Panel Discussion *Art, Nature and the Environment*. Berkeley Art Center July 9, 2009

Suzanne Tan: I'm happy to welcome you all to what should be a very interesting evening. But before we begin, I'd like to tell you a little about some of the things we're doing here at the Art Center. We have a new web site. It's berkeleyartcenter.org and you can always find out what's happening here by visiting the web site. We're a membership driven organization so if you're not a member, we'd love it if you became a member and supported the arts and the community. We're really focused on creating connections in the community for the arts and exhibitions and our related programs. I guess I should say, too, that we're supported in part by the city of Berkeley, but we're a private, non-profit organization. Right now we're showing an exhibition called "Perceive and Connect." It features three artists, one of whom is here tonight, the sculptor Janine Briggs. Could you stand up?

Now I'd like to talk a little about the genesis of this program and why we're here tonight. Since I'm the new director, we've been working a lot on planning, marketing and visibility for the Art Center. One of the things I've been trying to do is to connect our exhibitions with our music and literary programs and the talks we have with the exhibition programs. So Richard walked in one day and while we having a casual conversation, I thought: here are three artists working in really different media and coming together to have this dialogue. And Richard has all this experience talking with all kinds of artists in this area, so wouldn't it be great to work together to invite three artists coming from different perspectives to talk about their process? Richard thought it would be interesting to ask them about their relationship to nature and how important that was to artmaking. So that's how this panel tonight came to be.

Now I'd like to introduce Richard Whittaker. He's the founding editor of *works & conversations* and also the West Coast editor of *Parabola Magazine*. So we'll have some images to look at and some dialogue, and then room for questions.

Richard Whittaker: Thank you Suzanne. Thank you everybody for coming. I'm just delighted to be here.

Now I have a tendency to think in big categories, and I thought, well let's try to talk about art, nature and the environment. Okay, that's a lot to bite off and I'm sure that all we can do is just to open the subject up a little bit. I think it's a subject that's incredibly interesting.

I'm so delighted to have three of my favorite art friends, artists, here tonight. Each is quite different. John Toki. Many

of you know John. His family founded Leslie Ceramics. John was telling me it's been sixty-two years that Leslie Ceramics has been in operation. It's a very special place and I know that if any of you work in clay, you already know that. If you're not, you might just go down there to enjoy the good vibrations. I thought John, who not only runs Leslie Cermaics, manufactures glazes and clays and equipment, has just retired as a faculty member at CCA, writes books, designs machines and still has time to be a full-time sculptor somehow working in clay, I thought it would be interesting to have John here. He's a guy with his hands in clay a lot of the time and what is a more basic connection to nature than having one's hands in clay?

And then Sam Bower. Sam is the founding director of something called greenmuseum.org. It's an online portal for worldwide environmental art founded about eight years ago. So Sam has connections with environmental artists all over the world who are working at raising consciousness or coming up with better ways to go about things. And Sam is an artist himself. So I think Sam will have some very interesting material to share with us tonight.

Kathleen Cramer is a close friend of mine. She's primarily an artist of theater background. She writes, directs and acts in plays, more recently writing operas—a librettist. One of her recent operas told the story of a woman who was at a garden party in Kenya and after the party was over and people left, she remembered she'd left her sweater behind and went out back to get it and unfortunately, there were lions around there and she never came back. *The Woman Who Forgot Her Sweater*, but the real subject matter was what are those problems in our *inner environment* that eat us up? I thought it would be interesting to have Kathleen, who is not only gifted in theater, but also poetry and painting, to have her talk about some of the inner aspects of the environment.

So that's what I look forward to tonight. We'll have a little discussion among ourselves and then hopefully some exchange with all of you.

So John let me hand it over to you.

