

SFAQ

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A note from the Publisher

As I write this, it is the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights march on Washington DC, and I feel like asking a naive question: “Why is everything still so fucked up?” It seems we are on the brink of another world war, not to mention perpetual attacks against the rights of people of color, reproductive choice, the LGBT community, and basically any social good or equality in the world. Not to mention the relentless attacks on voting rights and the unmanageable parody of the Trayvon Martin trial and verdict. The only positive development I've witnessed in recent months, has come from the courageous acts of Bradley [Chelsea] Manning and Edward Snowden, who put their own freedoms and lives at risk attempting to wake up our sorry excuse for a forward thinking and intellectual nation. A call for us to acknowledge the fact that we might have actually lost our “democracy” long ago... but if ever it existed, where did it go? Not that art can fix any of this, but artists can. I call upon artists of all generations to get more radical, get weird, get revolutionary, get arrested... the rest of the world is putting their lives on the line for what they believe in, perhaps it's time we started to do the same.

This issue of SFAQ is dedicated to:

Bradley [Chelsea] Manning, Edward Snowden, Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, Julian Assange, Trayvon Martin and Stokley Carmichael.

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Luis Miguel Bendaña grew up in New York and Nicaragua and is currently based in Chicago. He recently exhibited his work in Detroit, Belgrade, Madrid, Athens and Mexico City. He has an upcoming solo exhibition at Important Projects in Oakland this month.

Terri Cohn is a writer, curator, art historian, and editor. Her research and writings focus on conceptual art, technology, public art, and socially-engaged art practices. A Contributing Editor to Artweek magazine for 20 years, she currently writes for Public Art Review, Art in America, caa.reviews, and Art Practical. Terri edited and co-authored Pairing of Polarities: The Life and Art of Sonya Rapoport (Heyday, 2012), and curated exhibitions of Rapoport's work for Kala Art Institute and Mills College Art Museum (2011, 2012). Her many public talks include SFMOMA, Columbus College of Art of Design, University of London, and Oxford Brookes University, England.

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Jarrett Earnest is an artist, writer, and co-director of I: I, a collaborative that took the form of an art space in the Lower East side of Manhattan. He writes regularly on contemporary art and pursues the interview as a distinct critical form, publishing long innovative interviews with artists such as Maurizio Cattelan, Richard Tuttle, and Nayland Blake, among others. He is presently at work on a book of writing and drawing exploring the aesthetics of intimacy. All of his disparate projects engage the intersections of performance, poetry, the visual arts and politics.

John Held, Jr. is a staff writer for San Francisco Arts Quarterly. He is currently the subject of the play, “With Held,” performed at the San Francisco Fringe Festival. His reviews of Bay Area art events are a regular feature on sfaqonline.com. Held's two-volume work, “Where the Secret is Hidden,” containing over one hundred essays on the alternative arts composed over a thirty year period, is available from lulu.com.

Ava Jancar is an archivist and is the co-founder and co-director of Jancar Jones Gallery, Los Angeles.



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Ryan McGilney
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Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery.

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Sam Lipp lives and works in Chicago. Recent projects include Great Skin at Bodega, Philadelphia and a forthcoming two-person exhibition at Devening Projects, Chicago. He is also a member of the artist group Pp5ft.

TOM MARIONI 1969 One Second Sculpture, curate Invisible Painting and Sculpture, 1970 founder (MOCA) Museum of Conceptual Art, curate Sound Sculpture As, 1970 The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art, 1972 Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach, Drum Brush Drawings, 1975 Thinking Out Loud, Warsaw, Poland, 1975-1981 editor/ designer VISION magazine, 1981 Guggenheim Fellowship, 1991 The Yellow Sound for Kandinsky, radio play, Cologne, Germany, 1996 founded The Art Orchestra, Beer Drinking Sonata, 2003 A Memoir, Beer, Art and Philosophy, 2012 Beer with Friends... Vienna, Paris, Bristol.

Austin McManus is a photographer, writer, curator, and publisher. He founded the web-based zine publishing and distribution collective TheFlopBox.com in 2003. Austin is involved in a wide range of creative projects and currently works as an editor for Juxtapoz magazine.

