

# Sustainability and Art Making

Andrea Olsen



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*In this essay Andrea Olsen discusses the dialogue between the goals of sustainability practices and the skills of art making. She draws on examples from her daily walks on the Monterey Peninsula in California and 30 years of teaching dance and environmental studies at Middlebury College in Vermont. As visiting scholar at the Monterey Institute of International Studies spring semester 2013, Olsen reflects on the edge between all that we know from our heritage and studies and all there is to discover moment by moment—the dynamic ecotone of art and science. She considers that the creative process of art making gives students the confidence to visualize an idea and make it real—whether that’s installing a complex public sculpture or saving an old-growth forest. Artistic discipline provides students with a practiced form and skills for expression so they avoid depression, aggression, and repression—the burnout and health issues that accompany challenging projects. Overall, Olsen concludes, the arts help you feel—sustaining a conservation ethic through responsiveness to both form and flow.*

## Sustainability and Art Making

There are two qualities necessary as an artist: fidelity and originality. Fidelity because it takes so much work and time to bring something to fruition, and there will be times when you will want to leave it behind. Originality because you are making something new, something never experienced before.

—Terry Tempest Williams, “Mosaic: Finding Beauty in a Broken World,” the Scott A. Margolin 1999 Lecture in Environmental Affairs, presented at Middlebury College, March 2007

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## Home Place

Watching a red-shouldered hawk guard her nest in a tall Monterey pine, I lift my fingers from my laptop and pause. I’m new to Monterey, California, and to this species of hawk. Sharp calls communicate her presence to nearby seagulls and crows, as well as to our human neighbor in this cul-de-sac—noisily blasting his leaf blower on the ground below. The hawk’s nest is hidden from my binoculars, but when she flies off to an adjacent pine, her reddish belly and underwing colors flash resplendent. Striped tail feathers fold and talons extend for landing.

I am reminded of the efficiency of animals. The hawk’s patterned colors and form blend with rough bark and pinecones, so only her movement gives her presence away to my unaccustomed eyes. Author Annie Dillard suggests in *Notes for Young Writers*: “If you have a choice, live at least a year in very different parts of the country.” Stretching perceptual habits is a skill requiring that I alternate between field guide, binoculars, typing, and listening. Sitting still helps me notice.

When The Dance Company of Middlebury comes from Vermont to The Monterey Institute as part of our 30th anniversary California tour, it’s rather like family arriving to meet relatives. MIIS is now affiliated with Middlebury College—my teaching home—and we introduce ourselves through dancing. Outdoor rehearsals in various locations, from beach to county courthouse lawn, help us become familiar with people and place; performance in a nearby theatre links us to dance aficionados. As calcaneus and toe meet new soil and stage, students connect to others who share interest in bringing an embodied perspective to intercultural exchange.

*Compass*, our site-specific dance, begins in a spacious circle. Jessica Lee (a joint major in environmental studies and dance) uses a bright orange field compass to orient us to the cardinal

directions; each part of the dance has a different facing. Chairs line the perimeter of this outdoor courtyard adjacent to the student center, where unsuspecting diners watch through glass panes or join us in the bright sunshine. Electric violin resonates from musician David Schulman's bow, creating a soundscape that both defines and expands our space. The choreography, drawn from our tour repertory, is informed by the architecture, audience, and natural elements of the day, including drifting clouds, blooming calla lilies, and whiffs of ocean scent and sound.

The six dancers wear bright-colored coveralls and tennis shoes for the rough tile surface. Improvised sections within the 45-minute score allow them to create duets with particular parts of the site—water fountain, slatted arbor, walls. A few students and colleagues from The Monterey Institute, including Fusun Akarsu from Turkey, join us in the opening piece. We find that dance creates relationship, blending intercultural exchange within the fabric of performance. It's inherently interdisciplinary, requiring anatomical accuracy and historical perspective filtered through personal choices within art making and collaboration. Dancing is out of place in this setting, yet deeply familiar to everyone who inhabits a body.

