e. Further, in a show that relies so much on visual analogy (this thing looks like that thing in these ways), the reference to Saroyan suggests that, more than just a hermetic insider's wink, artistic allusion can actually be a sophisticated and powerful form of analogical thought.

For all the show's verbal and visual wit, the evoked branch letters can sometimes appear obvious — such as an "N" written with a straight diagonal branch placed between two vertical stems — which makes their analogical effects less compelling. But the majority of the shapes are not predictably lettristic. Indeed, many do not even evoke recognizable English-language letters at all, as in a configuration of branches that hints, if you squint hard enough, at an eccentric "H" but more strongly recalls a hashtag or a tic tac toe grid. Likewise a group of thin, straight branches that could each pass as a lone "I" but, side-by-side-by-side, more immediately and powerfully evoke a prisoner's bleak tally marks. These kinds of associations, inevitable when viewing abstract art, also often operate by means of analogy. The show's branch arrangements may

constitute a metaphoric form of writing, but it is a species of writing more concerned with sculptural expressivity than bald communicative clarity.

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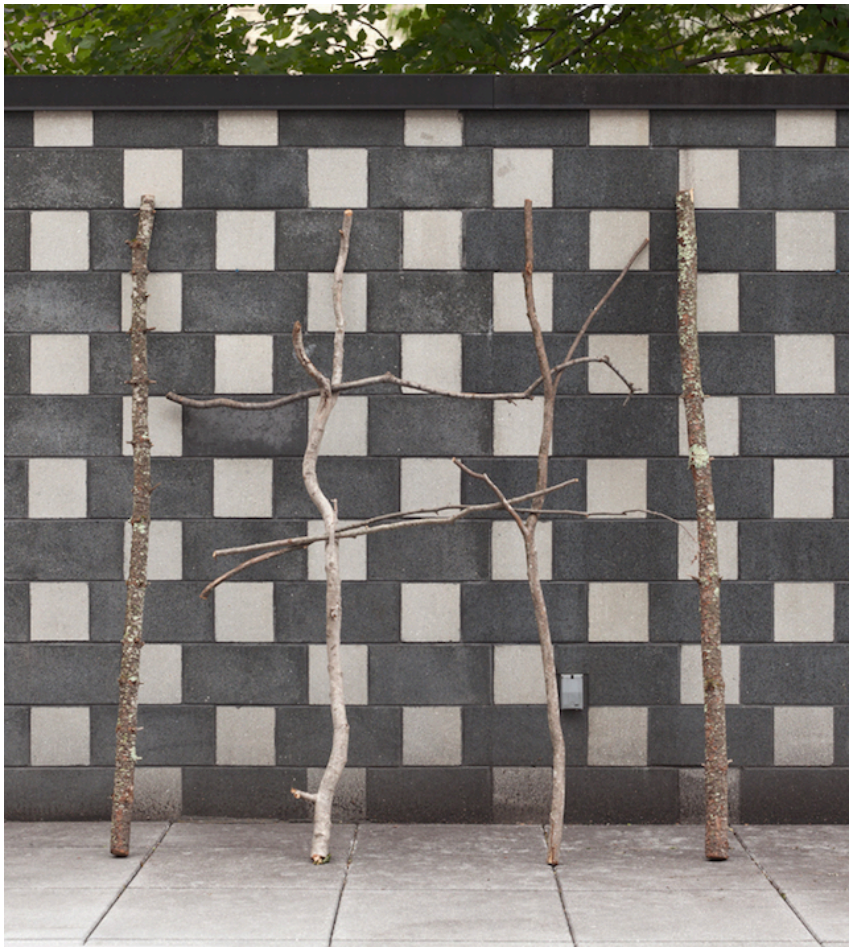
In this respect, "Trees Are Alphabets" represents a naturalist's contribution to the traditions of concrete poetry and visual poetry, the latter of which is currently experiencing a re-efflorescence thanks to the ease of its digital production and dissemination. Concrete poetry, the analog forefather of Internet-centric Vispo, began as a mid-20th century international aesthetic phenomenon, with roots stretching back to the 17th century emblem poetry of George Herbert and beyond, emphasizing the typographic arrangement of words over those words' semantic sense. In so doing, it took poetic disregard for language's plain communicative function to an extreme —sight over sense — that abutted poetry up against visual art.

For the most part, however, concrete poetry and visual poetry have been page- or screen-based practices, even when what's depicted on the page or screen is an image of a three-dimensional object. A handful of poets have written visual poems that use natural materials in a sculptural way: Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden environments, Jody Gladding's object poems, and Raúl Zurita's "ni pena ni miedo," bulldozed into the sands of the Atacama Desert in Chile, are notable such predecessors. But those works retain a commitment to legible linguistic signification that "Trees Are Alphabets" gestures toward but ultimately abjures. Trees may well have important things to tell us — the artist Katie Holten cleverly played with this idea in her 2009 "Tree Museum," an audio installation along the Bronx's Grand Concourse — but McAdams's branch

writing points up the ways in which we humans are, to our detriment, far from fluent in their language.



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In taking Barthes's metaphor about as far as it can go, McAdams delineates a limit case of environmental engagement in a way that recalls Wittgenstein's famous proposition that, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Ecopoetic experiments in which humans collaborate with the environment, such as Jody Gladding's poetic translations of bark beetle tree markings, often push, provocatively, at the limits of language-as-world and world-as-language. McAdams has himself done important work in this vein: his *TRANSECT* series, for example, uses aleatory procedures to recuperate discarded language from both manmade and natural environments in order to compose walking poems. But while "Trees Are Alphabets" clearly participates in the burgeoning field of ecopoetics, the show also feels like a potential expansion of, or departure from, the field proper. McAdams wants to widen the limits of his — of our — world, but human language can't easily express the trees' quiddities.

Sculpture, however, may well get closer, in a manner redolent of the trending recent strain of anti-anthropocentric philosophy known as object-oriented ontology. As sculpture, the work in the show stands out for its inability to stand out on its own. I mean that literally rather than pejoratively: because the branches have no base by which they could support themselves upright,

they need to be propped up against the wall in delicate balance. In profile, this makes the branches look like a row of disaffected teens slouching up against a schoolyard wall.

It also makes the branch arrangements susceptible to the elements. On one of my visits to the show, one group of branches lay prone on the ground and another beside them stood windswept and tilted. Nature had, perhaps fittingly, taken an eraser to McAdams's nature writing. Environmental sculptors such as Andy Goldsworthy have long deliberately incorporated material change and decay into their work. But McAdams's branches, amputated limbs repurposed from from tree cuttings in city and state parks, feel particularly frail and impermanent, ghostly, elegiac. What's being lamented here is not the lost lives of fallen trees, or the larger fate of nature in the Anthropocene — nature will continue on just fine, however we temporarily rearrange it — but the difficulties of communing with nature in something other than a narcissistic way. Art, full of surprising likenesses, offers one way to help move the conversation forward.

**Trees Are Alphabets** *remains on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1040 Grand Concourse, Concourse, Bronx) through February 7, 2016.*

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