John Toki: I want to share a few images of my work with you. Most of the clay I use comes from the foothills near Sacramento, so it's a local material. I've chosen the ceramic medium because of the expressive quality I can achieve with it as an artist. I've spent a good part of thirty-five years making things with my hands. It's a very quiet activity. The opposite might be working with the metal, interior parts that you don't see. There's this contrast working with the technology that's required to finish one of these large pieces. That means the hood, the earplugs, the respirator, the gloves. I feel like this

big puffball. But the actual creative process is only with my hands. Although I have machines everywhere to help me life these things, big cranes and forklifts, all the final detail work is done by hand, and the cranes and hoists are hand operated. It's a very delicate process. So here's a shot of my studio. I call it my research center. That's where I explore my creative work. [slide] That big piece was exhibited right here [points to a spot in the room]. That one weighs five thousand, eight hundred pounds. I rolled it in. It took about six hours to install.

When Richard asked me to be a participant I asked, gosh, what can I offer here? We discussed that. One connection to nature with my work is that much of my work is built outside. So many of my titles are often like "Wind" or "Sky" or a color that is related to nature. [new slide] That piece is about twelve feet high. It's a more recent sculpture. It almost looks like an Egyptian mummy. Sometimes these things happen after the fact. [next slide]

For a time I was trying to build work that had kind of an energy field around it. By making works that were tall and slender I was trying to force the energy within the column. I worked quite a few years with this theme. Most of these pieces are about eight or nine feet tall. The scale is really important. One of the attractive elements in my work as I build is that I'm using a material that is ancient to begin with. It probably took many thousands of years to make that clay. I like the idea that although it's brand new, made a few years ago, it doesn't give clues as to exactly when it was made except for the fact that I have dated it. [New slide]

This is the back of that piece. It's entitled *Blue Valley* and I was trying to imagine a river, a mystic river almost running upstream, vertically, to the sky. Trying to force that blue, as a body of water, into the back of the sculpture.

As I build works, the best moments are when I feel this inner energy. It's kind of translating through my body and through my hands. Those of you who make artwork, I'm sure understand what I'm talking about. It takes time to get there. I've always described it as almost like a workout. You work out every day, every day, every day. I used to be a runner. When you compete, there's that great moment when you feel all that energy coming together. In this case it's bringing all that energy together from within, and it's going through your hands. I think it's the hardest thing I do and that's why I do it. It's very physical. There's always a new moment. I like the fact that these pieces—like that one on the screen is probably eight or nine hundred pounds and the other ones are like six thousand pounds. Ten thousand pounds of clay, all hand-modeled. And some are much more than that. They take two years to build. Six years from the time of design to when it's actually shown.

One of my former teachers said, John, I can't wait that long. But I have that patience. I let the process guide me. So all the overwhelming tasks you might not want to do, and that you never see—like mixing the clay, carrying everything, all the grinding—it becomes part of that wonderful process. It's kind of like watering that plant, that little bulb in the ground. You don't see anything for a long time. You wait all year for that one flower to bloom and you have two weeks with it. Sculpture has some of that feeling for me. You keep nourishing that soil. The other kind of dynamic quality of ceramics is that you start with this wet, mucky mess that you shape and manipulate like crazy. My goal is to make it feel like it just emerged. So that it doesn't look overworked. The other wonderful element of ceramics is the firing process. It takes a hundred and sixty hours to fire the pieces to almost 2,400 degrees, and another hundred and sixty hours to cool. I love the process. [applause]

RW: Thank you, John.

Sam Bower: [new slide] In the most recent issue of *works & conversations* there were a few images by an artist named Dan McCormick. He lives in Marin. These are erosion control sculptures. These are all woven out of green willow branches. After a period of time and contact with the moist soil, this will become a willow thicket and stabilize that creek bank. This is the type of artwork that I think is very interesting and, in some ways, is related to my own background as an artist.

For many years I was part of a group called Meadowsweet Dairy. It was a collaborative group. We presented found natural objects as art and also did site specific habitat sculptures. [slide view] This is us working out on Southeast Farallon Island creating a sculpture that provided habitat for an endangered seabird. This structure here is made of stainless steel with different artificial nesting boxes. Burrowing seabirds would land, crawl between the cracks of this recycled concrete rubble that we stacked over the sculpture and then the would live inside those little boxes. There was a door on the other side, so for the first time, scientists could go inside the structure and study the nesting behavior of burrowing seabirds from inside their burrow. And the whole thing is artwork. *And you can't visit*. [laughter]

That's where the idea for greenmuseum.org came about. It's an online resource for interconnecting people who are addressing this type of work. So related to all that, here's a larger thing I'm going to talk about real quick. [new slide] It's about the idea of art and sustainability. Many of you have heard different definitions of sustainability, so I'm not going to go over that.

