

SUSAN LEBOVITZ STEINMAN,  
SUZANNE LACY AND YUTAKA KOBAYASHI

BENEATH LAND + WATER: A PROJECT FOR ELKHORN CITY, 2000–2006  
Elkhorn City, Kentucky

*This 6-year collaboration with residents of Elkhorn City, Kentucky, a small ex-mining town, was in a sense a remediation of the entire town of 1,000 people. Situated on a beautiful riverfront, the town was and still is ecologically and economically damaged. With a great group of motivated local people, Steinman, Lacy and Kobayashi invented and built the "Blue Line Trail," a walking trail that unites the cultural and environmental strengths of the town. One section of the trail includes a new waterfront park with native flora and fauna that absorb storm water runoff.*

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For a complex six-year collaboration by three established artists, *Beneath Land + Water* is a uniquely holistic paradigm of like goals, communal strategies and interwoven aesthetics. Art-wise, the project is best described as a real time performance of engaged conversations based on Joseph Beuys' ecological social sculpture, Alan Kaprow's "Art as Life," and Arlene Raven's "Art in the Public Interest." Ecologically, it models reclamation strategies for an endangered waterfront, and harnesses the power of art to stimulate green tourism in an economically-strapped region with endangered habitats.

Internationally known for in situ social-issue tableaux, Suzanne directs large groups of stakeholders as performers. Yutaka, a respected Japanese nature/eco sculptor, had worked with Suzanne in 2000. I assisted Suzanne on her innovative 1988 City Sites project, meeting artists Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Helen and Newton Harrison in the process. This inspired me to combine conceptual art, ecology principles, and social justice in large-scale community based eco-landscape projects. I also assisted Suzanne on her groundbreaking text, *Mapping the Terrain*.

In 1999, Suzanne was invited to Kentucky by the American Festival Project and Appalshop to develop a future performance. Drawn to the Elkhorn City Heritage Council's dream of developing a green tourist economy to replace disappearing coal jobs, protect its riverfront, and revive a declining town, she invited Yutaka and me to collaborate. Together we designed, critiqued, redesigned, organized, constructed. Suzanne led big-picture transparent planning meetings at the local café, encouraging open participation—inviting the Mayor, county staff and other decision-makers. I collaborated with local art and science teachers to conduct student eco-art

workshops, painting tiles and propagating native seeds. I designed town-wide public murals and the habitat reclamation park. Suzanne brought Otis College of Art & Design students to help. Yutaka created eco-interventions, cut out asphalt, planted and built sculptural benches. All painted blue lines and hauled soil. *The Blue Line Trail* emerged, encircling the town, connecting "nature to culture," uniting disparate parts into cohesive gestalt, reviving derelict buildings with blue paint and murals, protecting and cleaning its riverfront. A sophisticated tourist brochure was created: visit the historic riverfront town with contemporary eco-art.

Our project attracted the Governor's Earth Day Award; National Park Service support for a protected riparian trail connecting riverfront towns; and new grants. The town grew in green ways: festivals, local theater, farmers' market, testing water quality. We left a civic eco-art plan for future projects by Kentucky artists. As a model, it's a great success. It is up to Elkhorn City to sustain the work, increase the momentum.

— Susan Leibovitz Steinman

