

The LowDown On High Art

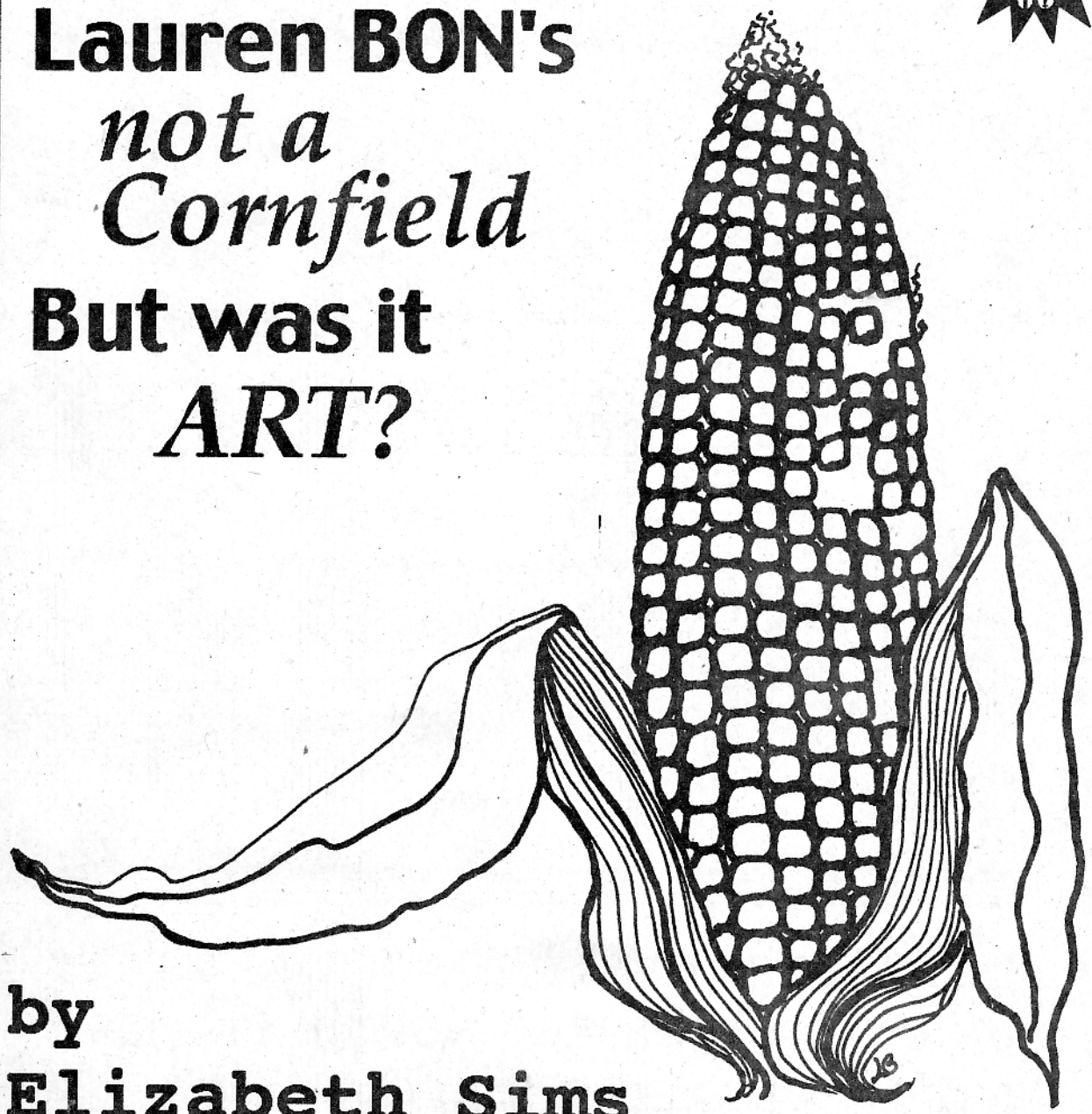
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Lauren BON's
not a
Cornfield
But was it
ART?



by
Elizabeth Sims

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LAUREN BON'S *NOT A CORNFIELD*

BY ELIZABETH SIMS

"This is real. You feel like you're in something real in a city that is at least largely about the creation of an image."

