

BONNIE ORA SHERK

LIFE FRAMES SINCE 1970



PORTABLE PARK IV: past/present/future

Karen Moss

FIG. 1
OVERALL VIEW OF *PORTABLE PARK IV*, 2012

FIG 2.
BONNIE IN THE GARDEN, *PORTABLE PARK IV*, 2012

FIG. 3
PEPPERMINT AND GERANIUM LABELS, *PORTABLE PARK IV*, 2012

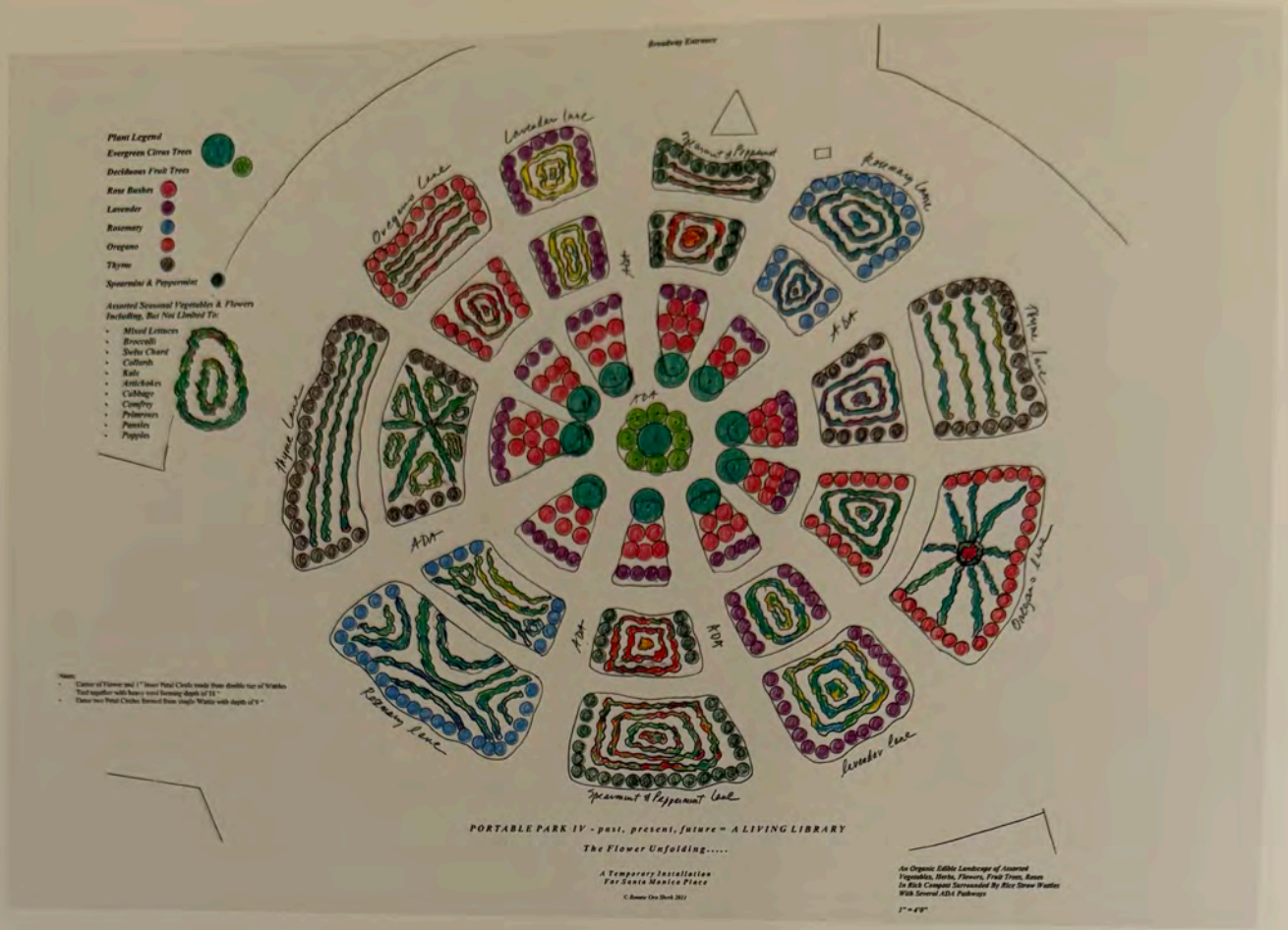
FIFTY-THREE YEARS AGO, IN 1970, artist Bonnie Ora Sherk imported trees, picnic tables, and live animals to downtown San Francisco for her *Portable Parks I–III* (pls. 5–7), one of the earliest environmental art projects to temporarily transform barren urban sites into green, living spaces.[1] Installed over a period of four days, motorists and pedestrians could see ironic juxtapositions of nature and culture: palms fronds rising above a freeway overpass; redwood tables, cows, and hay bales on concrete traffic islands; and lambs, goats, and llamas ("on loan" from the San Francisco Zoo) grazing on grass unfurled onto Maiden Lane, a chic shopping street.[2]

Even during the apex of the 1970s counterculture, the sheer spectacle of *Portable Parks I–III* surprised and amused audiences. One iconic photograph of the project shows Sherk and a cow with two San Francisco officials, who she convinced to grant permits for her ambitious project. She appeared at each site and directly engaged with the environment, just as she did in her concurrent performance series, *Sitting Still* (1970, pls. 16–28), for which she occupied a chair and sat serenely as a "living tableau" in various locations across the city. Sherk considered *Portable Parks I–III* as yet another in her series of ephemeral, temporal, and durational events: "At that time I was interested in creating non-permanent events, because I didn't believe that anything was permanent. I still don't, but I realize that certain things can endure."[3]