Mark Van Proyen is an artist and art critic based in northern California. His writings have appeared in Art in America, Art Issues, CAA Reviews, New Art Examiner, Bad Subjects, Art Practical and Square Cylinder.

Gianni Simone escaped from his home country in 1992 and found refuge in Japan, where he promptly found a job teaching people how to shout HELP! and avoid being robbed on foreign buses. Since 1997 he has been unhealthily active in the mail art network, unleashing on the unsuspecting public, among other things, the “Treatise of Pataphysical Anatomy” and the international fake political campaign poster project. He has recently opened the Stickerman Museum - Tokyo Annex. When not running after his two kids and from his wife, he is usually busy making zines, writing for high- and lowbrow magazines, and exploring Tokyo.

Stephanie Smith received her Bachelor of Arts at the University of California at Berkeley, where she majored in Psychology and Art Practice, with electives in Art History and Italian. She has remained active in the Bay Area art community, gaining exhibition and curation experience at several galleries in the East Bay. She maintains an interdisciplinary art practice, including installation, new media, social practice, and arts writing.

Vincent Uribe is a creative entrepreneur who originates from Los Angeles. He graduated with a dual degree in Fine Arts and in Visual Critical Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has been the founding director of LVL3 gallery in Chicago since early 2010, where the focus is to help promote connections between emerging and established artist from around the world. Vincent enjoys red-flavored things as well as eating Taco Bell. (http://lv3gallery.com/)

V. Vale, publisher of the late seventies zine Search & Destroy, helped bring local, national, and international attention to a Punk scene every bit as vibrant, weird, and progressive as more highly publicized ones to the south and to the east. The publication was launched with grants from Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. For Vale, Punk became a gateway for a host of cultural obsessions, including industrial music, the writings of J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs, feminism, pranksterism, and the more bizarre ends of filmmaking and music, which he has chronicled for over three decades with the RE/Search series that he founded.

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BONNIE ORA SHERK

Interviewed by TERRI COHN

Bonnie Ora Sherk's poetic and visionary environmental and performance-based work concerning our relationships with the natural world—ranging from animals to the tamed and untamed urban landscape—has always been the material and conceptual essence of her art. Consistently working with and framing these alliances as metaphors for human intelligence, knowledge, and transformation, Sherk's work has grown from her early *tableaux vivant*-like works, to a model that is more grass roots and monumental in scope. Her interest in "found" or created environments, where she would create a performance in order to express their inherent ecological systems, and create new experiences of those places has evolved over time. Her early works inserted a unique, environmentally sensitive voice into the socially aware, avant garde lexicon of the first generation of Conceptual artists, and formed the core of her *Life Frames* and *Living Libraries*.

While *Life Frames* have become community learning modalities and transformed ecological environments, with integrated programs and processes that incorporate the unique resources of a locale, and are intended to help people experience them more fully, Sherk defines *A Living Library* as a comprehensive metaphor. Inclusive of everything on the planet and in space, ranging from people, birds, trees and water to all the things we create: artwork, parks, gardens, schools, curricula and communities. *A Living Library*, or *ALL*, provides a conceptual and aesthetic framework for linking culture and technology as part of nature.

When I first encountered Sherk's *A Living Library* in the mid-1990s, I found it to be humanitarian and visionary, raising questions about what we call art. In a review I wrote about it at that time, I considered this question, and arrived at the conclusion--which I still maintain--that "considered in the context of [art] as the human ability to make or do things that display form, beauty, and unusual perception, it is art's quintessence." *

* Terri Cohn, "Bonnie Sherk Projects and Plans," *Artweek 27* (1996): 9

When did you become a Conceptual artist or realize you were a Conceptual artist and why did you become one?

The '70s was such an exciting time. Everything felt very new, and I was inspired. I remember using myself as one of the elements in the pieces that helped whatever needed to be communicated. The work was about communicating ideas and feelings, and finding the best way to do that. I was very aware of the balance of interconnected systems, and I found the work to be more interesting if it had this dimensionality.

What do you mean by dimensionality?

There were ideas, feelings, emotions, and spiritual dimensions in addition to the physical form. The greater the scope of integrating these different aspects--the deeper the work--the more relevant the work is.

It seems to make sense relative to what you have always done.