It's basically the idea that people want to be around for a long time, right? [laughter]

In that context we can look at what we call the environmental art movement. We use that as an umbrella term for a whole range of different words you might be familiar with like land art, eco art, bio art, earthworks, slow food, acoustic ecology, social sculpture… There's a whole range of things that approach our relationship with the natural world through art. The bigger issue is context [slide of the earth as seen from space]. *This is where we live*! Of course there's scary news about global climate change and species extinction, pollution and all manner of terrifying things. So in the face of all these changes, what do we do? Well, art has a job to do.

All art has its own job. It can make you feel good, think a certain way, reflect a certain way. In the context of ecological issues, there's a rich tradition—this is not a new idea. You see this idea in many people's cultures, in their architecture, their calendars, the way they decorate themselves and in their agriculture and land stewardship. All those things in these cultures, whose people live sustainably, are richly integrated with art. *Everyone makes art* in these cultures. And in all aspects of their lives things are both beautiful and related to sustainability. But in recent times our notion of art changed.

[new slide] This is considered the first example of environmental art. It's from 1955, this mounded, sculptural environment. But you know, people have been mounding earth up and moving rocks around for as long as there have been people. It's kind of silly to think that this is the first thing.

[new slide] But in contemporary art history, these are early examples of land art where people were applying art ideas to the land. Then people started looking at ecological issues.[new slide] This is a hog pasture created for the Museum of Fine Art in Boston by Helen and Newton Harrison. [new slide] here's Mierle Ukeles cleaning New York City as art. [new slide] Joseph Beuys planting 7000 oak trees as art.

Question from audience: Could you go back to that slide? [A Joseph Beuys quote: "Every human being is an artist, a freedom being called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures and shape and condition our lives."]

Sam Bower: I'm supposed to get through this in five minutes and we can answer questions afterwards. But this is the basic idea that we're all artists and everything we do could reflect our own sense of aesthetics.

[new slide] In contemporary practice, there's a whole range of different things. I'll go through this quickly.[new slide]

Xavier Cortada in Miami: this is a mangrove restoration sculpture, an ongoing project. [new slide] This is a large park in Chengdu, China that purifies the river water that flows through it, as art. [new slide] Here's a project in Israel to clean two kilometers of polluted creek. It was polluted by excess construction cement and became the first ecotourism trail in Israel, and brought the community together. [new slide] These folks here create biogas generator sculptures that work for poor communities looking for alternative sources of energy using manure. [new slide] The Harrisons are pioneering figures in the ecological art movement. They do large scale mapping sculptures that re-envision entire nations and watersheds. This project here is how do we resettle the UK in the event of a fifteen meter rise in sea level?—as art.

So basically, art can be part of all of the things we do. [new slide] And the best way to do it perhaps would be to study people who have been living that way for long periods of time and take ideas from them. Because really our understanding of what art is, in a lot of ways, emerges from the value of art as a commodity, art as a thing. In these other cultures who live sustainably, art is just part of life. So, if we really want to to live sustainably, we might want to look at their examples and see what we can learn to do things better.

[new slide] There's a great guy, Paul Shepard, who writes interesting books. The basic point here is that these ideas are old and that we have within us the patterns that will allow us to reshape the world we live in. [new slide] And lastly, a lot of people talk about making art for the earth, but not so many really look at what the earth really wants or needs. So an interesting way to look at it is —What would the worms like? What would the robins and the redwoods actually appreciate? That's about acknowledging that there is a non-human audience for art. For all these things we make, the materials come from some place and they end up going some place. If we're going to be *actually thinking about our relationship to the natural world*, it might be helpful to think about this.
[applause]

RW: Thank you, Sam.

