

Log

SUMMER 2006

Toward a critique of sustainable architecture and landscape

<i>Marc Angélil and Cary Siress</i>	137	Dubai, Inc.
<i>Shumon Basar</i>	46	Don't Stop, Never Stop
<i>Tina di Carlo</i>	50	Tropical Green
<i>Cynthia Davidson</i>	31	Raised to Observe: Glenn Murcutt
<i>Daniela Fabricius</i>	113	Vieques: Greening the US Military
<i>David Greene</i>	152	L.A.W.U.N.
<i>Catherine Ingraham</i>	77	Expansive Resourcefulness
<i>Mark Jarzombek</i>	7	Sustainability: Fuzzy Systems and Wicked Problems
<i>Jordan Kauffman</i>	13	To LEED or Not to Lead
<i>Bill Kelley, Jr.</i>	69	<i>Not A Cornfield</i> : Public and Private Space in LA
<i>Leon Krier</i>	25	<i>Classicus</i> and <i>Vernaculus</i>
<i>Caroline O'Donnell</i>	21	Gibson, Giraffes, and Gibbons
<i>Alessandra Ponte</i>	99	Garbage Art and Garbage Housing
<i>Hanno Rauterberg</i>	41	Cognitive Baroque: The Digital Modern
<i>Julie Rose</i>	88	The Wollemi Pine: From Dinosaur to Patio Icon
<i>Zoë Ryan</i>	59	A Conversation with Mel Chin
<i>Ole Scheeren</i>	50	Penang Tropical City
<i>Paulette Singley</i>	143	Fascism Under Erasure: A Proposal for Via dei Fori Imperiali
<i>Charles Waldheim</i>	120	Airport Landscape
<i>Allen Weiss</i>	131	Trauma and the Future of Landscape

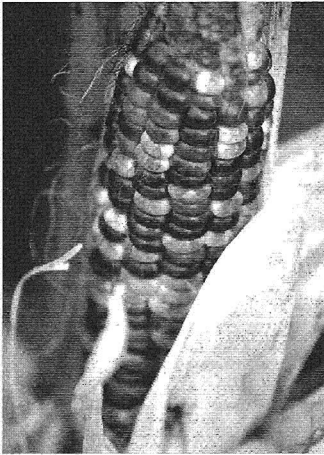
General Observations:

On Eco-aesthetics 112 . . . On Public Art 6 . . .
On Recycling 40 . . . On Systems 58 . . . On Utopia 76 . . .

Cover Story:

Pine-scented Automobile Air Freshener
Courtesy Arbre Magique®, Milan

Not A Cornfield: Public and Private Space in LA



CORN FOR HARVEST, NOVEMBER 7,
2005. PHOTO: STEVE ROWELL.

Artist Lauren Bon has been in the news. Not for the recent *Not A Cornfield* project near downtown Los Angeles, for which she is the principal artist, but for the more visible media spectacle of the South Central Farm closure across town and subsequent eviction and arrest of several activists on June 14, 2006 – a process that included hopelessly trying to keep the media at arm’s length while getting Darryl Hannah and other protesters down from a walnut tree. The entire episode was caught on video and broadcast on the local news.

Somehow the city’s plan to buy the South Central Farm property before the eviction date fell through. Since 1992 local community groups have bickered amongst themselves and with the city over the use of the farm space. In 2003 the city sold the property to developer Ralph Horowitz, who recently vowed never to sell it to the farmers, whom he accuses of being ungrateful.¹ Horowitz responded by ordering the closure of this south-central LA “community farm.” The Annenburg Foundation, for which Bon is a trustee, concurrently attempted to donate \$10 million toward the purchase of the 14-acre site in order to preserve the property for the farmers. The farm, located at 41st and Alameda, lies within one of the more dense industrial corridors in the country, a characteristic it shares with the 32-acre *Not A Cornfield* site running along North Broadway and Spring Street. All the while, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, since meeting with Bon, has been trying to position himself as the deal maker and his city as the “greenest big city in America.”