Sherk's *Portable Parks I–III* has endured, although through just a few photographs and a short black-and-white video. This documentation appeared in *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*, which I co-curated with Constance M. Lewallen for the Getty's inaugural Pacific Standard Time series in 2011–12.[4] This exhibition focused on a new generation of artists making conceptual art, performance, installation, and sound works







who wanted to counter the increasing commercialization of artistic production and to interject personal, political, and social content into their work. Sherk's installation also included documentation of a performance from *Sitting Still Series*, where she is seated on a sidewalk amid traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge (pl. 21), and *Public Lunch* (1971, pl. 30), in which she ate a meal in a cage adjacent to a lion at the San Francisco Zoo, each foregrounding her sheer audacity and demonstrating her activism regarding issues pertaining to the environment and animal rights.

Recognizing the curatorial challenge of presenting predominantly performative practices solely through documentation, the Getty sponsored a concurrent *PST Performance and Public Art Festival* in January 2012. This seemed like an ideal opportunity to invite Sherk to produce a new, updated version of the *Portable Parks I–III*, and she agreed to embark on what she called *Portable Park IV: past/present/future* (figs. 1, 2).[5] I was teaching in the Otis College of Art and Design's Public Practice MFA Program, so I invited Sherk to be an artist-in-residence and work collaboratively with students on this project.

Initially, Sherk hoped to install her new *Portable Park IV* directly on the street, but City of Santa Monica codes strictly prohibited this. We eventually chose the central plaza of the Santa Monica Place shopping center. Originally designed by Frank Gehry in 1980, the center had been recently renovated into an environmentally conscious, "green" facility.[6] This upscale shopping destination drastically changed the context and meaning of *Portable Park IV*. How could we translate this concept from urban, downtown San Francisco to a shopping center by the beach, with its marble floors and glass storefronts?

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* (fig. 4) was planted with colorful vegetation and trees bearing labels made by students from the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences (fig. 3). After ten unseasonably warm days and thousands of visitors, we de-installed the garden and re-purposed

FIG. 4
THE FLOWER UNFOLDING, ARTIST PLAN FOR *PORTABLE PARK IV: PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE*, 2012

everything: the wattles and soil went to the city of Santa Monica; we gave away flowers, vegetables, and fruit trees and donated remaining plants to a school and a garden project initiated by Slanguage Studio in Wilmington.[7]

The Otis MFA artists became interested in critiquing the shopping center's mission, confronting the idea of a site devoted to commerce and entertainment that also attempts to have an environmental agenda. Their own project, *Consuming Nature*, included an outdoor, glass living room that alluded to minimalism as it mimicked the commercial storefronts; a live video projection of the actual sunset onto a window each evening; a monumental bird's nest of recyclables perched on a terrace; and texts with water usage statistics installed on the bathroom mirrors. Some of the performances included "green tours" that raised questions about the efficacy of the Santa Monica Place's environmental agenda, a public workshop of *Mall Drifts* inspired by Guy Debord's concept of the *derive*, and a closing day human chess game that addressed the spectacle of shopping, surveillance, and consumerism.[8]

Sherk successfully reenvisioned her 1970 project in terms of specific site and environmental conditions, using concepts of organic gardening that emanated from A Living Library, a nonprofit organization she founded in 1980. For this long-term pedagogical project, Sherk produced environmental design projects such as "think parks" and organic gardening programs for public schools in both California and New York.[9] Ultimately, Sherk's *Portable Parks I–III* must be remembered as a critical forerunner to the pocket parks, parklets, and parking lot gardens that have become so ubiquitous today, while her *Portable Park IV* attests to her more than fifty years of subsequent work as an environmental activist, landscape architect, and educator who left her mark on San Francisco and other sites across the country.

NOTES

1. Bonnie Ora Sherk executed *Portable Parks I–III* with Howard Levine June 25–28, 1970, at three sites: the James Lick Freeway that formerly crossed over Market Street; two traffic islands adjacent to the Mission/Van Ness offramp; and Maiden Lane, a shopping area between Stockton and Grant Streets.
2. For a discussion with Sherk about her approach to performance and many of her works, see "SiteWorks: San Francisco performance 1969–85," interview by Nick Kaye, University of Exeter, February 6, 2015, https://siteworks.exeter.ac.uk/interviews/bonnieorasherk.
3. Sherk, quoted in Linda Frye Burnham, "Between the Diaspora and the Crinoline: An Interview with Bonnie Sherk," *High Performance* (Fall 1981): 58. Also reproduced in this catalog, p. 22.
4. *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*, co-curated with Constance Lewallen, was on view at the Orange County Museum of Art, October 2011–January 2012, then traveled to the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, February–June 2012. From September 2012–January 2014 the exhibition traveled 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.
5. Sherk's present and future at the time includes A.L.L., which 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.
6. See "Frank Gehry's Santa Monica Place Mall Deconstructed in a Green Renovation," *Art Daily*, August 6, 2010, https://artdaily.cc/news/39766/Frank-Gehry-s-Santa-Monica-Place-Mall-Deconstructed-in-a-Green-Renovation.
7. Sponsored by Slanguage Studio, founders Mario Ybarra and Karla Diaz hired green artists-in-residence, Katie Bachler and Tony Lopez, to work with a group of local teens for a "radical gardening" project in Wilmington.
8. For more information about *Consuming Nature*, see http://karenmoss.art/consuming-nature/.
9. Information about the projects can be found at www.alivinglibrary.org.