I was always working on these multiple levels, and I also understood that everything happens in a place. When you create the place and then integrate it with the performance or the activity, then you're creating a whole experience.

I want to share a poem with you that I wrote in 1985:

**BEING IS PURE, BEING IS POWER
FORM IS PURE, FORM IS POWER
IDEA IS PURE, IDEA IS POWER
LOVE IS PURE, LOVE IS POWER
SPIRIT IS PURE, SPIRIT IS POWER**

**ART IS BEING, IS FORM, IS IDEA,
IS LOVE, IS SPIRIT, IS POWER**

**NATURE IS PURE, NATURE IS POWER
ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MINERAL ---**

**EVERYWHERE
AND IN BALANCE**

EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING

"THE ESSENCE OF ALL"

I had this poem translated into multiple languages. I performed the poem and its translations in *A Tribute to Nature* in New York at Exit Art. This is universal; it's the essence of what we're talking about. And, it's all nature.

What I'm doing today, with *A Living Library*, is creating a framework, and series of strategies and methodologies, in which the biological, cultural and technological can be seen as integrated systems, and culture and technology are understood to be part of nature.

When did you begin to form the idea of 'A Living Library'?

I remember doing a performance piece in 1971 at the University of California, San Diego, which I called *Response*. I was invited to create a work, to do something in the art gallery. I didn't want to create something before I went, but rather to respond to being there. To me, the University is the place where everything comes together.

I didn't want to create a piece for the gallery. That wasn't of interest to me. I went around the campus and found a place that was still under construction... it was the Library, which is also a place where everything comes together. I decided to ask people from different parts of the University to be in this piece with me. I wasn't sure what it was going to be yet, as it was being created as my response to being there. I met a Biologist, Physicist, and Photographer. They all participated in the piece. The piece was, I think, the seed of what *A Living Library* is about.

The two landscape pits in front of the new Library had not yet been planted. You could view them at ground level, or, from above. There were four different ways to view the piece. I decided that I was going to do a series of actions in one of the pits, and the Physicist viewed my actions on a television monitor. He was in another pit, describing what I was doing in Symbolic Logic. The Biologist was above, verbally describing my actions in biological terms. The Photographer described what I was doing photographically, moving around each area. The Fixed Video Camera was also describing what I was doing, which the Physicist saw on the monitor. The piece showed there's not one way to understand or describe something.

The first thing I did was boil an egg. Then I ate the egg, dug a hole, buried the shell, and planted a tree. Then I released two birds. I was responding to the environment through these actions. The other performers responded to what I was doing by describing it. The viewers responded by watching, and the birds responded by leaving, or not leaving, when released.

I think that 1971 piece, in a very simple way, was the seed for what *A Living Library* is. *A Living Library* was formally conceived, and so named, ten years later, in 1981, for a site and plan that I developed for Bryant Park in New York City, adjacent to the Main Research Branch of the NY Public Library.

Can you talk about the evolution of your work?

My first public project was *Portable Parks I-III*, and moved through the *Sitting Still Series* culminating with *Public Lunch*, which then led to my early work studying animal behavior. My work with animals led to *Living in the Forest: Demonstrations of Aktin Logic, Balance, Compromise, Devotion, Etc.*, and, that then became *The Farm with The Raw Egg Animal Theater (TREAT)*. All of this work evolved to become *A Living Library*. There's a very strong thread that ties all the work together. They were all *Life Frames*.

Can you talk more about 'Portable Parks', and then other projects?

Portable Parks I-III were meant to demonstrate how relatively simple it is to transform "dead spaces" by creating temporary installations. In 1970 I didn't believe that anything could be permanent, and in a sense I still don't. However, later I realized that we can create things to endure. Creating a day-long event at that time seemed appropriate.

Each different site was a unique environment, and each had increasingly more participation. The first one was a *tableau vivant*, not participatory. The *Life Frame* initially was an image that you could see, as in a still photograph-- a still life. Then, the *Life Frame* became one that you could gradually become part of. The work became much more public, participatory, and transformative, as a way to frame life, see it, and experience it better.

It seems to be a metaphor for the kind of path that you've been on with your own life.