During the last 15 years, Middlebury College has developed a creative arts focus as part of the environmental studies major. Advising potential majors, I remind them that students in the arts have to be rigorous about their specificity of language and fact. You earn your credibility by understanding and articulating views that span nature and culture, telescoping from geologic to human time scales. Studying the science of both body systems and Earth systems and their inherent interconnectedness is the foundation. Body is home, and place is known through direct experience of the senses. When you say calcaneus instead of heel bone, Monterey pine instead of tree, or red-shouldered hawk instead of bird, specificity creates familiarity. It's like learning someone's name.

## Hiking the Canyon

Hiking in Carmel Valley with Marli Melton, an acquaintance newly retired from decades of effective leadership in social and environmental organizations, I criticize art as hobby. "I just can't at this age join a watercolor group for fun," I begin. "My dad was a watercolor painter, I have a degree in painting, and I've lost the beginner's mind. For me, art is a discipline—it's hard work."

A few minutes later, I recant: "Art as hobby is fine, essential in fact. It's just not where I enter." She



laughs, tells me she has spent the morning with friends at a weekly watercolor class. "It helps us to see detail," she says. "You gain compositional overview. You learn to let go of your preconceived intention and respond to the paint. It makes everything more vivid." Later she reflects, "Classes help us overcome isolation and introduce new perspectives and skills." I stand corrected. Art making sharpens our senses and roots us to place; it also grows our humility.

As we walk, we consider artists who once made Carmel famous and moved higher in the valley in the 1950s. John Muir is quoted as saying in his decades-long defense of Yosemite National Park: "Anything dollarable will be destroyed." As development spread, rents went up, and creative individuals had to go elsewhere to make their work. When the property was worth more, and brought in more income, retail space replaced studio space. The artists' daily grind of facing empty canvas, page, or studio couldn't compete with galleries selling work. If economic goals are the highest priority, how do we sustain the vitality of artistic investigation and creativity in the heart of community and in our lives?

This conundrum was visible in Copenhagen, Denmark, a few years ago as I biked past Dans Hallerne, the largest center for modern dance in northern Europe. Participating in a sustainability research tour, we were viewing a Carlsberg renovation project rehabilitating a former industrial site that closed in 2008 after 160 years in operation. The six studios and two theatres were thriving, yet a shiny brochure in the entranceway described the award-winning master plan for the

Jessica Lee in site-specific dance at Middlebury College 2012

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development project stating in this ominous way: “Right now Carlsberg is focusing on temporary uses of the area.” Once the artists increase economic values (generally a 30-year span), their future is nebulous.

Urban studies theorist Richard Florida identifies the economic value of artists in community as the “bohemian index,” showing that creative community draws crowds. Importantly, it also encourages young folks to commit locally and play a role in what unfolds. Permanency and long-range thinking are required. The Lloyd & Delphine Martin Prosperity Institute (University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada) maintains updated charts on the bohemian index of various cities internationally, showing the “concentration of working artists, musicians, writers, designers, and entertainers across metropolitan areas.” You choose your home base with creativity in mind!

Yet many artists disdain “using” art in the service of something else. For example, grants often require that projects serve a specific population or follow guidelines that limit investigation and risk-taking—trying to harness the unwieldy creative process in service of a predictable outcome. Rather than explore and give voice to the unknown (creativity and innovation), you repeat what’s already succeeded. In essence, art is neither predictable nor measurable; it slips under the radar of convention and convenience and promises something more valuable—access to the imagination.

Sometimes a partnership between art and science enriches both in the search for sustainability. I learned this when involved in a conservation project in Downeast Maine. Our land trust hosted four Middlebury College interns “documenting an ecological reserve with place-based art.” Students participated in a 10-week biological inventory on 61 lakes and surrounding forestlands, giving equal time to art making in each person’s preferred art medium. The project concluded with a public presentation of photography, video, painting, and creative writing, along with data from written reports for the final natural resources inventory.