These most recent events highlight a central dilemma, one that ultimately questions the idea of public space and community and the role private development plays in our relationship to them. This is certainly how the media have treated this story. Yet, in a way, it is misleading to position public space independently from private property development. Very often the two are one and the same; the value of a

1. In 1986 the City of Los Angeles took the land from Horowitz through eminent domain with plans to build a trash incinerator on the site. Horowitz later sued and won the right to buy the property back in 2003 for \$5 million.

EARLY FLYOVER SHOWING RELATIONSHIP OF CORNFIELD SITE TO DOWNTOWN LA. PHOTO: JAMES GOODNIGHT. OPPOSITE: LARGE-SCALE PLANTING AT THE SITE. PHOTO: STEVE ROWELL.



project like *Not A Cornfield* ultimately highlights the ability to work within the parameters of one to better articulate the other, a system of action and recognition that finds some success within the cornfield. What public space can and cannot be, the sway and weight it carries within the current urban discourse of gentrification, begins to weave itself into form under the safe auspices of an “art project.” In some ways these two very different urban community-based agricultural spaces, the *Not A Cornfield* project and the South Central Farm, are uniquely connected inasmuch as they highlight viable and fragile channels of articulation. What cannot be resolved in court is given some space to operate under the specialized moniker of culture – a form of cultural currency. The possibilities for a constructive dialogue around public space and community emerge from this terrain in ways that are specific to LA: by further questioning the role of such collaborative “public” projects within an aesthetic discussion already heated and troubled by a field of corn called “art.”

The *Not A Cornfield* art project officially concluded in March 2006. The corn has been harvested from the former 32-acre brownfield near downtown, and the keys to the soon-to-be public park, which will be renamed the Cornfields State Park,² have been handed over to the California State Parks agency.

The site, backed up against the banks of the Los Angeles River, has always been perfectly situated as an agricultural space. Geographically speaking it is in the hilly region north-east of downtown. The field is a level ground within surrounding sloping hills and acts as an opening for the river to

² Over the years, the site has been referred to as “the cornfield” by local residents because corn has grown along its edges for some time. The history of the site can be found at www.notacornfield.info.



enter the basin when it floods, naturally irrigating the field. Excavations during the building of the new metro Gold Line, which runs adjacent to the field, uncovered sections of the *Zanja Madre* (Mother Ditch), an early 20th-century brick and mortar aqueduct used to bring water to the growing city center. The Tongva people were there before the Spanish Mission system and the subsequent “settling” of the Pueblo in the late 18th century. When the river bottom was paved to accommodate growth of the new city in the 20th century, the agricultural site became a Southern Pacific Company railroad yard adjacent to the new Chinatown and to the bridges that now cross the river to connect the downtown with east LA. The site lies directly below the current LA Police Academy and Dodgers Stadium, formerly the site of an immigrant, residential neighborhood known as Chavez Ravine.

In 2001 the site was marked off for large industrial development — a plan that community activists and local residents protested. They lobbied state legislators in Sacramento, made public pleas, and managed to get the state to buy the land from private developers, who realized that the effect of the local campaign was not working in their favor. So a park was planned.

When Bon proposed the year-long, one-crop cycle *Not A Cornfield* project in 2005, she first made connections with the community groups that were already established in the area. There was some initial friction, but meetings were held and concerns were aired, leading to the project being well received by the community. As the project took shape, members of the community and local groups were asked to assume roles in the organizational process; some were paid, some volunteered, and others were asked to participate in organizing weekend events, which ranged from political discussions and lectures to performances and video screenings.

Presentations at the Getty Research Institute, on-site discussions with LA-based urban theorists, art-world academics, and artists, together with research on formal and informal local archives situated the project, for many in the art world, within their established, and therefore more comforting, critical discourses. Research and documentation led to publishing a website with images of 19th-century area-maps from the Huntington Library collection, downloadable podcasts of interviews and narrative histories of the area, short documentary films and images, interviews with farmers and agricultural specialists, a blog, and a field-mounted webcam. Annenberg funding supplied not only the materials and machinery needed to prepare the field and harvest the

3. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 161.

