



Urban Oasis

Born Massachusetts, USA

IMAGINE A SINGLE DELICATE FLOWER growing in the midst of a massive, roaring, industrialized landscape. Bonnie Sherk notes, "It was this incredible contrast that was very much a part of me, and I was fascinated by this image. I would literally conjure it up at night, and dream it."¹

Instead of fading in the manner of most childhood dreams and fantasies, fascination with this image intensified as Sherk matured. At first she treated it as a metaphor. The fantasy flower was a poignant symbol for entire populations of plants, trees, insects, and animals plagued by industrial, commercial, and domestic intrusions into their habitats. Then Sherk and the musician Jack Wickert

launched an ambitious, multifaceted art project to help the defenseless metaphoric flower blossom into a vibrant experimental community and agricultural center. Sherk named it *Crossroads Community (The Farm)* (1974–1980). She was its founding director/president.

The location Sherk chose to establish *The Farm* was not a tranquil, rural setting but a six-and-a-half acre tract of cement adjacent to abandoned warehouses that was barren except for heaps of debris. It was situated in the midst of clamorous, exhaust-spewing cars, buses, and trucks speeding along the elaborate maze of the Army Street–freeway interchange in the heart of San Francisco. The landscapes in this region had become macadam-scapes, leveled and paved to accommodate the velocity of motorized vehicles and the foundations of urban structures.

Sherk imagined this degraded habitat as a multicultural, interspecies, ecological, neighborhood oasis. Two forms of the diversity she sought were already in place—three underground creeks converged on the derelict site, and four distinct neighborhoods bordered it. According to Sherk, this vibrant mix of waterways and disparate people made it “a magnet site of invisible energy.”² This energy was augmented by introducing animals, plants, programs, and infrastructures. Their plan was well timed and well placed. The freeway interchange had just been completed, and public money was available for the acquisition of open space and the establishment of new parks. Sherk explains, “I saw the total integration as a new art form: a triptych (human/plant/animal) within the context of a counter-pointed diptych (farm/freeway: technological/non-mechanized).”³

Over the next seven years Sherk’s ambitious aspirations were gradually realized. A broad array of life enhancements was launched: garden, farm, park, school without walls, alternative art space, performance space, community center, environmental education center, kitchen, library, and more. Sherk describes the process of establishing this new integrated art form: “I thought of it as a performance piece; I was creating the performance of being.” She goes on to explain, “The ultimate performance is being a total human being. . . . Within this performance I performed multiple roles. I was the administrator, politician, strategist, teacher, cook, designer, gardener, etc. In a sense, everyone who participated was also a performer.”⁴

The social experimentation conducted at *The Farm* was integral to the idealism that roiled through San Francisco in the ‘70s. It was as sweeping a rejection of the repressive institutions as the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s “guerrilla theatre,” the Artists Liberation Front’s demands for artists’ rights, the San Francisco Diggers’ defiance of market practices, and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense’s uprisings. However, *The Farm* did not contribute to the extremist strategies that turned San Francisco into a hotbed of radicalism. Instead, it pursued its progressive agenda according to mainstream requirements, gently insinuating its radical utopianism into the established cultural framework. *The Farm* was registered as an official nonprofit organization, submitted annual reports to the IRS, was run by a board of directors, and earned grant moneys from such authorized agencies as the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, and foundations. Other income was earned by renting spaces for concerts and events.

Four years before *The Farm* got underway, Sherk established her connection to the site by creating an uplifting artwork on a downtrodden urban site. *Sitting Still No. 1* (1970) was a performance of great intensity but minimal action. Sherk put on a formal gown and sat in an old stuffed armchair exactly where she found it—in a heap of garbage strewn in a flooded empty lot beside the Army Street Circle interchange that was under construction at the time.



**Bonnie Ora Sherk | Crossroads
Community (The Farm) | Model
(view south) | 1975–76** Mixed
media | Dimensions: 3' x 5'

PHOTO: BONNIE ORA SHERK / COURTESY
BONNIE ORA SHERK

Sherk describes being inspired by “a potential audience” that consisted of people creeping along in the traffic slowed by the highway construction.⁵ Her performance involved simply sitting and occasionally making eye contact with the drivers as they passed.

