

California Lawyers for the Arts
Arts and Environmental Dialogue II—Los Angeles
April 7, 2011

“Trash is a failure of the imagination”

Our work to raise the profile of the arts in building public awareness of the environment began with an innovative Arts and Environmental Dialogue at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco in November, 2008. In addition to exchanging information about environmental issues, participants learned about current work in several arts disciplines, including public art, electronic media and spoken word. The first Dialogue resulted in several tangible projects which have started to generate additional resources for artists to work with environmental themes. We were eager to apply the dialogue approach in Los Angeles in an effort to build state-wide momentum for this work, while facilitating relationships among artists, and environmental organizations and agencies.

The Arts and Environmental Initiative has been funded by the Wallace A. Gerbode Foundation, Quentin Hancock Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Statewide Network Program of the California Arts Council and members of the Board of California Lawyers for the Arts. In-kind support for the LA Dialogue was provided by the LA City Council.

In advance of the both meetings, attendees were asked to read *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* by **James Gustave Speth**, former dean of the Yale School of Environmental Studies. A 10-page set of informal notes derived from the book was distributed to the Los Angeles participants prior to the meeting. One of the artists, **Brian Howe**, shared this jazzy “wordle,” created from the Speth notes, as part of his presentation:



In addition to artists and arts organizations, the Los Angeles Dialogue was attended by environmental organizations, local and state agency leaders, and educational and youth development leaders, with a total of over 50 participants.

Jan Perry, President Pro Tempore of the LA City Council, started the day with a discussion of the political background of the city's environmental policy, acknowledging that it is the responsibility of the current generation to improve the environmental legacy for those coming behind. She described successful efforts to fight climate change by establishing a comprehensive program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from all sources and said that LA has met its goal of 20% of renewable energy by 2010 (however only 1% of that is from solar energy).

Making the connection among the arts, environment, and greater community wellness, Perry highlighted the successful work of Measure O: Water Quality Improvement Project for Los Angeles River Watershed. The watershed renewal project transforms fallow space into an outdoor classroom. The funding supports the development of the Augustus Hawkins Wetlands Park, a two-acre wetland in South Los Angeles now populated by wildlife including herons and turtles, where previously no wildlife existed. A second wetlands park at 54th and Avalon is set to create an urban oasis, education center, and passive recreational center in heart of South LA. The wetlands area will feature-solar powered lighting, capture, clean and recycle storm water, create resting and feeding grounds for migratory birds, and create indigenous habitats that support colonization. Perry expressed hope that, within the wetlands project, science could be combined with creative expressions such as visual or performance-based art exhibitions.

Justin Yoffe, Board President of the Electric Lodge Visual & Performing Arts Center in Venice, CA and **Joel Shapiro**, its Founder and Artistic Director, responded to Perry's comments and described the Lodge. The Lodge promotes sound ecological principles with 100% renewable energy, cutting waste in operations and making more funds available for creative programming. Based on this model, Yoffe now has a contract from the City of Los Angeles to audit energy uses and make recommendations for cultural facilities throughout the City.

Other speakers on “Artistic Responses” included:

- **Nobuko Miyamoto**, a performing artist, songwriter, and Artistic Director of Great Leap, Inc., a Los Angeles-based, multicultural arts organization that uses art as both performance and a creative practice. Using her artistry and looking at personal and cultural consumption of wood, she was inspired to encourage environmental activism by promoting use of reusable chopsticks.

- Poet **Lewis MacAdams**, Founder and President of Friends of the LA River (FOLAR), who described his true art as his 40-year project to clean up the Los Angeles River, read from *The River, Books One, Two & Three*:

The voice of the river is a redwing blackbird twittering in the trash bags festooned across the branches of a cottonwood like prayer flags.

The freeways are louder than the river, The I-5, the 110, the L.B. overwhelm the River and its tributaries with their roar. But when the tributaries bring their gifts of rain water to the main stem

the River can be louder than the thunder rolling out of the San Gabriels.

The Voice of the river is the golf balls clanking in the power towers. I hear the river singing through the passing railroad cars....

I listen for them to make my own hearing more acute—the scream of a fishhawk, the flapping of a hundred pigeons, and the rock doves too scatter in fear,

At the center of itself the River is silence, and that's where I come in: with the sounds in my head and the words in my heart.

- **Doris Hausmann**, Director of School programs at The Armory Center for the Arts, a community center and primarily a visual arts institution, discussed *Children Investigate the Environment*, established in 1986 in the Pasadena Unified School District to integrate integrates science with the arts in order to increasing students' understanding of ecology, geology, and the life and water cycles.



