NEW HIGHLAND
ART AGENTS

DOUBLE TAKE

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME
PERFORMANCE AND
PUBLIC ART FESTIVAL 2012

Bonnie Ora Sherk

Consuming Nature Portable Park IV: Past, Present, Future = A.L.L.

01.27–02.05.2012

Santa Monica Place Shopping Center, Santa Monica

Palm 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 over four days.[1] One of the earliest environmental art projects, *Portable Parks I–III* (1970) was, until recently, known primarily through a few iconic photographs and a video that were included in the Getty Pacific Standard Time (PST) exhibition *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970.*[2] The PST Performance and Public Art Festival seemed like an ideal moment to reinstall a new version of *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 Practice MFA Program, where she would 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, publicly accessible site. We finally chose the sixty-foot central plaza of 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 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

1
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.

2
State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970, which I organized with co-curator Constance Lewallen, showed at the Orange County Museum of Art in October 2011 through January 2012, then traveled to the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, February through 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.

3
A.L.L. stands for *A Living Library*, Sherk's nonprofit 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/.

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].

dominated by marble floors, escalators, and glass storefronts, a space of commodities 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. Consisting of straw-stuffed burlap wattles shaped into petals, *The Flower Unfolding* garden was planted with colorful vegetation and trees bearing labels made by students from the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences. After thousands of visitors and ten unseasonably warm days, we repurposed everything: the wattles and soil went to the city of Santa Monica; we sold the flowers, vegetables, and fruit trees on the final day; and we donated remaining plants to a school and a garden project initiated by Slanguage Studio in Wilmington.[5]

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

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 and entertainment complex. Ultimately, Sherk's *Portable Park I–III* must be remembered not just for this one reinvention but as the forerunner to the pocket parks, parklets, and parking-lot gardens that have become so ubiquitous today. —KAREN MOSS

Organized by the Otis College of Art and Design, Graduate Public Practice Program.

5
Sponsored by Mario Ybarra and Karla Diaz's Slanguage Studio in Wilmington, which 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
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.