Definitely! The *Life Frame* continued to evolve. I remember at *The Farm* thinking very clearly about the term "Life Frame" and realizing that what I was trying to do was create a framework for diversity, not only in terms of multiple species--animal and vegetable--but also in terms of humans, who are also part of the equation, and able to accommodate diversity. The *Life Frame* acknowledges, respects, and integrates diversity.

Can you talk some more about 'Sitting Still'?

The *Sitting Still Series* incorporated a seated human figure in diverse found environments.



[Above and below] "Short Order Cook" Andy's Donuts, 1973. Courtesy the artist.





Scene From "Public Lunch" Lion House, San Francisco Zoo, 1971. Courtesy the artist.



"Portable Park II" Mission/Van Ness Offramp at Otis, 1970 (with Howard Levine). Courtesy the artist.

It showed how that could simply transform the place—from a garbage area where water had collected, to streets in different neighborhoods, like the Financial District, Golden Gate Bridge, and various indoor / outdoor cages at the San Francisco Zoo. It was the original Occupy.

The *Sitting Still Series* culminated in *Public Lunch*. During *Public Lunch*, I had a meal in the Lion House at the San Francisco Zoo, adjacent to tigers and lions eating their lunch. I was a human being in a cage next to the lions and tigers.

In the cage with me, was another cage with a rat. There was a cage within a cage, within a cage, within a cage. I was exploring the idea of who is really in the cage.

During the performance, after I ate my meal and paced, and did various other human things. I climbed up the ladder to a platform, laid down, and looked up at the skylight. I saw these wonderful birds flying. It was very peaceful, and I was very relaxed, just experiencing being there.

The tiger in the adjacent cage jumped up to his platform, got up on his haunches, and peered at me. I looked at him and realized that he was perceiving me, and was probably thinking and feeling. I wondered, "What is he thinking and feeling?" That was a very seminal, important moment for me.

I decided to take the rat who was in the cage with me, back to my studio, and I created *Rat Run* for her. The *Rat Run* was a space between two pillars in the studio. I made a wire mesh enclosure and put sod on the bottom, and left it open at the top so she could leave, but she decided to stay. I thought, "This is very interesting. She's a guru to me; she's my teacher!" So I named her Guru Rat. I gradually introduced other species of animals into this environment, and it grew, becoming a total, complex environment.

This was a powerful time for me because I studied the language of different animals and their behavior. I learned so much. I realized that we are all performers and architects. That's when I began learning about ecological systems, by observing the animal's behavior and inter-relationships. This early work led directly to *Living in the Forest*, which evolved to become *Crossroads Community (the farm)*.

Did you consider the work performance, or did that matter to you? Were you just living your life and this is what you did?

I considered the early work to be environmental performance sculpture. I was an element in the piece as were the animals and the people who participated. Gradually my performance became the performance of "Being." At this time I realized that the ultimate performance is being a total human being. With *The Farm*, I began the performance of "Being." I also thought of it as "Life Work"—Real Life Work.

When did you start 'The Farm'?

In 1974. Just before *The Farm* began, when I was exploring many different kinds of performances, from the creation of very tight vignettes like *Public Lunch* to a real job I had at Andy's Donuts, where I was a *Waitress* and a *Short Order Cook*. For me, it was an opportunity to do a job as a performance piece. I consciously did so, wearing Cultural Costumes. The *Waitress* had a bouffant hairdo and wore a black and white nylon dress. The *Short Order Cook* wore a t-shirt and levis. I was exploring what it meant to be a performer.

I felt a kinship with Grotowski, who was a theater person, who used the environment in ways that felt sculptural to me, as he often used real places for his pieces. That was significant, because I also used found environments. Now I'm totally immersed in understanding the local place, its rich resources, and how it can be transformed by incorporating them. This is a significant concern in terms of integrating ecological and multicultural resources.

The Framework of *A Living Library* is to understand and incorporate the local resources of each locale: human, ecological, economic, historic, technological, aesthetic—seen through the lens of time—past, present, and future.

It seems that you actually always worked with that art/life merger; you have more often gone into the world and done your work, rather than making the world come into the rarified atmosphere of the gallery space. You're an amazing researcher about life and place.