Students found that the major challenge in this project was to learn to value the time spent with art making as much as the time spent on fieldwork. It’s one thing to gather your field equipment and head out every morning to net dragonflies or drill tree core samples, with seemingly direct results (although data sent off to experts takes months to process, and you may never know how it is used). But art making requires cleaning an empty garage for a studio, curling up with coffee to write, or heading off to take pictures: It doesn’t

look or feel like real “work.” There are days when nothing productive emerges. Yet lab work in both art and science trains consistency: You show up daily and tap at the door of discovery.

In the end, for our Maine-based project, funders were caught by the stories; brochures and national magazines featured the photographs; and the community enjoyed viewing their landscape through an aesthetic lens. The scientific data supported long-range conservation efforts and was the underpinning for the creative work. Both the science and the art extended the range and relevancy of the project from a local to a national scale. The 342,000-acre conservation project, including a community forest, was successful. And the interns are now professionals, sustaining a conservation ethic through a broader range of skills.

Arts play three essential roles in sustainability projects: They focus our attention; they help us become comfortable with uncertainty, practicing the edge (of not-knowing); and they help us feel. As we feel we care, becoming caretakers of body, caretakers of place. Hiking in the mountains with Marli, I’m also reminded that the process of art making—whether it’s your lifelong professional focus or a pleasurable component of daily life—plays a role in refreshing perceptual habits, valuing what’s here.

## Ocean View

The Monterey Peninsula is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. Honoring this constant presence, my husband and I walk for an hour and a half each day—fulfilling a wedding vow we made some 20 years ago, to walk regardless of weather, schedules, or moody inclinations. Following a path along Asilomar Beach at the base of our Pacific Grove hill, we spot back-floating sea otters. We learn that they balance a chosen rock on their chest for cracking open the hard shells of clams or the occasional abalone, foods chosen according to individual preference and availability.

During our second week in Monterey, gray whales are migrating. As we walk the shoreline, a woman runs past us with binoculars. “We’ve been driving the coast all day looking for whales,” she exclaims. “Have you seen any?” “Yes,” we offer, “there are maybe 15 to 20 right off the shore—watch for their spouts.” She hurries on along the path. There are two problems with this response: First, gray whales offer a few visible breaths, then dive for around eight to 10 minutes. So time and timing are required for viewing. Second, if you’ve never seen a whale spout, it just might not register in your visual field.

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It helps to understand the nature of perception. Using vision as an example, what you “see” is selected, then interpreted based on your past experience (personal, familial, cultural)—and limited to human senses. Only one-thousandth of the visual stimuli to the rod cells in the retina of each eye gets selected to be sent on for interpretation. What you’ve seen before gets through visual gateways first; you see what you expect to see. Ecological perception—seeing from the Earth’s perspective as well as with human-centered focus—broadens perceptual range; we are participants in larger systems. Perception is at the core of values: The ways we perceive change who we are and what we think is real.

Embodiment practices teach us to go back to our roots, our home, our body—the core of who we are—before setting out to affect others, including places and people. Both Middlebury and the Monterey Institute students are doers—people who intend to have impact in the world, take on roles of leadership, and use what they learn to drive change. Embodiment work offers skills aimed directly toward fulfilling these goals. In a global view, sustainability requires somatic integrity, knowing the self—including the limitations of human perception and intention.

As an artist and professor of anatomy, my teachings revolve around what connects us as humans rather than what separates us, starting with our own bodies. Body is our first language, and communication is a whole-body event. Encouraging students to take on challenges with a positive attitude and determination means helping them find inroads to their authentic voice. Personal experience registers through bodily sensations that provide ground for their language, ideas, concepts, and conclusions/theories. They are literally ground truthing that what they are taught is real.

When three lively conservation biology majors came to me in the mid-1990s and asked for a course at Middlebury that included the body in the study of the environment, we developed a winter term offering called Ecology and the Body. They were also interested in creative nonfiction, so the role of personal story in shaping views of place became central. We found that place is emotional—the childhood tree cut down, the home left behind in divorce, the hospital room offering a first experience of death—and underpins our willingness to connect and care long after the original experience has passed.