Sherk places great significance on the mysterious force that drew her to this location because while performing *Sitting Still*, she faced the northernmost frame of the Islais Creek Watershed, where *The Farm* would later be established. This watershed has continued to inspire many subsequent artworks. “I feel I am on this path, being in my alignment. There is a spiritual power and energy that is inherent to the work, including precognitions of work that were to become part of my future. . . . I really believe it was the universe guiding me.”⁶

The commingling among humans and diverse living species at *The Farm* was also anticipated in an earlier work. *Living in the Forest—Demonstrations of Aktin Logic, Balance, Compromise, Devotion, Etc. (A,B,C,D,E)* (1973) is the elaborate title of an equally elaborate installation at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University in California. It consisted of a six-week experiment to facilitate interspecies communications. These communications were enhanced by the interplanetary alignments suggested by feng shui, a Chinese system that seeks to gain positive energies from a site’s location and its surroundings. A rat, chickens, male and female rabbits, doves, a pig all occupied the museum “forest.” This menagerie’s physical features, behaviors, and evidence of their native intelligences performed the

functions of paint, brush, and manual dexterity in conventional art works. No bars or cages separated the animals from each other or from the museum visitors. They roamed freely within the environment, seeking places to eat, groom, sleep, etc. Sherk explains that the animals were "both performers and beings."⁷

Each week one section of a transplanted forest was opened, giving human and non-human participants access to it. Sherk documented the dramas that ensued with sound recordings, video, and photography and by writing about the events that ensued on the gallery walls. For example, Sherk titled one event "Pigme Demonstrating Double Imposition—Destruction: the pig digging up the tree roots counterpointed with the humans who cut the tree roots for the Christmas holiday."⁸ Another event was titled "The Lady Doe Makes a Warren for Her Family—Birth: a litter of rabbits is born in the safest place in the installation the mother rabbit could find to create an underground nest—in the bottom of tree with no roots."⁹

The Farm earned its reputation as a pioneering eco artwork by greatly expanding the opportunities for humans to interact with diverse animal species. It was neither a zoo, nor park, nor farm—the conventional locations where animals reside and plants grow. Nor was it a school—the typical place people learn about these life-forms; nor was it a bureaucratic organization—the normal structure designed to carry out these functions. Its digressions from these cultural conventions steered it in a direction that many subsequent public artworks emulated.

Not a zoo Zoos are the urban norm for such concentrations of animals. While more than seventy animals made their homes on the site beneath the freeway, *The Farm* did not resemble a zoo because no animals were isolated in cages or otherwise barricaded from visitors. Sherk named her comprehensive social experiment "The Raw Egg Animal Theatre" (TREAT). Ducks, geese, chickens, rabbits, sheep, and other species "performed," which meant that their normal behaviors were observed by urban residents who had few opportunities to hear a rooster crow, or see rabbits tend their young, or pet a lamb. In this manner, the concept of a community of interacting organisms expanded to include people and animals.

Not a park Likewise, *The Farm* expanded urbanites' enjoyment of the bucolic setting beyond the conventional park. Instead of limiting experience to passive contemplation and recreation, visitors to *The Farm* actively engaged in its use and maintenance. Through "interactive learning" and "integrated community programs," people at the farm touched, tended, and communed with the many plants and animals that occupied the site.

Not a farm The standard meaning of *farm* did not define this community artwork either, because the people who dug, planted, and harvested were acrobats, actors, activists, poets, children, old folks, and even punk band members from MDC, Tragic Mulatto, Polkacide, and DOA. Everyone participated in tending gardens and caring for the animals. People even planted special gardens to grow food for the chickens, rabbits, and other animals. Tending to their needs fostered a nurturing alliance that demonstrated the codependence between humans and the nonhuman species in their diets. In addition to enjoying fresh eggs, fruits, and vegetables, these urban laborers were introduced to sensual and functional contact with their foods.

Not a school *The Farm's* progressive educational philosophy united disciplines that typical schools separate. The humanities, sciences, education, art, agriculture, and social sciences



Bonnie Ora Sherk | Crossroads Community (The Farm) | Scene from the Raw Egg and Animal Theatre (TREAT) | 1976

PHOTO: BONNIE ORA SHERK / COURTESY BONNIE ORA SHERK

merged with research, planning, design, implementation, use, maintenance, and management. The garden as a living laboratory served as the hub for these diverse disciplines. Garden-based learning is an instructional strategy that utilizes a garden as a teaching tool. Sherk explains that *The Farm* approached education as "an ecological system."¹⁰ Students from over seventy-five public schools participated on a regular basis. The children's learning program was one of five in the state of California funded as an Alternative Education Program.

