

ARTISTS and PARKS

Whether weaving art into parks or creating new parks altogether, artists can play an important role in shaping how we experience our shared natural spaces.

BY CAROLYN LAW with MATTHEW STADLER

At the Tolt River–John MacDonald Park near Carnation, Washington, artist Elizabeth Conner recently spent six months with staff scientists from King County’s natural resource divisions. Together they monitored fish biology and the water’s movement at a flood plain restoration site. But Conner asked different questions and used different words than the scientists to describe what they were seeing.

“We would like to get people down to the edge of the river, maybe even get them to put their faces in the water,” says park ecologist Josh Latterell. “But scientists are not so equipped to tell the river’s story.” That’s why the Tolt-MacDonald Park scientists appreciated Conner and her questions and observations. By breathing new life into their data, she helped them make the river’s story—and the river itself—more enticing because they, too, started to use more richly descriptive language when talking and writing about the biology, ecology, and history of the river. In turn, Conner has a strengthened understanding of the river and land that will inform concepts she is developing for an art project sited at the park that Latterell hopes “shows me something, rather than tells me, about the river.”

Conner is one of many artists who work in various creative capacities to shape U.S. parks with varying success. While some artists subtly affect visitors’ experiences by adding new content to parks, other artists fully create new parks via artistic vision and action. Whether artist-altered or artist-generated, what makes any artistic intervention in a park ultimately successful is how well the artist understands the complex layering in the distinctive nature of parks as different from other public places and spaces.

Not a Tabula Rasa

Generally defined, parks, trails, and open spaces are publicly owned land set aside and tended by governmental agencies for the enjoyment of community members. This definition conveys a simple notion of designated green space structured for various forms of active or passive relaxation and recreation. From this limited perspective, it’s possible to extrapolate that art’s purpose might be to fill a cultural void, satisfy a functional need creatively, or add interest to the park. But focusing on the park as a blank slate awaiting the artist’s intervention doesn’t serve the artist, the art, or the park itself.

Parks, trails, and open spaces are compelling places in their own right. No matter its size or location, whether local, state, or national, each park has its own unique complexity. Different layers are associated with ecology, flora, fauna, geology, history, form, design, emotion, processes of change, and other things seen and unseen. Most significant is the emphatic presence of nature.

In a recent essay about artists and environmental stewardship, writer, activist, and curator Lucy Lippard highlights three thoughts directly applicable to artists working in parks: Artists can teach us new ways to see the land; artists’ sensitivity to the land and ability to respond meaningfully is broadened if they think beyond market-driven conventions of art-making; and this sensitivity is further expanded if artists move beyond the notion of the land as a fresh slate and recognize the complex layers of meaning and uses already present in landscapes. According to Lippard, the land is never a *tabula rasa*. By extension, neither is a park.

Asking an artist to work in a park is like asking an artist painting a waterfall on-site to convince people to only look at their reproduction, not the real thing. The waterfall itself, within the surroundings, is generally more compelling. The challenge for artists is to see what is really there, and then offer a notable experiential expansion that provides additional meaning to people.



An artist's ability to understand and appreciate this unique complexity ultimately requires an investment of time in open inquiry:

- What exists in the park?
- How do human uses intertwine with what is “of the land” in a particular park? The form of a park—for example, a manicured park versus a more intact natural place—influences people's interactions with nature.
- How do people connect to the hierarchy of uses within the park's natural setting? Park designers provide a cultural overlay to the natural site. They refine the relationship between nature and programmatic uses, framing or guiding visitors' encounters with the land.
- What is the experiential range of the park? Socially and culturally, parks are exciting because visits, whether undertaken alone or in a group, tend to be dynamic. As people relax they open to unexpected experiences.

When asking these questions, artists are likely to become “park whisperers,” contributing entirely new things to parks' vernaculars by sensitively establishing creative experiences.

There is no question that parks are far more important than just places to relax and recreate. For most people, parks are the most likely location to sense differences between what we build to accommodate our lives and work and the natural foundation upon which we build them. For artists, parks are a singular opportunity to pull back the many veils between people and the land that supports them by strengthening webs of interconnection and an ethic of stewardship for the environment. In leaving behind presumptions and jettisoning a blank-slate approach, artists can make essential offerings toward this end.

In the following pages are recent projects that represent a broad range of artistic actions in parks, showing that artists can add dimension to the park experience in any number of ways.

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY

As part of a garden restoration in Pittsburgh's Mellon Park, Janet Zweig brought the sky to earth by embedding 150 tiny lights into grass. The lights depict the location of the stars and planets that were over the park when Ann Katherine Seamans, a young Pittsburgh resident who loved the garden, was born in 1979. Not only does *7:11AM 11.20.1979 79°55'W 40°27'N* (2009, above) celebrate Seamans's birth, it also commemorates her untimely death. The poetic disjunction between stars on the ground (below) in an urban location where stars in the sky are not easily visible allows the artwork to function on multiple levels within a natural setting. On one level, the park now has a second, human-made 24-hour cycle, in which the stars always come out at night even if city lights or the weather don't allow a view of the stars or a sense of the sky. On another level, it is simply enchanting for people to walk amidst the stars.





ENTICING VISITORS TO EXPLORE

In 2005, Christo and Jeanne-Claude lined 23 miles of paths in New York's Central Park with 7,503 simple walk-through structures hung with orange fabric. Visitors said *The Gates* (left), which was financed by the artists, allowed people to grasp the whole park in a fresh way by inviting them to walk into further reaches of the park than usual. The project also established beckoning perspectives that drew the eye toward many distant views and new horizons, creating a completely new, visceral sense of scale for individuals within the landscape. This bold temporary gesture caused people to explore, and consequently remember, the land more deeply.