At the beginning of spring semester at The Monterey Institute, in the closing 20 minutes of a three-hour class with Nukhet Kardam, we discuss

stakeholder analysis. When talking about poverty and social needs assessment from a global perspective, are Earth’s systems a stakeholder? Do we consider the Earth as unified: globe, world, Gaia—with ancient interconnected systems supporting human needs within the integrity of Earth itself? Or do we continue to look only from the human perspective, emphasizing short-term gains that deplete resources? And from a personal view, do we consider the body as whole—person, self, I, including our physical, intuitive, emotional, thinking, spiritual selves—however we define the parts? Or do we continue to drain our energies, waste inherent resources, and consume more because we don’t understand and balance our body systems?

Before sleep, I’m reading *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck, a novel based in Monterey. Close friends with biologist Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck weaves a fictional story describing the systematic destruction of ecosystems and species in the name of science and human need and greed, with colorful characters resisting categorization. As I walk along the shoreline and peer into tide pools, I don’t see the teeming life described in his 1950s work. Yet at a conference held in Monterey on marine protected areas, I watch three days of PowerPoint presentations by committed groups dedicated to coastal and ocean monitoring, who report that certain species are rebounding (otter), while others are not (abalone).

I am reminded of my essential motivation for teaching art making to those committed to environmental projects. If we are going to encourage young people to care, we also need to teach them a practiced form for expression, so their feelings don’t lead to depression, repression, or aggression. Creative process through art making helps one to ingest the overload of information, integrate it into personal views, and choose response, focusing capacity for action in relation to the world. Sometimes, that response is stillness: noticing all that’s happening inside and outside the body moment by moment, and appreciating that dance of multiplicity without having to do anything about it. Other times, it leads us to action: front-line protest, camping out in the tops of endangered old-growth redwoods and holding on, or telling our stories to enrich connection to others who care.

What is sustainability? Creating artwork or environmental projects involves originality and fidelity—encountering boulders and eddies and not getting stuck, balancing form and flow throughout a creative process. We practice it every time we write an essay and are interrupted by the phone, a fresh slew of e-mail, or even illness. What is

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Andrea Olsen at  
base of Sequoia

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the through line that joins our diverse moments in vital integrity and also dives deep into the underwater canyon of our authentic voices, seeking wisdom beyond the chatter of thoughts? Rigidity of form in the creative process limits sustainability; flow allows fresh vision. Mobility and responsiveness to change are inherent to life, basic to every cell, nature's gift to each of us.

While visiting Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, 100 miles east of Monterey, an e-mail from a report-writing colleague requests two reasons the arts are important in environmental studies programs. I ask a young park ranger her views. Michelle Fischer tells me that she studied dance at Marlboro College in Vermont. Tonight she's giving a ranger's talk, "Imagining the West: How American Artists Created the Myth of the American West and Supported National Parks." Ranger Michelle tosses up her hands at the idea of condensing her views into two lines: "I'll think about it," she offers, and suggests we make our first pilgrimage to the sequoia at Grant Grove.

Arching back to view the tree canopies of these giant relatives, the word stature comes to mind. When no one is present, I dance with General Grant, one of the three largest trees on Earth by volume. At 268 feet tall and 40 feet in diameter at ground level, my partner is the widest known sequoia, although not the oldest. Because I'm only sixty-four, this 1,700-year-old "big tree" has much to teach me about sustainability, including channeling a life force that endures through countless storms and fires, and the whims of people. We breathe in, we breathe out, exchanging a chemical elixir that sustains both our lives on this planet. Dancing together in the deep silence of this sequoia grove is an exchange: We're not the same, but we're one.

*Andrea Olsen is the author of **Body and Earth: An Experimental Guide**, and **Bodystories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy** in collaboration with Caryn McHose. Her new book, **The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making**, with McHose, will be available this fall. Olsen performs and teaches internationally.*