-Lauren Bon

Ironically, the sprawl of hegemonic globalization has produced a hankering for localism that seeks to reject a democracy diverse only in its consumer choices. Redefinitions, within the spatial-cultural discourse, of "community" and the "public," continue to indicate a desire for the comprehensive intimacy of belonging. Contemporary site-specific art practices tend to evince an embattled conviction of the possibility of a more authentic life. However, for consumers indoctrinated by a massified media, this desire is liable to manifest as an objectification and appropriation of marginalized cultural traditions, rather than as an engagement with the ephemeral matrix of relations in a unique environment. Site specific art projects in particular, because of their dependence on institutional funding and promotion, are often caught straddling these two dynamics. Lauren Bon's *Not a Cornfield* project attempts to extract locality from downtown Los Angeles the way its crop leaches the soil, drawing out the large and small histories, relationships and visions of its residents. Unfortunately, the primacy of its heavy symbolic content simulates, instead of stimulates, an empowered and grounded community.

Bon's choice to create a center in this famously de-centralized city at the 32 acres running along side the Southern Pacific Railroad, is due in part to its own historical parallels to the rise of Los Angeles as a whole. The site of the project was first populated as a large Native American settlement, Yang-na, until the Spanish evicted and dispersed its indigenous community to form the Los Angeles Pueblo in 1781. Corn was crucial to the subsistence of the colonizing society, and was irrigated by the Zanja Madre, a channel of the Los Angeles River which now continues its path through a bed of sloping concrete adjacent to the site. As Los Angeles was claimed by the United States and industrialized, the Southern Pacific Railroad brought in Italian and Chinese immigrants. The trains that passed through this land as it became a railroad waste dump also spilled corn seeds which took root along the tracks as pioneer plants, giving the yard its nickname: the cornfield.

As "the cornfield," this land was characterized by marginalized, incidental life. The poetic inversion of the title *Not a Cornfield* prioritizes the participation and intentionality of the community over its material product. Participation by local minority groups, artists, and workers in socio-political fields in most aspects of the work, including the harvest and discussion meetings, has been a consistent, though limited, dynamic of the work. These individuals and groups are mostly incidental to the overall form of the work, unsolicited in its design but necessary to its execution and completion. This crucial limitation reduces their collective engagement to a symbolic action.

Likewise, the corn itself is limited to operating heavily as a metaphorical agent. Links on notacornfield.com guide visitors to descriptions of Mayan creation myths that center on the plant, and Betty Fussell, author of *The Story of Corn*, relates at one meeting its Art Historical and poetic uses along with its more scientific properties. As Bon intends it, the planting of the corn symbolically avails the contemporary Latino demographic of Los Angeles of its supposed roots, and suggests the possible reconstitution of an original, and apparently land-based, value system that goes unarticulated and undefined.

Problematically, corn as a generator of Mayan myths has little relevance to the Latino experience except as an iconic element in the constitution of "culture" for a group of people more substantially cohered by the oppression of the dominant class. In the absence of a critical approach to conceptions of "community" and "culture," the emphasis on the symbolic or poetic properties of corn enables the work to idealize and exoticize the "minority" group. Thus idealized, the involvement of Latino people lends the artwork a superficial pretence of authenticity. By reducing corn to a transcendent symbol representing a demographic as a spiritual collective, the participation of that currently disenfranchised group signifies a return, or a rejuvenation of the essential spirit of the site. The progressive utopianism of the implied narrative of de-fragmentation approaches the fascistic grand narrative it is designed to refute.

In confrontation with this effect of the work, fortunately, is the organization of weekly events as a platform for a diverse mix of local speakers to tell their own stories of the area. The urbanization and industrialization is described by older residents who experienced the Chavez Ravine land grab in the 1950's and younger ones that expressed a territorial intimacy with the area through tagging and skating. Longtime local Zeke Contreras' testimonial of the imminent domain crisis in which residents of Chavez ravine were forced out of their homes for the alleged development of more low income housing, a project which promptly became the construction of Dodger Stadium, is podcast at www.notacornfield.com. A film about the subject, *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story* by Jordan Mechner, was shown at a Friday night gathering at the field.

Other assemblies of films like *From Chinatown to China: the Chinese American Experience*, curated by Visual Communications and Echo Park Film Center, *City of Angels: an EPFC Youth Documentary Project*, and *Ties on a Fence: Women in Downtown LA Speak Out* acknowledge other social conditions of the area. Integrating meta-narratives like these helps to distance the project from status quo models of public land use that are designed to accommodate and lure a desired constituency, while evicting and concealing an existing one, and assert the cornfield project's relevance to its actual public. However, the formal precision of the films has the potential to overwhelm the individual voices of the residents. Issues put to film are more spectacular as they are extracted and abstracted by the artists' privileged delivery.

