

# GreenMuseum.org

ALLISON L. COMPTON

Imagine traveling the globe to see and learn from works of contemporary environmental art. To explore the difference between natural and artificial ways of life, you could visit Anke Mellin's 1996 project *Up and Down* in Germany. To see how Jean-Paul Ganem transformed a dumping ground filled with human waste into a colorful, life-filled agricultural composition in 2000, you could go to Montreal to see *Jardins des capteurs*. Or to learn how Shai Zakai called attention to the effects of concrete dumping with *Concrete Creek* in 2001, you could go to Israel.

Such travel is not possible, you say? But it is, and you don't need a plane, train or time machine to do it. An eight-year-old museum has brought all of these works, and many others, together for you to visit. This museum requires no TerraPass for carbon offsets, and there's no admission fee. It's called [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org) and its street address is on the Internet. There, environmental art is available at your fingertips.

The site's founder and executive director, Sam Bower, left Meadowsweet Dairy, a San Francisco Bay area eco-art collective, to launch the website in 2001. "At the time, the traditional arts infrastructure was not set up to support large-scale, site-specific ecological or ephemeral works, except through documentation," he says. By its nature, Bower adds, "a lot of environmental art isn't designed to be sold in a gallery or moved for exhibition in a museum."

So [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org) digitally continues the tradition of the museum by inviting the curious to see art in a certain way, a way of relating ideas and objects. In its lobby, a.k.a. main webpage, Yutaka Kobayashi, Daniel McCormick, and over 100 other practicing environmental artists are prominently listed along with critical writings and a calendar of events taking place around the world. And you don't have to wait in line to visit their online exhibitions.

"We're a museum turned inside out. We've created a place for everyone," says Bower. The website welcomes 3,000 to 3,500 international visitors daily from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Japan, Canada, and more. For artists, park rangers, educators, and civic and art administrators, there is a "Toolbox" section, which offers a complete set of resources for people interested in making art to serve our communities and ecosystems.

The site explores the history of environmental art, and what is driving artists today. Conscious of their choice of materials' origins and impact on the earth, they are no longer interested in questioning the function of the art system; instead their art balances aesthetics and function with proactive healing of our shared ecosystem. They're interested in creating dialogue with audiences in and outside of the art world.

Bower expands on environmental art's circles of dialogue of influence and connection. "When we talk about sustainability, we ought to think about what the earth will notice and appreciate. What would a watershed, worms, and robins think of an artwork? What about the materials that went into something and its carbon footprint and the potential long-term impacts (positive and negative) on people and the environment? Considering the nonhuman audience for art opens up the idea that everything we do is deeply interconnected and can affect the world around us."

Artists involved with [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org) share this perspective and are proactive with their environmental stewardship through their art practices. They operate as catalysts within communities to help meet responsibility for our ecosystems. Here, we travel to see some of the artists whose works in the United States are available for viewing at [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org).

## HARNESSING THE ELEMENTS

"People present me a problem or an opportunity and I respond. I'm interested in what's happening in the site in the present," says Ned Kahn, a MacArthur Award-winning San Francisco Bay-based artist who creates public art that enables audiences to experience the elemental forces of fog, wind, water, fire, light, and sand. So when the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh asked him to participate in designing an addition to link two existing buildings in 2004, Kahn created *Articulated Cloud*, a skin for the façade of the addition that is also a shimmering sculpture. Forty-three thousand individual square panels are hinged to a steel screen, moving in the wind and reflecting light and shadows.

Because *Articulated Cloud* diffuses direct light and bounces indirect light through the building's windows, it reduces the amount of artificial light required inside and the amount of heat generated by artificial light, so it lowers the cost of cooling and heating systems. The building also incorporates sustainable practices such as water conservation, indoor air quality, and energy management. Due to these features, it earned LEED points, which helped the museum to be awarded Silver LEED certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. And this meets Kahn's goals. "There is a conundrum for public art. It's proverbially linked to development," Kahn says. "You're right in there with the developers, but you want the development project to gently touch the earth."

## REFRESHING THE WATER

Jackie Brookner, a New York City-based artist, is invited to create storm water remediation public artworks around the world. She recently completed *Laughing Brook* (2001–2008), a wetland park and storm water filtration project in Salway Park in Cincinnati. It is part of the Mill Creek Restoration Project's greenway system.

*Laughing Brook* is comprised of over 100 biosculptures™ that here take the form of human hands evolving into six species of fish that once flourished in Mill Creek. Storm water runoff from adjoining parking lots, sidewalks, and ball fields is stored in an underground cistern and recirculated through *Laughing Brook*. Brookner says, "Biosculptures™ are vegetated sculptures that utilize the capacity of mosses, wetland plants and microorganisms to filter water. Essentially they are sculpted



wetlands." The biosculptures™, the wetland plants, and the rock bed filter out contaminants such as car oil, antifreeze, and animal droppings. In essence, this ecovention cleans water before it enters the Mill Creek's eco-system, to help the long recovery that will enable these fish to thrive again. There is a map kiosk with solar panels on its roof that power the irrigation system for *Laughing Brook*. The kiosk itself is made of recycled plastic, which equates to 4,000 plastic milk jugs being saved from local landfills. Brookner comments, "*Laughing Brook*, with its reverse evolution, provokes questions: Who are we? What is the being of human?"

