

JANET ECHELMAN:

Can Art Save the World?

WE ALL EXPERIENCE the bombardment of images and data about the ticking time bomb that is global climate change. One would have to be in complete denial not to acknowledge that the icebergs are melting, the frequency and severity of floods are increasing, and our oceans are warming and becoming acidified to the detriment of coral reefs and marine life.

So as professionals in the arts, what are we to do? We can't all drop our lives and become full-time activists, and who knows how useful we'd be, even if we did. So the question becomes, how can we stop being part of the problem, and find a natural and meaningful way to take our skills and expertise, and become part of the solution? How do we use art to save the world?

I believe public art and design can play a pivotal role in the sustainability of our physical environment. I'm trying to find ways to engage that may be small but are themselves sustainable, both personal and professional. I will share a couple here.

Two years ago, the Aspen Institute established a new Energy and Environment Awards program, and asked if I'd be willing to design their new award. I accepted, and last year was invited to join the board, where I was able to initiate a new Art and Design category for the awards, convincing others of the fact that public art and design are able to make a critical difference in public opinion and in energy conservation.

This year, I look forward to seeing a more direct environmental impact, as my sculpture commission for the Richmond

Olympic Oval, the speed-skating venue for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games, has just opened. In this new contemplative environment that encourages visitors to linger in a shared public space, people approach a new water garden by walking on curving red wooden bridges. Above their heads, red netted "sky lanterns" move in the wind, and below, "water drawings" can be seen amid reflections in the pond.

What remains unseen is the environmental component: This project takes the runoff water from the Olympic Oval's five-acre roof and cleans it through aerating fountains and plant selection. The water garden with fountains serves as a wetland treatment pond that provides storm water retention, water quality treatment, and water storage for irrigation use. The planting elements absorb heavy metals, prevent siltation and remove other impurities from water; provide native habitat for birds, mammals, and aquatic life; and recreate an authentic native wetland garden experience for visitors.

I'd like to close on the subject of collaboration. I've found that reaching out to other professionals in collaborative work opens new doors. I believe that if the art and design community take our creativity and apply it to the task of preserving our planet, we will have an impact.

JANET ECHELMAN is a sculptor who creates monumental public sculptures that respond to environmental forces including wind, water, and sunlight.



Gregory Sale, *Love Buttons*, 2008, Scottsdale, Arizona. The buttons initially functioned as event tickets and became wearable, interactive performative art. At a Sunday afternoon jazz festival, 9,000 buttons and 500 Frisbees were distributed. More at www.love-buttons.com.

wedding, a museum opening. By confounding preconceptions of appropriate civic dialogue and expanding the possibilities, it is part psychological experiment, part collaboration with strangers, and part compulsion to elicit intimacy.

Are all these projects within a discourse on sustainability? Today many artists striving for a transition to sustainability are asking questions rather than offering answers. Artists with

experience in problem solving and facilitating complex negotiations often set up new and unusual systems of communication. There is an impulse to take the art into the everyday—the Lower Ninth Ward, one's front lawn, a jacket lapel. In these places, where artists are exploring multiple and varied intersections of art, sustainability, and the public realm, *sustainable* can mean "maintainable" or "balanced" or "lasting."

GREGORY SALE is a public artist who works in visual and performance art, and creates community-based projects in Phoenix, Arizona.