

Portable Park IV: past/present/future
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Palms fronds rising above the walls of a freeway overpass? Redwood picnic tables, cows and hay bales on two concrete traffic islands? Lambs and giraffes on a street with chic shops? These ironic juxtapositions of nature and culture temporarily transformed barren urban sites into green, living environments, in Bonnie Sherk's installation *Portable Parks I - III* (1970). Forty-four years ago Sherk imported trees, picnic tables and live animals to downtown San Francisco installing them in three different sites during four days.¹ One of the earliest environmental art projects, until recently *Portable Parks I - III* (1970) was known only through a few iconic photographs (fig. 1) and a video that were included in *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970* the exhibition I co-curated for the Getty's PST initiative.² When I first heard about the PST Performance and Public Art Festival, I thought it was the ideal moment to re-install a new version of the *Portable Parks I - III*. Bonnie Sherk agreed and we embarked on *Portable Park IV--past/present/future--A.L.L.*³

Sherk became a visiting artist at Otis College of Art and Design Graduate Public

¹Executed with Howard Levine, the sites included the former James Lick Freeway that crossed over Market Street; two traffic islands adjacent to the Mission/Van Ness off-ramp; and Maiden Lane between Stockton and Grant Streets.

²Co-curated with Constance Lewallen, *State of Mind New California Art Circa 1970* opened at the Orange County Museum of Art in October 2011 - January 2012, then travelled to the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, February - June, 2012. From September 2012 through January 2014 *State of Mind* embarked on a tour organized by Independent Curators International to the Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver; SITE Santa Fe; Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

³A.L.L. stands for *A Living Library*--Sherk's non-profit organization founded in 1980 that produces environmental and educational projects such as "think parks" and school gardens. See www.alivinglibrary.org and www.alivinglibrary.org/blog/

Practice MFA Program, where she could work collaboratively with students on the ambitious project. Initially, we wanted the installation on a street, but city codes prohibited this so we needed to find a large, publically accessible site to install the 10-day project. We finally chose the 60-foot central plaza of the Santa Monica Place, a three-story, high-end shopping center, originally designed in 1980 by Frank Gehry, but recently renovated into an environmentally conscious facility.⁴ In spite of its stated green mission, this upscale shopping destination drastically changed both the context and meaning of *Portable Park IV*. How could we possibly translate it from its original roots in gritty concrete and asphalt locations in downtown San Francisco into this commercial site dominated by marble floors, escalators and glass storefronts, a hyper-commoditized space inhabited by local youth and international tourists?

Sherk proposed to transform her 1970s sod-based micro-parks into a multi-sensory, living sculpture of raised bed gardens filled with fruit trees, flowers, vegetables and herbs that the public could stroll through or view from above. (fig. 2) Consisting of straw-stuffed burlap wattles shaped into petals *The Flower Unfolding* garden was and planted with colorful vegetation and trees (fig. 3 - 5) bearing labels made by students from the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences (fig. 6) At the end of ten unseasonably warm days, we re-purposed everything: the wattles and soil went to the city of Santa Monica; the Otis artists organized a sale of flowers, vegetables and fruit trees the final day, and we donated remaining plants to a local school and to a garden

⁴ See “Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica Place Mall Deconstructed in a Green Renovation,” from *Art Daily* [http://artdaily.com/news/39766/Frank-Gehry-s-Santa-Monica-Place-Mall-Deconstructed-in-a-Green-Renovation#.Uua_DP2tsy4\[/url\]](http://artdaily.com/news/39766/Frank-Gehry-s-Santa-Monica-Place-Mall-Deconstructed-in-a-Green-Renovation#.Uua_DP2tsy4[/url])

project initiated by Slanguage Studio in Wilmington.⁵ Additionally, the students did a series of video and sculptural installations, text interventions on bathroom mirrors and outdoor signage, *Green Tours* that questioned Santa Monica Place's environmental agenda, and performances that addressed the spectacle of shopping, surveillance and consumerism.⁶ While Sherk re-envisioned her *Portable Parks* for the 21st century, the Otis artists wanted to more critically engage the site, but together they engaged thousands of visitors to experience a more aesthetic environment and to contemplate sustainability issues within the shopping/entertainment complex.

⁵ Sponsored by Mario Ybarra and Karla Diaz's Slanguage Studio in Wilmington hired green artist-in-residence, Katie Bachler, and Tony Lopez to work with a group of local teens for a Radical Gardening project. See the interview with Bachler at: <http://slanguagestudio.com/artist-interview-katie-bachler/>

⁶ Entitled *Consuming Nature*, the Otis projects included Rory Sloan's *Nest(ing)*, a life-scale bird's nest based on the habitat of birds native to Santa Monica; Tamarind Rossetti's *Setting Sun*, a video projection of each evening's sunset in a storefront window; Xiaotong Zhuang's *Be Careful of Glass*, a six-foot open-air cube in the Central Plaza. Alexandra Cantle and Amanda Martin Katz's signage presented intriguing facts about sustainability; Susan Sanchez conducted *Green Tours* of the garden and Silvia Juliana Mantilla-Ortiz's, *A Field Guide for Re-imagining Your Mall* was guide full of information and suggestions for a new ways to interact with Santa Monica Place. Raul Baltazar's *Panem et Circuses (Bread and Circuses)* included two chess games: one with a regular scale chessboard and another with life-sized human players. See Otis College of Art and Design, Graduate Public Practice spotlight on *Portable Parks IV* and *Consuming Nature* at: <http://www.otis.edu/graduate-public-practice/spotlight/portable-park-santa-monica-place> A *Consuming Nature* brochure/poster designed by Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz and produced by Consuelo Velasco was published by Otis in 2012.