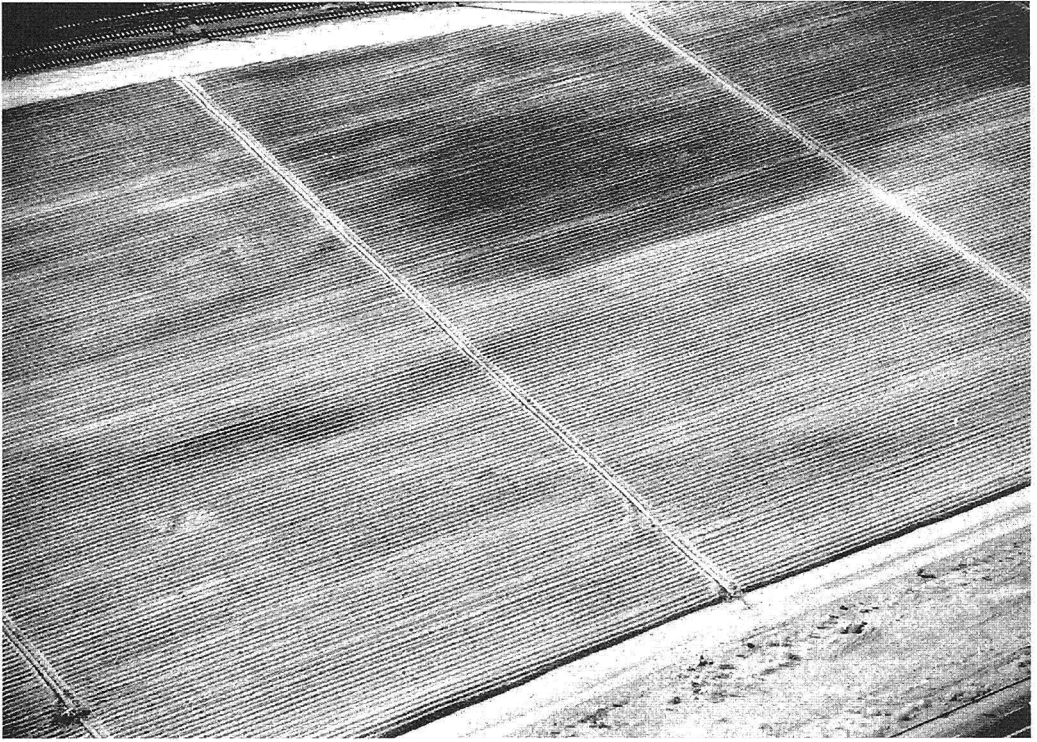
crop but also facilitated the use of specialists, delivery of 1,500 truckloads of clean soil, and the purchase of over a million seeds of indigenous corn from a local seed bank.

Multiple interests and possibilities are simultaneously mirrored in these physical and material arenas. The project is marked both by the ability to “re-purpose” the foundational work and experience of local collectives and learn from them, and to redouble this directed energy. This approach implies taking advantage of what Grant Kester calls a “politically coherent community.”³ The project’s recovery of the site’s neglected history and narratives works toward the common interest in raising questions concerning public space through the cultivation of one of the most historically important and repeatedly misused and neglected areas in the city.

The material and collaborative structure used during, and remaining after, the cornfield project – published research, renewed soil, and shared experiences – has been said by some to be compromised by the fact that the funding source is closely related to the artist herself. This fact is not a guarantee of a project’s success, and the communal experience of thousands of visitors, school kids, and collaborators does not require the validation of the individual authorship of an artist. Yes, Bon is a trustee of the funding source, but that is not the point. The willingness to donate \$10 million toward the purchase and preservation of the South Central Farm speaks of a willingness to engage the public as well as the private sector, a process echoed in the cornfield project, in order to better articulate a more complex relationship to public space while simultaneously helping preserve it. It manages to bring a theoretical aesthetic discourse to dialogue with the core questions and activities surrounding private/public space – to put its money where its mouth is.

Not A Cornfield is as much about this kind of public/private negotiation as it is about anything else. It benefits from residing neither in the land of incomplete open-endedness, nor within castigating political circuits. After all, work does not need to be antagonistic to be political: It can negotiate between parties. Processes and projects like these rely simultaneously on *both* a sense of community and a healthy respect for multiple subjectivities. Neither is mutually exclusive. Can it do these many things at the same time? Can it be effective and relevant within a flexible and democratic discourse? Can it fruitfully address notions of a communal and individual experience simultaneously? Can it do these many things and still be political?