Not an organization *The Farm* transformed the standard bureaucratic structure of institutions by including the public in multiple phases of its functioning, including decision making. Sherk explains the many benefits that derive from distributing work and diversifying roles: "It is from these rich processes that significant solutions can be found which will help to heal misunderstandings and prejudices among people, flawed educational systems, as well as solve serious problems of misuse, neglect and abuse of the environment."¹¹ In regard to *The Farm*, this disorganizational structure helped resolve the separations and inequalities existing among and between humans and nonhuman species.

The grand scale and holistic design of the experiment was envisioned when the project was first conceived. Sherk recalls, "It was an epiphany. I could see it in full flower. So I set to work to implement the vision. You can look at the drawings that I made in 1974."¹² What they present is a detailed layout of the entire site. Neatly typed at the outer edges are the names of the crossroads that gave the project its Crossroads Community name. Areas within these boundaries are allocated for a school, theater, barn, and roof garden. Tiny drawn figures interact with miniature chickens, cows, and sheep in the midst of fruit-laden trees and patches of cabbages, zucchinis, and strawberries. The drawings envisioned uncovering natural resources of the earth, like the water that flows from beneath, and recycling the concrete, which covered the land, to create meadows, gardens, and ponds. The vision was complete—a bleak urban lot converted into a flourishing promised land.

Six years after Sherk left *The Farm* to pursue other projects, an official eviction notice was issued. Sherk explains that this tiny grassroots society was a threat to the authority of government institution, even if this threat was merely symbolic. Furthermore, the owner of the property saw income-earning potential that *The Farm* was not satisfying. In 1981 the

municipality began construction of a conventional park on the site, although *The Farm's* influence persists. There are community gardens, and live/work studios are available to artists to rent.

Sherk looks back on this bold experiment and comments, "The bad news is that the planet is falling apart. The good news is that it is forcing people to think holistically. When I started, people didn't want to think holistically and did not think of art in this way. . . . Art is really the most powerful transformational methodology available to human beings. I'm not talking about formal design. I'm talking about art that has infinite manifestations of integrated elements and forms. It is when all parts are integrated systemically that it gains its power and greatness."¹³

Pioneering Contribution to Eco Art *The Farm* established an autonomous zone of action that far exceeded the alternative art spaces that were being established at the time. Attending to the problems of the urban environment as an art practice was one noteworthy innovation. Another was including nonhumans within its definition of a city community. In this manner its site-specific features model an ecologically based society in which biological and cultural systems are fully integrated. Sherk identifies the ultimate significance of these accomplishments by saying that *The Farm* "had to do with the theory and practice of art as a tool for cultural transformation and human survival."¹⁴ Over the succeeding decades, the implications and opportunities provided by this inclusive vision have continued to expand. Sherk's subsequent artistic activities include the establishment of community learning environments—called *A Living Library & Think Park*—in public parks, school yards, civic centers, and urban wastelands around the United States. Each branch is developed with local resources and integrated with community programs to cultivate and vitalize human and non-human populations, as well as all nonliving resources—economic, technological, and ecological.

NOTES

- 1 Bonnie Sherk quoted in "Between the Diaspora and the Crinoline: An Interview with Bonnie Sherk" by Linda Frye Burnham, *High Performance Magazine*, Fall 1981. Accessed through CommunityArtsNetwork.com (2002). http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/files/2002/09/between_the_dia.php.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Bonnie Sherk interview with the author, March 12, 2010.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Bonnie Sherk correspondence with the author, October 9, 2010.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. Bonnie Sherk interview with the author, March 12, 2010.
- 10 Bonnie Sherk, "A Living Library: A Global Ecological Network of Diversity and Commonality," *UN Chronicle* online. http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/webArticles/121806_lib.htm.
- 11 Bonnie Sherk interview with the author, March 12, 2010.
- 12 Bonnie Sherk correspondence with the author, October 8, 2010.
- 13 Bonnie Sherk quoted in "Between the Diaspora and the Crinoline: An Interview with Bonnie Sherk" by Linda Frye Burnham, *High Performance Magazine*, Fall 1981. Accessed through CommunityArtsNetwork.com (2002). http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/files/2002/09/between_the_dia.php.