Kathleen Cramer: [slide] There's a vacant lot that I think is magnificent. When I first saw it, I thought it was like an altar. It was a place made holy, for me, by my experience of seeing it. If it were my God to clean up certain things, I would follow that and respect that tremendously. These are wonderful things. Sustainability is a big notion that we all need and are interested in. For me, first, sustainability has to do with the locating and maintenance of a kind of inner space, the space

that is the ground of, well, of art, let's say. Sam said something in the magazine about how there are forces coming from enormous distances to us, and through us. It's this space that can receive those forces. We sustain that space by our efforts, by mastering our art, by possessing our art and by practicing and, I think, by making our seeing as pure as we can have the force to muster.

[looking at slide] This is, I guess it's ironic, too, which I think is hopeful in a way, because things that say two things at once have a way of opening up some kind of space, that space that is foundational. It also reminds me of a poem by Hadwidge the Second in the thirteenth century—*tighten to nothing, the circle that is the world's things*. So that naked circle can grow wide, enlarging and embracing all.

I was so taken by that notion that it became the foundation of an opera I'm working on about a woman—she doesn't go to a vacant lot, she's looking for a vacant lot. She has herself immured in a wall, against a wall, in a church. The opera is set in the fourteenth century. And the woman has to spend the rest of her days inside a very small room as long as she lives, and do nothing but study and speak what happens in this space.

So there's another kind of space that has a possibility of reaching all, or embracing all, as it were. Something has been sustained, too, in terms of theater, this space. I guess maybe that's habitat preservation, or restoration. I can say that because I was in a theater in Greece that's twenty-five hundred years old. A circle where everything came from is shown. It comes and then disappears—you never see it again. It only lasts while you're looking at it. It is where Euripides, for instance, had his plays.

I was standing on that stage, and it was another kind of transforming possibility of the empty space, as it were. People were sitting around. Ten thousand people were sitting there. And they were over two thousand years ago, too, sitting there. You went to the theater. You went to the theater in the last step in a pilgrimage to get healed. After the good advice about diet and exercise, and after the dream therapy, the last thing you did was go to the theater. And with everybody else, you have this catharsis. You see this wonderful play that makes you laugh and cry together. It all comes from this empty space.

[new slide] Now this vacant lot, it's so beautiful. I think of it as habitat preservation because in order to keep this space open it requires a continuous kind of effort. Things can happen. For instance litter happens. To me it shows something about how what can spill over can be beautiful. It can also be litter. It reminded me, when I saw the picture in the magazine of those beautiful erosion control sculptures.

[new slide] This is a vacant lot on a street where I live, and I've been admiring it for years and years and years. It came to me that it had leaked out under the fence, that it was on its way to becoming something else. I like the way it's escaping from the fence. It's another kind of habitat preservation that when something leaves you, it's out there. And the next moment, after something leaves you, is so important because it seems to me that's the point where the sustainability comes in. The space has to be kept open in different ways with the energy of the moment.

[new slide] Oh! [laughs] Well, I find this so hopeful—and scary, at the same time because there's something about anagogic writing where you're trying to reach the subconscious. I don't know about *trying*, but sometimes it just appears in all its glory right there! There's nothing to do but like it. Or, if you have a camera, take a picture! I have several of these photos of boats in different stages of being submerged. In some way there's something latent for some space that's implied. I think it's a vital part of artmaking, that.

Oh, and there's another poem I really wanted to bring. It's a tiny little Rilke poem— "You said *live*, out loud. And *die*, you said, lightly. And over and over again, you said, *be*." [applause]

RW: The scope that we've touched on is so broad here, but I wonder if any of you would like to reflect on something very close to you in relation to nature, a point at which nature comes close. Is that important and, if so, how? Even in the context of art. How does that work? And what would you reflect, if anything, about that?

JT: As a studio artist, when I'm working outside I can't help but feel the wind. I have one sculpture that is titled *Winter Vision*. It was made in winter, of course. It was really cold. I love that feeling of wind, that energy. You can't see it. You just feel this energy! As human beings, I just firmly believe that's our connection to nature, that unseen feeling that you have, the beauty you feel when you see a sunset.

