

*Portable Park IV: past/present/future*  
Karen Moss

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.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest environmental art projects, until recently *Portable Parks I - III* (1970) was known through a few iconic photographs (**fig. 1**) and a video that were included in the Getty PST exhibition I co-curated, *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*.<sup>2</sup> When I first heard about the PST Performance and Public Art Festival, it seemed like an ideal moment 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.*<sup>3</sup>

Sherk became a visiting artist at Otis College of Art and Design Graduate Public Practice MFA Program, where she could work collaboratively with students on the ambitious project. Initially, we wanted to install it on a street in Santa Monica, but city codes prohibited this, so we needed to find a large, publically accessible site. We finally chose the 60-foot central plaza of the Santa

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<sup>1</sup>Executed 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.

<sup>2</sup> *State of Mind New California Art Circa 1970*, co-curated with Constance Lewallen 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* toured 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.

<sup>3</sup> A.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](http://www.alivinglibrary.org) and [www.alivinglibrary.org/blog/](http://www.alivinglibrary.org/blog/)

Monica Place, a three-story, high-end shopping center, originally designed in 1980 by Frank Gehry, but recently renovated into an environmentally conscious facility.<sup>4</sup> In spite of its green mission, this upscale shopping destination drastically changed the context and meaning of *Portable Park IV*. How could we translate the gritty urban locations in downtown San Francisco into this commercial site dominated by marble floors, escalators and glass storefronts, a space of commodities space inhabited by local youth and international tourists?

First, Sherk proposed to transform her 1970s sod-based micro-parks into a living sculpture of raised bed gardens filled with fruit trees, flowers, vegetables and herbs that the public could stroll through or view from above. **(figs. 1-2)** Consisting of straw-stuffed burlap wattles shaped into petals, *The Flower Unfolding* garden was and planted with colorful vegetation and trees bearing labels made by students from the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences **(fig. 3-6)** After thousands of visitors and ten unseasonably warm days, we re-purposed everything: the wattles and soil went to the city of Santa Monica; we sold the flowers, vegetables and fruit trees the final day and we donated remaining plants to a school and a garden project initiated by Slanguage Studio in Wilmington.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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])

<sup>5</sup> 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/>

The Otis artists became interested in critiquing the shopping center's mission with their own project, *Consuming Nature* including installations of an outdoor living room that mimicked glass storefronts; an evening video projection of the actual sunset onto a window; a monumental bird's nest of recyclables perched on a terrace. Texts installed on bathroom mirrors and outdoor signage and "green tours" questioned Santa Monica Place's environmental agenda, while a public workshop of *Mall Drifts* and a closing day human chess game both addressed the spectacle of shopping, surveillance and consumerism.<sup>6</sup> **(fig. 7-8)**

While these projects differed considerably—Sherk re-envisioned her 1970 project in terms of environmental and space considerations, while the Otis artists approached the site more critically—together they temporarily shifted the attention of thousands of visitors to aesthetic interventions and issues of sustainability within the shopping/entertainment complex.

Ultimately, Sherk's *Portable Park I - III* must be remembered not just for this one re-invention but as the forerunner to the pocket parks, park-lets and parking lots gardens that have become so ubiquitous today.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.