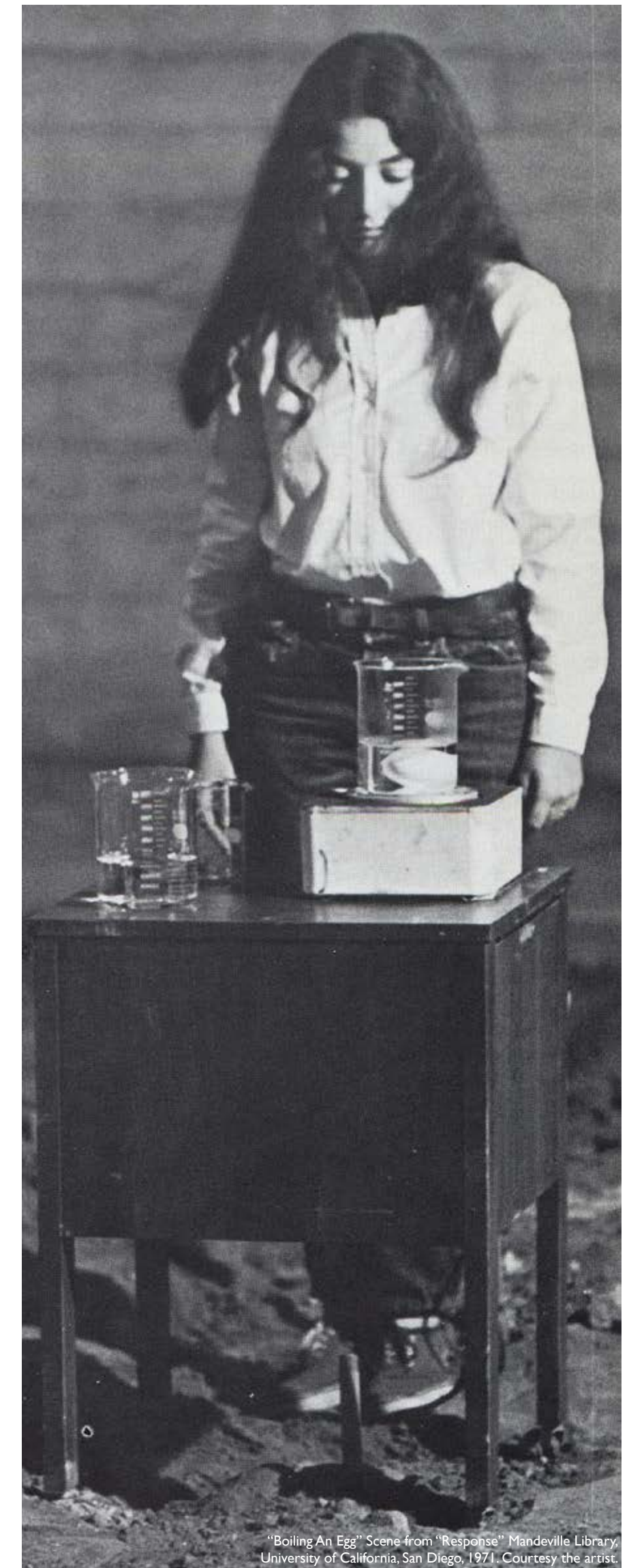
I always do a lot of research, and additionally, now I am teaching others how to research because I think that is missing for many, who don't have the sense of wonder about the richness that's around them. We have to learn how to uncover it. There's a lot of value in understanding your local place. Contextualism is important.

Can you describe what you're doing now with 'A Living Library'?

We have several *Branch Living Library & Think Parks* in San Francisco, and one on Roosevelt Island in New York City. A Goal is to link the sites through *Green-Powered Digital Gateways* and develop other Branches – locally and globally.

When we learn all that we can about our local place, from that we can extrapolate and learn about the world. It's about understanding and transforming our local place, and then sharing what we learn with people who are learning and doing in other places.

We are Cultivating the Human & Ecological Garden.



"Boiling An Egg" Scene from "Response" Mandeville Library, University of California, San Diego, 1971. Courtesy the artist.

I think 9/11 made this even more clear to me, that it's important to be Cultivating the Human Garden, as well as the Ecological Garden, and creating opportunities to bring diversity together. The 'Life Frame' is 'A Living Library,' and provides a way to heal.