TRAVELING THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

Under an elevated section of the I-5 freeway in Seattle's Colonnade Park, John Roloff's 2006 *The Seventh Climate (Paradise Reconsidered)* (above) creates a little eccentric oasis in a barren dirt landscape situated deep within a forest of columns holding up the freeway. Using a variable intense lighting system and a suspended water system controlled by a computer programmed with the 365-day weather and light patterns of 1960, the artwork physically manifests the daily rainy or dry days and the daily daylight and moonlight patterns of the year before the freeway was built. Standing in contrast to the actual weather that cannot be directly experienced in real time due to the overhead freeway, the artifice of this weather oasis inevitably generates many questions for visitors and underscores the fact that what appears barren was once more natural and would be again if the freeway were gone.

HEIGHTENING THE SENSES

On the edge of Seattle's South Lake Union Park—at a lake that is not swimmable—Peter and Sue Richards have provided a direct sensory link to the water with *Blanche* (2010, right and below). Visitors can step onto a crafted floating dock, giving them a fuller sensation of being near water, where a suspended, overturned boat hull amplifies collected on-site water sounds. Without this artwork, visitors are deprived of any intimate interaction with water, which is really the most significant aspect of the environment of the park.





EXPERIENCING ART-AND TRAILS-MORE SLOWLY

The Long Walk is a four-day, 45-mile trail walk from Washington's Puget Sound to Snoqualmie Falls. It grew out of the larger Trails Project, a participatory set of performative art events developed by artists Stokly Towles, Susan Robb (below right), and Paul Rucker to connect a broad community to the trail system spanning urban, exurban, and rural land around Seattle, Washington. The first *Long Walk*, guided by Towles and Robb in 2010, was the final public art piece of the Trails Project and exposed walkers to a continuous, large segment of the trail system. This year, Robb engaged a writer to chronicle the event and added commissioned temporary artworks and performances along the route. In one project, animations made along the walk (above) were later projected onto kites in a barn shelter on the last night of the walk (below left, top and bottom).

In its two iterations, this multifaceted, hybrid program immersed viewers in public art as a dynamic physical experience by slowly moving them through many natural and interstitial places. It also revealed changing social experiences triggered by the landscape as participants' groupings constantly shifted. Stories, both oral and digital, expanded the follow-up beyond just healing blisters. Few people these days have a slow experience of place, and along this crazy quilt of land, it took artists to catalyze one.





SEEING NATURE'S INTELLIGENCE

In 2006, an impassable stretch of bayou crisscrossed by highways was converted into an accessible 23-acre park in downtown Houston, Texas. That was the first phase of *Buffalo Bayou* (above), a water restoration and parkland project that will eventually reach well across the city. The master plan was developed in part by a design team member, artist Stephen Korn's, who, after taking many days to walk and contemplate the site's impact on him, imagined what might be worthwhile to others. From this inquiry he designed an intricate environmental lighting system (right) to run through the entire project.

The first phase of Korn's lighting project expresses a natural, 29-day lunar cycle using shifts of blue and white light. His choices highlight the nuances and unpredictable elements of both nature and infrastructure by selectively influencing what people see. Korn's intention for the lighting, he says, was to reveal the intelligence of nature within the living bayou and to draw people's eyes and minds more deeply into the phenomena of nature within the spaces of the urban surrounding.

Eventually, through accent lighting within the surrounding street grid, light will appear to emanate from the bayou, and to ebb and flow into downtown during the lunar cycle, drawing further attention to the provocative tension between the natural and built. While other public art projects will be scattered along the length of the bayou, Korn's artistic lighting concept is overarching.





GREENING HAZARDOUS LAND

In 2005, Lauren Bon planted corn at a hazardous, derelict, state-owned, 32-acre site in an area of downtown Los Angeles bereft of parks. After planting one million seeds (above, top), community members took part in tending the crop. But the reach of *Not a Cornfield*, which Bon considers a sculpture, extended well beyond initial delight with the craziness of corn growing in Los Angeles.

In the process of developing the project, Bon's team established a deep relationship with the broader community through ongoing, inclusive communication. That dialog, along with team- and community-initiated events like film screenings and drum circles (above, bottom), allowed a nonstatic, porous community to grow and blossom in tandem with planting, growing, harvesting, and on-site storing of the corn crop. Community and art converged on the land.

The team, known today as Metabolic Studio, continues to be involved with what is now a formalized park overseen by the state. Los Angeles State Historic Park (left), formerly known as "The Cornfield," now employs one team member who continues to nurture community interactions that would not happen without the land. When compared to the make-it-and-leave process normally associated with artists in parks, the continuity and commitment of this park's creative "shepherds" is a compelling model.

DISCOVERING ECOLOGY, MARKING CHANGE

In San Francisco's Presidio National Historic Landmark District—part of the largest urban national park in the country—*Presidio Habitats* (2010–2011) presented year-long temporary artworks by 11 artists and designers, including *Western Screech Owl Habitats* by Ai Weiwei (top right) and *Sculpture Habitat for the Gray Fox* by CEBRA (bottom right). Each work examined an aspect of lost biodiversity resulting from major shifts in the park's long-established environment due to human use in a short time span. Two longer-duration temporary pieces by Andrew Goldsworthy, *Spire* (2008) and *Wood Line* (2011, below left), underscore landscape restoration efforts in the park by expressly using downed timber in two dynamic forms located in the restoration area.

These recent artworks may be more or less intellectually or emotionally engaging, but they effectively draw visitors to different areas of the Presidio and set up a dialog about environmental change. Whatever entrée the artworks provide, they establish a new starting point for a relationship to the park.



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