Yes, and it requires some work. It requires the artists,



CROP AS GEOMETRIC FORM. PHOTO:
JAMES GOODNIGHT. © 2005 NOTA-
CORNFIELD LLC.

organizers, and participants to work in a diachronic way: to tap into multiple histories, actualities, and possibilities while constructing and sharing their discourses with local audiences. It requires a move away from the art world as it is currently constructed, a postcolonial model where both material and entropic processes are considered, and a strong footing in “knowledge” traditions, both archived and activated, while believing that the public and participants might actually “get it.”

Diachronic models often insinuate a stasis, holding narrative linear time still. Corn in this case functions as a referent to the suspension of time, something akin to Robert Smithson’s interest in crystallographic systems. The dynamic time of history is calcified in these systems. In this way, the land on which this corn grows, as well as the corn itself, is suspended from *its* malignant narrative – it is held still. History nourishes both, but is neither.

Corn, which is an economic term to designate agricultural production, is well known as this country’s leading agricultural product and export. Over 3,500 products are made from it. Originally from Central America, corn, or maize, has been the primary food staple, and as a consequence has played a central role in the cosmologies and



spatio-temporal logic of Mesoamerican peoples for millennia. For the Mayans, the gods made Man from corn – maize as body.

Nearly a million seeds of indigenous, multicolored “feed corn” were used in the *Not A Cornfield* project. After harvesting, some of the corn was given to a community seeds program, some reserved for exhibition, while most is still being considered for a renewable project.⁴

Corn has the unusual property of being a plant that regenerates top soil and leaches toxins from the ground without harming either the ears or the stalk. Apart from being scientifically proven, corn is a form of knowledge that has been understood throughout time by those who have cultivated it.

The idea of planting corn in this Los Angeles field was not some sort of romantic pastiche, nor was it a passive ethnic metaphor – a sort of fixed throwback. It could be seen, instead, along similar lines as Smithson’s *Mirrored Displacements*, his travel writing through the Yucatan, and his attempts to attenuate the narrative of linear progressive time. Jennifer L. Roberts speaks of Smithson’s interest in the suspension of progressive time, the mirroring/layering of cosmological depositions, and enantiomorphism: how the earth/land is the central player in this mirror.⁵ The displaced mirroring of these signifying possibilities – maize, diachronically speaking, as historical cosmology, as deposition and mirroring of time, as body, as material referent and sign – activates the field and us, a community of interested participants, to reconsider the possibilities of this field from within this field, through immersion and suspension.

By November 2005 the maize was so tall that for anyone entering the field, the downtown skyline disappeared. The noise of cars and traffic lights faded away. Navigation, in a

4. There have been several proposals for how to use and “recycle” the harvested corn, from making ethanol to converting it for biodegradable containers. At the moment this text went to press, no solution had been finalized.

5. Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 40.

city built for it, was no longer possible, not even a consideration. No buildings, no trains, no streets, those signifiers of linear histories were suspended, if only briefly. The holding of time and the immersion of the body were long enough, one hopes, for us to consider this deposition of time and mirrored displacement, for our identities to remain somewhat suspended. What we shared was partly a communal experience of possible new fields.

To find a process through which the communal experience isn't essentialized or romanticized, while recognizing subjective urban alienation, implies taking a certain responsibility for and action toward reconciling seemingly ontological absolutes. These communities are contingent on shared experiences, but often those are only temporary situations and solutions, given the nature of the public/private discourses in Los Angeles – the gentrifying strain on development and distribution – and the city's history of forgetting calls for taking on such causes. To forget that is to have missed the point entirely.

BILL KELLEY, JR. IS AN EDUCATOR,
INDEPENDENT WRITER, CURATOR,
AND CRITIC BASED IN LOS ANGELES.
HE IS THE FORMER DIRECTOR AND
CURRENT EDITORIAL ADVISOR FOR
LATINART.COM.