One time I was with my friend Stephen De Staebler. He spent his entire life making things. Someone asked him to explain his artwork. He said, I think it's best that you just look at it. It's like a sunset. Can you explain that, and why it's so beautiful? It's best that we just feel it. When I'm out at my studio working, I love the feeling of the sky absorbing the colors, feeling the wind. I love those moments when I feel kind of chilled when it gets dark and I'm trying to finish a sculpture. There's that deadline around the corner that we all

know as makers and producers of things. It's for that reason I work outside, and the work is so big I can't fit it inside.

I deal with weight. In nature, you can't deny the physicality of the objects, the trees that yielded the wood that formed this building. That's all part of nature. I always have these moments going from the city into nature where you stand next to a big rock and we're like this little, tiny speck, one little gram next to that giant piece of granite. I love that feeling. I love the humbling feeling one gets when visiting Muir Woods. I go there to absorb those beautiful trees, to feel that energy that exudes from the bark and the inside of those trees that are a thousand years old.

I think we need what Sam is talking about, this awareness that we must have on earth, and also a sense of connection with other cultures that have preceded us and have made mounds for thousands of years, and who feel that energy from that hill. We can't help but feel nature, as human beings.

RW: I resonate to what you're saying. Is there something important we're missing? For instance, take a sunset, if someone paints a sunset, that's a guaranteed cliché. Sunday painter. Is there some way that these moments we all have—of beauty in nature that everyone shares—does the artist nowadays have any possibility of really honoring such basic human moments?

SB: I think it's possible. All things are possible. But I think there's a big difference between noticing and honoring. I think that's a big part of the shift we're beginning to see. For a long time, it was enough to notice and it sort of leaves us out of any responsibility for being part of something. I think the best art really transcends that and leads you closer where you feel that so powerfully—like, Kathleen, your descriptions of those vacant lots! I was so moved by that. And the scale of time that you deal with with in your work, John. I mean, you're making rock! That's a powerful thing!

I think very powerful work demands of us a type of response that then leads us to live our lives in a different sort of way.

RW: With the suggestion of some possible transformative experience, is it necessary, or is it possible—or is it necessary, possible and *extremely important*—that the artist him or herself actually changes? Does change start by us fixing it out there, or do we also need to concern ourselves with change that happens [pointing to chest] in here?

KC: As far as I'm concerned, it *only* happens in here. And then something happens out there. I think of it as whatever comes near—like being in nature, say,(*when are we not*?)—whatever comes

near me that I can use is something I can practice with. And sometimes it's a ceremony. I think we need ceremonies. You could have a ceremony on that altar there in the vacant lot.

I know Sam you said it could be site specific, but we've been doing that for a long time. There could be something that came very near to us that we could *use*. I think the only responsibility *really* is to be open to that. And then whatever you make your God it will come out in that way. It's probably stamped on you when you arrive, what it's going to be. I think that's the responsibility. But I do think we need more ceremonies. There's a certain kind I'm thinking about, another kind of theater that's improvisational and spontaneous and skilled—and can be useful.

RW: Maybe we should open this up. A lot has been said and I'd like to invite any reflections, thoughts… go ahead.

Audience: I think art helps us slow down and notice and, by slowing down, perhaps we notice how much we use on the planet, how we use things. So I think intention is really important, and practice comes to mind when I think about art and life. I almost think of a walking meditation of life, and how you see your life—all your life, not just art. How you move your body through space, how you share the planet.

RW: Slowing down. Yes, that's important.

Audience: I had a question for John. The mummy. I see the lines. Are these individual blocks?

JT: The lines are where I cut the sculpture in sections so I can fire the pieces in the kiln.

Same person: How would you connect it then?

JT: There are steel pieces inside holding it together. And the largest piece is not more than forty inches, a thousand pounds per chunk.

Same questioner: How did you figure out how to balance it?