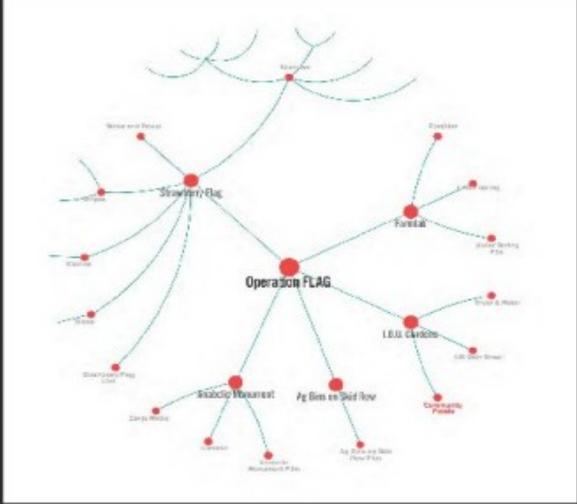
Armory Center for the Arts, *Children Investigate the Environment*

- Louis Pesce**, project manager for the Metabolic Studio, described several of the art studio's projects. As an example, he presented the work of Lauren Bonn entitled *Not A Cornfield*, which Bonn terms a "social brownfield" incapable of sustaining life. She transformed the land via bio-remediation with corn and jogging paths, and the park evolved into Los Angeles State Historic Park. Through engagement with complex bureaucracies that govern the park, the brownfield was energized. Part of the dialogue with the park system involved addressing present day environmental issues, including collecting storm water.



METABOLIC STUDIO

Derived from the Greek word for change, "metabolism" is the process that maintains life. In continuous cycles of creation and destruction metabolism transforms nutrients into energy and matter. Working to sustain these cycles, the Metabolic Studio transforms resources into energy, actions, and objects that nurture life. Led by artist and philanthropist Lauren Bon, it is her studio for practice at the intersection of art and philanthropy.




LOS ANGELES STATE HISTORIC PARK

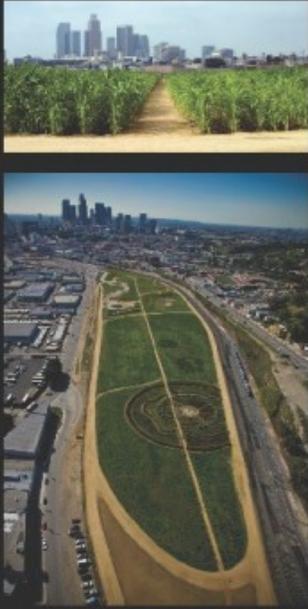
NOT A CORNFIELD
an artwork by Lauren Bon

ANABOLIC MONUMENT

OFFRENDIA

PIPELINE

Engagement with California State Parks



The second panel on “New Directions for Public Art,” provided a variety of examples about how artists working in the public realm have developed innovative projects that in some cases address environmental remediation. Speakers included:

- **Felicia Filer**, Director of the Public Art Division of the City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs, spoke about the ways that traditional boundaries of public art are being stretched in contemporary practice. In 2010, the Department of Public Art issued an RFQ for pre-qualified artists, a shift from departmental toward mission-specific work allowing artists to address thematic issues. She showcased several examples of environmental art that uses earth, air, light and space as media while informing and interpreting nature and its processes. One example is Jim Denevan’s 2006 work, *Surfers in Circles*, a sand art installation in Tunitas, Creek Beach, CA. An example of art that reclaims and remediates damaged environments while restoring natural habitats is Daniel McCormick’s *Watershed Sculpture Installation* in Point Reyes, CA. The challenge for artists working in the urban context of Los Angeles is faced in *Urban Rock Design*, a 1998 installation that engages participation through social action.



Jim Denevan, *Surfers in Circles*

- **Deborah Deets**, a landscape architect working for the LA Department of Public Works on projects where storm water, the environment, and economics, intersect with the arts, said that public art links the other three and is the key to creating sustainability. For instance the 2003 Bee Canyon project allowed the city to produce outdoor classrooms and arts activities, funded as part of a consent decree of the State Energy Program (SEP), and mandated by the Cornfields-Arroyo Seco Master Plan. Further examples of art in the environment include the 2005 installation of floating islands in Echo Park, including the planned revegetation of the park in 2011 and green public art created in Echo Park with

materials harvested from willow trees. Deets is also involved in the 2007-2011 Green Streets movement, a plan to use storm water runoff to green over 8000 square miles of streets in LA.