I think of this work as *Funcshuional Art*, a term I coined to describe this planetary genre I am working on.

Life Frames, Inc. which I founded and have directed since 1992, is the nonprofit sponsor of *A Living Library*, or *A.L.L.*, for short. We are in six schools in San Francisco in three neighborhoods working with over 1000 children and youth monthly, year-round, in hands-on, eco-art transformation and learning. We are also developing the *Bernal Heights Living Library & Think Park Nature Walk*, linking schools, parks, public housing, streets, and other open spaces leading to the hidden Islais Creek. This is a demonstration showing how we can interconnect the eleven communities in this Islais Creek Watershed—the largest in San Francisco—by creating a new expressive, narrative landscape that frames the Watershed.

Who are you collaborating with?

We are working with multiple State and City agencies, schools, neighbors, organizations, and individuals, and the work is funded by City, State, and private donors.

Can you talk some more about how 'A Living Library' works?

Each site is unique as it incorporates the local resources. I develop a master plan for each site with the community, that incorporates the local resources. Children, youth, and adults are engaged in transforming their environment. Students learn all subjects through hands-on, interdisciplinary, standards-based curricula, during the school day, after school, and summers. Math, science, language arts, multi-arts, history, language arts, technology come to life through their involvement in developing their unique Branch Living Library & Think Park.

There's a relationship you've always developed within the particular ecosystem that is your life, and your interconnection to all the parts of it. You just keep discovering it.

I made a video, and when it begins, you see the two-year old Bonnie, holding her arms out and saying, "I love the whole wide world." I remember doing that and feeling that when I was two. I think that same spirit has infused everything I have done in my whole life, even though I didn't plan it that way. I'm just operating from my heart and mind. My heart is leading me, and my mind follows.

The passion carries it.

Oh yes, definitely!

The Master Plans for 'A Living Library & Think Parks' carry forth the metaphoric idea of you, the artist, as being like a god, breathing life into something.

It's like being a dowser, and, often, I feel like a dowser. It's bringing out, and helping to express what's already there in a place, and helping to shape it a bit, facilitating the kind of shaping, and creating an assemblage of resources and outcomes. I am a sculptor, landscape architect, choreographer, producer, and performer, just allowing all of the richness to become itself. I think that's really what this is about. And, it is also theater.

I hired a wonderful gardener once, and I told him "You are a performance artist and choreographer and teacher because there are all these things happening simultaneously, and you just have to be aware of it, and help nurture it, and help make the place beautiful." It seems to be working.

I think 9/11 made this even more clear to me, that it's important to be *Cultivating the Human Garden*, as well as the *Ecological Garden*, and creating opportunities to bring diversity together. The *Life Frame* is *A Living Library*, and provides a way to heal. And that's what we need to be doing.



"Sitting Still I" Facing The Audience Across From 101 Interchange Construction, Army & Bayshore Blvd., 1970. Courtesy the artist.

A Living Library Promotes Sustainable Development And Health By Cultivating The Human & Ecological Garden

Each place-based, *Branch Living Library & Think Park* employs a powerful strategy for making ecological and cultural change, by integrating local resources and involving all sectors of community in learning, thinking and doing. *A Living Library (A.L.L.)* results in content-rich, systemic, landscape designs and greening of the public realm, with integrated community learning programs, that together, solve local problems, while educating all ages in sustainability, health, empathy, and interconnected systems – biological, cultural, technological.

Multiple *Branch Living Library & Think Parks* are underway in California and New York, transforming communities and helping to heal human and land fragmentation, disengagement, and urban blight. A Goal of *Life Frames, Inc.*, NGO sponsor of *A Living Library*, is to develop *Branch Living Library & Think Parks* in diverse communities and nations of the world, all linked together, so we can share and celebrate the diversity and commonalities of our cultures and ecologies – near and far – and better appreciate each other and other species, while healing our home, community, and ourselves.

In San Francisco, California: OMI/Excelsior, Bernal Heights, & Chinatown Branch Living Library & Think Parks



In New York, New York: Roosevelt Island Living Library & Think Park



Would You Like A Branch Living Library & Think Park In Your Community? Please Contact Us !

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