Bon has stated her belief that "Artists need to create on the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy." Despite her inclusion of other voices, Bon does not elude, or even challenge, the hierarchy implicit in the artist's shamanistic role as culture producer. Bon conceives of, and directs all of the cultural activity at the site with a typically alienated authority that often results in the commodification and exploitation of the very culture she wants to support. Her inclusion of Ceremonial Mayan dancers, Day of the Dead alters, and traditional Afro-Cuban harvest ritual performances at the site tend to mystify and spectacularize the activity of farming until it too becomes an empty signifier of intimacy.

Along with the appropriation of such specific rituals, the project ritualizes more archetypal forms of communion with nature, attempting to enact belonging instead of using truly site specific practices to diagnose and remedy its absence. The fire ring, the celebration of winter solstice with blue lights distributed throughout the field in mimesis of the constellations overhead, both fetishize the primal without illuminating it. The actual production of food is a neglected formal element in the piece. In terms of accountability and intimacy with nature, this element holds the most critical potential, as it reflects society's interests and its very sustainability. Despite some events scheduled at the site to address issues more integral to the sustainability of community and resources, such as Dr. Jennifer Wolch's film, *Up Against Urban Sprawl*, and Deborah Koons Garcia's film *The Future of Food*, the form of the project as a whole relies on symbolic gesture to express the urgent need for a "paradigm shift," rather than engage rigorously and critically with the institutions and ideologies that create this desperation.

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If the aim of the project really is to criticize and re-postulate the political, physical and spiritual alienation of people from their land base, then agriculture itself must come under query. It is understood that agriculture produced a division of labor and surplus of goods that eventually gave rise to the technocrat, materialism, class hierarchy, and the industrial civilization that alienates the very community Bon seeks to unite. As a monoculture, *Not a Cornfield* is poorly designed to replenish or detoxify soil, is farmable only by heavy, diesel-dependant machinery, and if continued would eventually require the use of pesticides to curb infestation due to its suppression of biodiversity. Corn itself is of limited nutritional value, even were the Annenberg Trust brave enough to risk the liability of its distribution to the malnourished residents of Skid Row (which it is not, despite more than one laboratory test affirming the corn's suitability for consumption). Though a small area of the field encircling the fire pit is planted with corn, beans and squash in the Three Sisters Guild traditional to Southwest Native American tribes, its marginalization and symbolic value as referent for indigenous tradition undermines any of the critical potential it might gain through an association with permaculture, a form of sustainable agriculture. Perhaps the ultimate in site-specificity, permaculture provides many models and methods for a conservational and symbiotic use of resources that is radically intimate and accountable.

Bon's design is only specific to the political and economic imperative of a city pursuing a "multicultural" identity. As defined by Hakim Bey¹, multiculturalism is a paradigm which "presupposes a false totality within which are subsumed a set of false particularities." Accordingly, the specific people and environment which constitute the communities "served" by the *Not a Cornfield* project are, in fact, incidental to the City of Los Angeles' propagandistic imperative. Despite Claude Lefort's issuance that "the hallmark of democracy is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life: a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law, and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other," Bon's project reifies the same old ethnic divisions,

industrial forms of production, and her own elitist role as prime generator of meaning².

Most disturbingly, according to the California Department of Parks and Recreation, Bon's project "has become an opening phase of (the) Interim Park Plan...creating facilities and amenities" including an open turf area for recreation such as picnics and festivals, an irrigation system, and a lighting system. Future amenities will include an amphitheatre, restrooms, parking, educational panels and "historic sites" which will undoubtedly increase the property value of the Capitol Milling building, where the corn is now being reconfigured, as it is developed into 45 high-income residential lofts, as well as some retail space. In an unfortunate progression of Bon's design, the field will become a park "where neighbors can relax and commune with the outdoors, picnic, stroll through the park, jog, attend performing arts and special events (such as weekly multi-cultural farmer's markets) and celebrate cultural groups of today and yesterday." In an area marked by economic and social oppression, Bon's *Not a Cornfield* project has itself become "largely about the creation of an image," contributing to the "Spectacle of communicativeness-conviviality render(ed) into commodity form and (sold) back to those who have dreamt it."³

¹ Hakim Bey, "Against Multiculturalism," *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Autonomedia* 2003

² Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, MIT Press 1986

³ Hakim Bey "Against Multiculturalism," *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Autonomedia* 2003