#### RESTORING THE MANGROVES

In 2006 Xavier Cortada, a Miami-based artist, created a participatory ecovention called *The Reclamation Project* in response to the destruction of mangrove forests due to the widening of the 18-mile stretch of road to the Florida Keys. "I launched *The Reclamation Project* with an installation of 252 mangrove seedlings at the Bass Museum of Art on Earth Day 2006, recruiting volunteers to create installations all over South Beach in the fall of 2007," says Cortada.

As of March 2009, over 5,000 red mangrove propagules (seedlings) have been scavenged by local citizens of four separate communities across the state of Florida. "Some of the installations are temporary (i.e., Bass Museum, retail stores in South Beach), others are up year-round (Florida Botanical Gardens, Miami Science Museum)," says Cortada. "I call this latter group *repermanent installations*, since every year volunteers will add new mangrove propagules to these vertical nurseries, when the existing batch of mangrove seedlings are removed to be planted on the coastal wetlands."

In 2007 this project expanded to include urban reforestation by nurturing indigenous trees within the residential areas of metropolitan Miami. Residents who participate display green Native Flags that state, "I hereby reclaim this land for nature."

ABOVE: A segment of Jackie Brookner's *Laughing Brook* in Salsbery Park, Cincinnati, completed in 2008. BELOW: Xavier Cortada's *The Reclamation Project*, 2008, at Tempo Preparatory School, one of many sites nurturing mangrove saplings in Southern Florida.



#### "ECOVENTION"

The term *ecovention* (ecology + invention) was coined in 1999 by Sue Spaid and Amy Lipton. It describes an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology. Its aesthetic components may be both visible and invisible, with a primary emphasis on regional site-specific projects that concern restoration, reclamation, renewal, and rejuvenation of polluted and damaged wastelands.







"Native trees are more resistant to hurricanes, they can evolve over time, they need much less water than exotic trees that drain our water resources, which means it creates a more sustainable environment," Cortada has written. "Annually, the installations do more than engage viewers in public spaces, they actually grow mangrove forests and create new ecosystems above and below the waterline."

#### MONITORING ENERGY CONSUMPTION

In 2006 the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois in Urbana commissioned Chicago-based artist Tiffany Holmes to create *7000 oaks and counting*, an interactive public artwork that visualizes real-time energy usage in the building as an animation. The project is an example of eco-visualization, a term Holmes coined that refers to the combination of art and technology to create readable images that translate ecological significant data. Holmes's recent work is about using eco-visualization to draw attention to one's everyday habits—and the resulting action can be as simple as turning off lights and a computer when not in a room.

Due to privacy and security issues, *7000 oaks and counting* is not available for everyone to see in action. It's only visible for the 300 employees working in the building, whose energy consumption is tabulated and made visible in the piece. "There are no carbon credits for sale. This is key," Holmes says. "The piece is all about no-cost actions and gestures that people can enact at work (or coming and going to work) to lower their carbon footprint."

Holmes also created [www.worldoffset.org](http://www.worldoffset.org), an interactive website for people to count and share their personal carbon loads. As of March 26, 2009, the amount of carbon saved by 252 good people tallied 497,817.33 pounds. There are seven categories on this website in which visitors are asked to make promises to offset their personal carbon footprint: *Eat, Drink, Go, Live, Mail, Trash, and Work*. The suggested conservation choices are presented to facilitate changes such as eating at least one meal per week with locally-produced food, changing car air filters once a month, and turning off and unplugging home computers when not in use for an entire year.

#### ASSESSING ENVIRONMENTAL RISK

EcoArtTech, a New York-based collaboration between Cary Peppermint and Christine Nadir, creates provocative eco-art with new-tech critique for mass consumption. In 2008 EcoArtTech literally took the road with *Environmental Risk Assessment Rover-AT (ERAR-AT)*, an all-terrain mobile solar



ABOVE LEFT: Animation still from Tiffany Holmes's *7000 oaks and counting*, 2006–08, displayed on a touch screen kiosk at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, University of Illinois in Urbana. ABOVE RIGHT and BELOW: EcoArtTech, *Environmental Risk Assessment Rover-AT (ERAR-AT)*, 2008. This solar-powered, all-terrain mobile station collects real-time risk data relative to its local coordinates. Pictured during a performance in March 2008 in Purchase, New York.



and GPS-powered networked video installation. "If the rover is located in New York City, it will pull data on both global and local risks: car accidents, air pollutant levels, subway accidents, murders and assaults, ground water toxicity, global warming probabilities, and proximity (or number of) superfund sites, among other factors," the duo explain. "After accumulating this data, *ERAR-AT* responds to its environment. As it is pulled down, say, 14th Street, it produces a unique 14-tiered threat level that is embedded live within videos of natural and human-made environments and projected onto local natural and architectural surfaces."

This tactical approach to presentation combines technology and nature. "We think science is important but that is limited, too, in its ability to fix ecological problems when it, in many ways, caused many of the crises we face today," claims EcoArtTech. "Art and literature and the work of the imagination need to supplement scientific endeavors."

**ALLISON L. COMPTON** is a writer/artist based in New York. Her work explores environmental practices and art in the realm of public engagement. She also writes for *Sculpture* magazine and has upcoming exhibitions in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Richmond, Virginia.