Daniel McCormick, *Watershed Sculpture Installation*

- **Rebecca Ansert**, Founder & Principal of Green Public Art, described several demonstration projects: fiber that can detect and produce sound, responsive wall paper that makes energy consumption visual, and a zero energy media facade powered by LED lights. Additional projects include: Matthew Mazzotta's *Park Spark Project*, which transforms dog waste into energy, and his *Piezoelectric Walkways*, which uses pressure to produce electricity; Molly Dillworth's *Cool Water, Hot Island* installation in NYC; Adam Frank's *Sunlight in Denver*(projections powered by solar energy); and Dider Hess' *House Swarming* in Pasadena, which causes glowing nodes to change based on air quality measurements.
- **Peter Schulberg**, founder of Eco-LogicalART Gallery, showcases functional art from recycled materials. Schulberg was inspired by billboards falling on his roof to create a project repurposing vinyl from billboards into formal canvasses. After receiving a donation of ad time of over \$300,000, he was able to install the recycled monumental billboards as public art accessible to thousands that would not otherwise enter a gallery. The concept moved to San Francisco under the title "Gimme Shelter Art" which installed recycled vinyl painted by children in Clear Channel bus shelters.

- **Brian Howe**, an artist and designer living in Los Angeles, creates remediative sculptures that proactively interact with the environment, culturally and/or environmentally. Howe is currently working on a centerpiece for the 19th Avenue and Riverside Drive roundabout. “Roundabout” is created with public art funds as part of the new Riverside Drive. The granite will be used to create nested sculptures, making best use of the materials by using all parts of the stone to create 9 distinct faces. Howe additionally sought to engage the natural systems by having the work collect the storm water as well as incorporate a solar component tying into the city grid.

Recommendations for further action emerged from a group discussion at the end of the day:

- Artists who want to work with government agencies concerned with environmental issues should present work that relates to a function of a city agency, for instance, cleaning water or streets. Though many public agencies cannot directly fund art, they can fund projects that are incorporated in functional way. Additionally, it was noted that this will allow artists to be creative within boundaries, noting that many artists work best when faced with certain constraints. For example, the State Coastal Conservancy is specifically trying to educate people about the coastal environment and always looking for new ways to engage audiences.
- In administering the City's percent for art program, developers could be encouraged to spend money for projects that use recycled materials and contribute to environmental remediation. In Los Angeles, the developers are allowed to purchase art work on site or pool the fee. They could be approached with the opportunity to make a choice. The list of allowable uses of development fees could be further broadened to include projects that provide environmental remediation.
- The best way to communicate artistic themes responding to environmental issues are podcasts, Internet and video. For instance, Nobuko Miyamoto released the *B.Y.O. Chopsticks* performance piece through YouTube because it was the fastest, most cost-effective way to reach large audience.
- Artists should create a standard for best practices for individual artists. The environmental impact of materials should be made known and available to artists. Artists could potentially enhance LEED certification of buildings.
- Artists performing in non-traditional art spaces such as parks can attract people who would not usually attend performances in traditional art spaces. For instance, parks patrons are not necessarily arts patrons, however, collaboration between the two sectors can reach different audiences. An example cited was a demonstration of Yourba performance art at the LA River.
- Artwork, including performing arts activities which take place in outdoor environments, can help reduce public health problems which have resulted from climate change. This form of art activity could be measurable and fundable by allowing kids to play, perform, relax, and reflect in the environment and thereby reduce heart disease and obesity.

- Tax credits or other incentives could reward efforts to divert landfill waste, such as Peter Schulberg’s billboard project.
- Practitioners should converge quarterly and annually to share ideas and celebrate innovators.
- Messaging through cultural facilities can include solar panels and car recharging stations, which not only create art, but also providing alternative energy sources.
- Resources for community art programs in a variety of venues, including schools, after-school programs, community service facilities, and correctional facilities should include environmental art as an appropriate theme.

At the end of the day, respondents listed these action steps in their written evaluations:

- Create “an arts and environmental” initiative for the LA Department of Cultural Affairs.
- Incorporate public art in environmental literacy projects in the parks.
- Pursue green certification for cultural facilities.
- Provide workshops on sustainability for artists and denizens of large cities (where the pace and cost of living might make green habits more difficult to adopt).
- Use reusable chopsticks instead of disposable ones.

CONCLUSION and NEXT STEPS

The first Arts & Environmental Dialogue in San Francisco resulted in several tangible projects which have started to generate additional resources for artists to work with environmental themes. Daniel McCormick, who attended the first Dialogue, was located in Charlotte, NC, where he is a resident in an innovative artist residency program focusing on environmental restoration. The participants in both Dialogues now have the opportunity to create a state-wide interest group which can create new initiatives. We intend to approach state agencies, such as the State PUC, the Department of Energy and the State Coastal Conservancy, to see how art programs can be integrated more meaningfully in their conservation and outreach programs. In addition, we are working with local arts agency leaders from around the state in order to provide on-going information and resources on the environmental issues.

To the extent that these issues provide opportunities for artists to make strides in public policy while making art and making a living, we feel that California Lawyers for the Arts is playing a useful role in supporting the arts sector as both vital and sustainable.

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