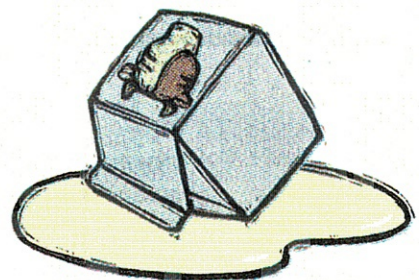


# SCENE



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## A von Rydingsvard sculpture fills an outdoor niche at Microsoft



RUSSELL JOHNSON

**"Skip to My Lou,"** a 1997 cedar and graphite sculpture by Ursula von Rydingsvard commissioned for Microsoft's corporate campus.

BY ROBIN UPDIKE  
*Seattle Times art critic*

New York sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard makes massive outdoor artworks that most often conjure images of ancient Celtic cairns or remnants of Stonehenge.

Given the raw, primitive, timeless feel of her work, and the fact that her newest piece is on the Microsoft campus in Redmond — ground zero for a new cyberworld where most human creations dissolve into obsolescence almost from the minute they're completed — the match between von Rydingsvard and Microsoft is at first difficult to fathom.

But Microsoft very much wanted a cutting-edge outdoor sculpture, and after looking over proposals from a dozen artists, the Microsoft Art Committee chose the submission by von Rydingsvard. The company announced last fall that for the first time in the 10-year history of its corporate art collection, it had commissioned an artwork, though the company will not disclose the size of the commission.

Called "Skip to My Lou," the piece was completed in late December. She was in town for an informal presentation to Microsoft employees a couple of weeks ago and to put a few finishing touches on the work.

Located in a 120-foot-wide grassy, central circle within a complex of new buildings, the cedar sculpture resembles a low wall that wanders in stops, starts and dead-ends until it finally more or less describes a circle 67 feet in diameter. As the wall snakes around, it undulates up and down from a height of about 2 to 3 feet, convenient for Microsoft employees to sit on while they eat lunch.

Von Rydingsvard, who often makes massive sculptures that would require rock-climbing skills from anyone who wanted to perch on top, calls the piece "my first interactive sculpture."

An articulate, down-to-earth, casually elegant woman who says she turned from painting to sculpture decades ago

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## Interactive sculpture provides a place for lunch

### SCULPTURE

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because her "paintings got heavier and heavier until they fell off the wall," von Rydingsvard has always been interested in physical gravity, mass and a certain psychological gravitas. She talked about the piece recently as she daubed on powdery black graphite to give it a deep, densely black surface.

"Skip to My Lou" has a "lowness and weightiness that I like. It's like the thick toes of an elephant." She said the piece was inspired by Native American storage boxes, the rambling script of a barely literate elderly woman she once knew, and a game of "Ring-Around-the-Rosie" she choreographed for her work crew. She employs several assistants, and to help give the piece a randomness,

she had them all join hands in a circle, then fall to the floor, where she outlined the way their limbs and bodies were arranged on the ground. She used the outline to get ideas about how to design the piece.

In a lecture at the University of Washington the night before, von Rydingsvard said that she tries never to be specific about what her sculptures are about. "I like metaphorical options for all the things I build," she said. "Not infinite options. But some options. With infinite options you lose all possibility of meaning."

True to her philosophy, she wouldn't say much about what "Skip to My Lou" is about, though she did note that she wanted it to be engaging from above as well as from the ground, since so many people from upper-floor offices would be looking

at it.

Von Rydingsvard, 55, works primarily in cedar. To make the new Microsoft work, as with nearly all of her other sculptures, she glues and dowels low-grade cedar four-by-fours together into loglike shapes, then chops and carves away with electric saws.

Her work is always large. Some pieces reach nearly 20 feet tall and 10 feet at the base. Some resemble huge, crude urns left by a prehistoric race of giants. Others are linear, serial works of log or canoelike shapes that stretch into the distance like a vanishing horizon. Partly because of her reverence for wood, von Rydingsvard's work has an earthy, organic quality. Her sculptures often manage to look monumental and built to withstand the ages. At the same time, they are more intimate than you'd expect from such large works.

Considered one of the most original sculptors working today, von Rydingsvard has seen her work included in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of

Art, Walker Art Center, and Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y., the nation's most prestigious outdoor sculpture collection. Unlike pieces in those collections, however, her new work at Microsoft will not be available for public viewing. Microsoft spokesman John Pinette says "the Microsoft campus is not open to the general public," and that the sculpture is therefore off-limits to all but Microsoft employees and guests.

As she circled "Skip to My Lou" a couple more times, blackening tiny pocks and planes on the wood, von Rydingsvard said that the graphite and cedar will weather in a few years to a silvery gray. She likes that shade of silvery cedar, one reason why cedar is her material of choice. And as a couple of thousand high-tech workers in nearby offices sat glued to computer screens and wrestled with the latest developments in the software world, she said she hoped that "Skip to My Lou" didn't look as though it was just built.

"It could be from 1998 or 2000 B.C.," she said. "I don't like to put my work in a particular time."