

The 1<sup>st</sup> Annual iLAND Symposium – March 28, 2009  
Opening remarks from Jennifer Monson

Welcome to the first annual iLAND symposium. I am looking forward to a vigorous discussion about the potential of dance and environmental practices to influence our perception and action in relation to environment. I wanted first of all to offer my gratitude to the many people who made this possible - Thank you to the New School for hosting us here and for supporting the value of Art and Science collaboration through their new initiative. Thanks to Danielle Goldman for being the point person behind all of this, to Alejandra Martorell for her thoughtful support, Bessie Thayer for her lively administrative support and organizing skill, Evan Namerow for designing the blog, Ryutaro Ishikane for documentation, Steve Matt for designing the postcard and of course all of today's presenters for their work and dedication to process and their commitment to New York City's ecologies. Also a special thanks to the iLAND board for steering us towards our goals over the last 4 years. This kind of public symposium has been a dream of ours for quite some time now as we look to create opportunities to build an ongoing conversation about collaborative process and engagement with urban environments.

I wanted to give a bit of background on how iLAND came into being. Back in 2000, I started the project BIRD BRAIN, a multi year navigational dance project that followed the migrations of Gray Whales, Ospreys, Ducks, and Geese. Each migration tour took approximately 8-10 weeks and followed the journeys of the migrating animals, offering free site specific performances, panel discussions on migration, navigation, habitat conservation, and movement workshops for the general public. During the creative development of the project I did a fair amount of research into the navigational strategies of animals as a way of developing the choreographic material. I also followed the research being done with satellite tracking devices on Gray Whales and Ospreys. Throughout this process both in the research phase and during the performance tour I had incredibly stimulating conversations and experiences with all kinds of scientists, environmentalists, and educators. My own work was deeply influenced by these encounters and I felt that there was a reciprocal stimulation across disciplines. Although this was a subtle exchange, I felt that it could have very powerful implications and I wanted to see if I could create an organization that could nurture this potential. iLAND was founded to support the development of creative collaborative process across disciplines as well as to illuminate our kinetic and sensed awareness of environments around us. I was very aware of the importance of supporting process, sharing methodologies and practices across disciplines - with a goal towards invigorating approaches to sustainability with a particular emphasis on the urban landscape as a natural site. Or, at least as a place where so many contradictions are held together in close knit communities.

So in very general terms, I wanted to frame the value and connections that I see between art and science collaboration.

Both art and science are fundamentally creative fields where there is a strong desire to investigate the unknown. Often the only way we can develop our understanding of something is by making a creative leap that dislodges our assumptions of it. This is part of the nature of experimentation and innovation - to put things together in an unexpected alchemy.

Science investigates the unknown with the aim to explain and comprehend.

Art investigates the unknown with the aim to express and contain multiple levels of comprehension. Art creates experience. Does science explain experience? Both fields demand an acute observational skill of our surroundings with highly sophisticated framing devices - whether we are looking at the small bones of fish in cormorant vomit to identify what they are eating or investigating the rhythmic patterns of arterial and venal blood flow in our dancing. The body is the medium in which we move through the world and it forms our approach to experience and knowledge. Dance has a unique role in creating aesthetic experiences that shape our understanding of space, place, environment and the systems that shape our universe. For scientists, working with dancers invites them to acknowledge and investigate their own creative endeavors from an embodied perspective.

The even larger frame that I would like to place around the work of iLAND is the current environmental situation that is changing at rates we haven't seen for thousands of years. In its own particular way, the work of iLAND hopes to generate adaptive and resilient approaches to face the radical changes we will see in our environment over the next century.

So, bringing things back down to the programs that iLAND is supporting now, our primary programs are: iLAB, a collaborative residency program supporting the development of interdisciplinary process, and we will hear quite a bit more about that later on today; and my own projects, which have most recently included the iMAP/Ridgewood Reservoir Project in Highland Park Queens and the Mahomet Aquifer Project in Illinois.

The Ridgewood Reservoir Project took place in the abandoned reservoir on the border of Brooklyn and Queens. Rob Jett will speak more specifically about its natural and cultural history as well as about the City's plans for the area. This project was partly, I think, a response to the migration project. In that project we followed a season geographically. With the spring migrations we were always arriving as the fruit trees were blooming, which I later found out was also why the birds were arriving then. There are certain insects that appear when the trees bud and flower; the migrating warblers depend on these insects for fuel to complete their journeys. If due to climate change the trees start blooming earlier, the birds are still migrating based on cues from the photo period or the length of the day then they will arrive after the insects are gone and won't be able to feed in order to complete their migration. (Anyway that is an aside.)

With the reservoir project I wanted to stay in one place and experience the change of seasons over time. The reservoir is also one of those unique treasures of urban wilderness that couldn't exist under any other circumstances. Part of my process again inspired by the BIRD BRAIN project was to explore the place through the lens of different kinds of experts - bird watchers, architects, biologists, botanists, natural resource managers, local community members. I wanted to weave together different kinds of knowledge in our process as well as provide them for the general public. During the performances we had members of the Brooklyn Bird Club, NYC Parks interpretive rangers, Uli Lorimer, native plant specialists, and architects from "threadcollective" inform the public about the place at the same time as the dancing was taking place - creating many entry points into an experience of this particular place and hopefully creating connections where these different kinds of knowledge overlap.

One of the most exciting outcomes for me with this project is that during this time the city decided to develop a regional park in this area with plans to make these incredibly rare urban wilderness sites into ball fields. The Brooklyn Bird Club has incredibly committed members who set up an organization to make sure that community input was taken into consideration. In our experience of the place, it was clear that there was a strong appreciation for the wilderness of this area. So this is one way that I see iLAND having an impact as well, through drawing attention to our local ecologies and how we interact with them.

I'll introduce iLAB in a bit more depth later on, but right now I would like to introduce Rob Jett, who I met through the Brooklyn Bird Club and has been one of the most active and influential members of the Highland Park. He is a dedicated and avid bird watcher, and committed to supporting environmental integrity in our city.