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Deborah J. Haynes
Ruth Wallen and
Beverly Naidus—
Exploring a City Block as a
Micro-Ecosystem

The collaborative *Eco-tistical Art* workshop with Ruth Wallen and Beverly Naidus looked at how people can find ways to create momentum in their communities through art. Their plan to offer a model for working with students actually led the small workshop group to generate a plan to change our engagement with the College Art Association's annual conference.

We began with the assumption that here, as in much art practice, one of the most fundamental tasks is to look at our environment with mindfulness. To this end, we went on a walk in the area around the conference hotels. We noticed a variety of qualities and characteristics, including how nature is controlled and the way corporate power is both implied and obvious. Human circulation was strictly limited, while cars were ubiquitous. Verbal language was pervasive on the street. Monumental buildings and concrete masses contrasted with small niches of pansies and grass growing out of a wall. Space seemed compressed. Walking in silence, we became a kind of spectacle as we passed worker entrances to the hotels and "Goose Bumps," a sex-fantasy bar. In particular, we were all impressed by a sense of isolation and disconnection.

With a comprehensive list of initial perceptions before us, we began to brainstorm about commonalities and relationships among them. What kind of content would we want to analyze? What core themes or central metaphors emerged? What would happen if we started with one object and brainstormed about it?

What emerged was unexpected. Our small group actually got a unique glimpse of the context for the Atlanta CAA conference. What if, we asked, at every CAA conference a group of eco-artists would go outside, encounter the environment of the conference itself, analyze this context, and offer something back to both the conference community and the wider city? What if, we asked, systems thinking were used in a context like the annual conference?

We then created a skills inventory among ourselves. What could we offer to a project such as this? Our skills included visual techniques, from painting and drawing to photography and collage. Combined with research, note-taking, writing, and technological skills, we discovered that we also had knowledge and experience in environmental studies and design theory. Several of us had experience in group facilitation.

Following this articulation of our collective skills, we began to brainstorm a form of presentation for the project and to articulate an intention. What would we want to do? Several major ideas emerged.

First, we discussed possibilities for helping to make CAA more aware of the eco-context in which conferences take place. How might the conference environments themselves be made more ecologically appropriate? While we recognized that it might not be possible to actually hold the CAA conferences in more ecologically sensitive sites, a first step would be to develop awareness among both the leadership and conference participants.

Second, we briefly discussed how we might shift standard conference rituals in order to create a stronger sense of community among those present. How, we asked, might it be possible to break the "conference trance" that most of us enter as we check into hotels and register for the conference itself? How might we subvert the dominant culture of the conference, which results in many of us



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Beverly Naidus, "DDT Is Good for Me," from the project *Canary Notes: The Personal Politics of Environmental Illness*, 1998, digital image, dimensions variable (artwork © Beverly Naidus)

Ruth Wallen, View Points, 1995, Station 12 of 13 on temporary interactive nature walk, Tijuana River Estuary, San Diego, California, hand-colored fiberglass-embedded photograph, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm) and mixed media (artwork © Ruth Wallen)

feeling marginalized and isolated? What if ecological artists could all stay in one place? What might be the possibilities for alternative housing that would allow proximity to and dialogue with one another?

Finally, we discussed a "green map" project, as an initial model for bringing awareness into the conference. Perhaps, as part of the program packet, participants would get a green map. This would begin to change the conference framework. Such an eco-conscious map might show nearby green sites, as well as environmental challenges and disasters. In collaboration with local groups, we might offer a green bus tour, a green dinner, and performances. All such activities would help develop critical thinking through analysis of the conference context. We all agreed that the eco-art activities should continue at annual conferences, for at least one day, and that a major conference panel and caucus should be developed. What began as a pedagogical discussion about how to help students engage in community-based eco-art projects ended with a powerful and pertinent question: how might it be possible to completely transform the College Art Association national conferences?

Deborah J. Haynes is professor of art and art history at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is the author of *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, 1995), *The Vocation of the Artist* (Cambridge, 1997) and *Art Lessons: Meditations on the Creative Life* (Westview, 2003).

Beverly Naidus's art practice has intertwined the roles of activist, educator, writer, and interdisciplinary artist. Her mediums have ranged from interactive, site-specific installations to digitally rendered artist's books. Excerpts of her work can be viewed at www.artsforchange.org. She is cocreating the program Arts in Community, with a focus on art for social change, at the University of Washington, Tacoma.

Ruth Wallen is an artist whose work is dedicated to encouraging dialogue about ecological issues. Her multilayered installations, performances, artist books, and nature walks have been widely exhibited. She teaches in the MFA program at Goddard College.