JT: The magic number is six tries in making it fit. It's a long process. Nothing comes out straight in clay. Everything warps and shrinks. You just sculpt and pray that everything is going to come back together. I've learned the most about what we're talking about, I think from nature, from imperfection and seeing it and understanding it in a piece. You try to be as perfect as you can, but the piece shrinks and moves. It's just a piece of

dirt originally that wants to do its own thing with the heat. So I see imperfection, not as a negative. It is what it is.

Audience: I had this thought that came from your term "acoustic ecology." I have a dog. Sometimes it gets very quiet in the evening and I've tried to move my hearing threshold toward that of the dog, to see perhaps how much of my hearing threshold I've lost. Living in this society we lose so much of our hearing threshold. If we have this notion of how the mouse hears, it's going to affect the way we move. It's going to affect the way we make sounds—the amplitude and the tamber and all the aspects of sound. Exploring that in a formal, artistic, musical way could be very exciting.

RW: That's very interesting, Ron. Before you spoke I'd been wondering how you all felt about what John had been saying about how important work with his hands was. In E.F. Schumacher *Small Is Beautiful*, he wrote that a human is a being with a brain AND hands—not even getting into the heart. He says if we're not engaged creatively with our brain *and* our hands, we're really not functioning as a human being. Is that something that's part of artmaking? What do you think?

Audience: I have a really specific thought. As human beings, we are in fact, object makers because in order to survive from the very beginning we had to have something to manage in the world, certainly as far back as archeology goes, we find objects. So I think we are encoded with these ideas and abilities and these needs that are survival skills. If we are object makers, because that's how we survived, then what happens to people when we stop doing this activity? Sitting in front of a computer all day, is that a way to translate that? I don't think it is. I think we're missing that. We can just look at children to see that. I think that's what we're all missing.

JT: When I worked with my wife's special-ed kids at her school I watched these five and six year olds. Without having to say too much I watched these kids start sculpting. I watched them manipulate that clay and it became a real language, but it was an unspoken language. They were really responding. You didn't have to tell them too much. They just had to touch it and feel it and they had an immediate response. I do believe that human beings need that. And I also believe there's the left brain tilting a little bit more to one side. I watched that at the California College of the Arts where things became a lot more conceptual. But I do really believe that human beings need to make things. They could be cooking and chopping carrots. There's still shape and color. The other way to imagine our earth is to

start taking these things away. What if everything was just one color?

SB: There's a real importance for diversity in the different ways we interact with the world and I think contemporary society has become much more distanced from the physical. I was thinking about the idea of the hand. In a way, a performance is another way of using your hand. It's a movement. The hand can put things together, it can gesture and, in a way, poetry and writing is a kind of sculpture with language where you're bringing together words and ideas to be able to do the same thing. All of these realms from the mental and emotional, gesture and the physical—all are part of this human experience. As much as we can be in touch with all of them in our lives, and aestheticize this larger context that we're in, we're getting closer to that sense of richness of interaction, depth of truth and understanding, and also capacity to engage with and transform.

Audience: When you said "hands" my first thought was what about the feet? What about the ears? We need to feel and engage. I think of a dancer relating to the air and space, or voice. Somehow we need to be in touch with our senses and make things in different ways.

RW: Yes. The hands are a stand-in in for the body, and the rest of our senses.

Audience: I just have a comment to make. I was in Phoenix Arizona last year at the desert botanical garden. There was a Native American lady who was one of the guides. She would point out how the Native Americans would use various plants and nature and the whole concept. It just made it so much more alive to me.

JT: There's a whole harmony that we must understand with nature. That cactus museum—have any of you been there? It's really incredible. There are things you can't imagine are actually growing. Some of them look like beings. They look like these incredible living organisms. Well, *they are living organisms*!

Audience: There's a recent series on television that I've become enamored with. It's called *Life After People*. It covers different aspects of what life might be like if people weren't here. It's a fascinating series. It talks about how our bridges would rust and how structures would fall apart and how nature would come in and take over. So nature really is the supreme power here, because it will come back. It would take over all those manmade structures we've loved for our whole lives. The

only thing that would remain, according to them, are the pyramids.

RW: Well, I think we could continue, but maybe officially, we'll stop here and if people want to continue in casual conversation afterwards, that's great. Thank you everybody.