

Mark Dannenhauer



My work combines performing, teaching, and environmental interpretation. My inquiry is moving toward connecting the arts, ecology, and policy. I work with a broad range of community organizations, including nature centers, art centers, watershed councils, governmental agencies, schools, and higher education.

My principal current work is the design and implementation of the Community Landscape Project. A Community Landscape Project provides community members, whether of a small town or city neighborhood, with the tools and techniques to investigate and document their local landscapes, digitize and map their findings, apply their findings to local planning and development processes, and transform individual investigations into community expressions through parades, pageants, and other arts events. The idea is to develop a simple overall form, flexible enough to respond to the needs of diverse communities, while maintaining sufficient form to be usefully shared between communities.

Two questions currently drive the Community Landscape Project: How do we change the landscape? How does the landscape change us? To answer these questions within each Project, my tasks are to 1) identify participants and sites; 2) facilitate citizen's interpretation and documentation of local landscapes using sound, image, movement, and text, 3) assist with digitization and computer-based mapping, 4) coordinate citizen Project work with planning and development work; and 5) help to create and produce arts events.

My work is about change: 1) change the way community members relate to their local landscape—develop tools and techniques for locally controlled landscape investigation, documentation, mapping, planning, and performance; 2) change in the role of citizen participation in the planning process—facilitate active and ongoing participation not just in visioning but also in design; 3) change in the societal role of the arts—restore the arts as a bridge between people and place; 4) change in the practice of the arts—promote community, not individual, expression; 5) change in the connections between art, ecology, and policy—create pathways with which they can inform each other, in theory and in practice.

Where do I engage?

I work mostly in southern New England, less frequently in northern New England, even less frequently around the country. As above, I continue to work in a variety of community settings. Recent projects have included collaborations with the Millers River Environmental Center, the Musketaquid Program of the Emerson Umbrella Center for the Arts, the Conte National Wildlife Refuge, and the Shutesbury Elementary School.

What are the terms of my practice?

The terms of my practice are, in order of preference, cash, check, wampum, beads.

My inquiry is based on my professional work in puppetry, begun in 1971, and recent academic work on environmental interpretation. Initially, I worked for more than a decade with the internationally renowned Bread and Puppet Theater. After playing in national theaters and international theater festivals for heads of state and major critics, I began a backwards career path. In 1985, my wife Jane Urban and I co-founded a small touring theater company, Ninots. We played in housing development parking lots, malls, corporate parties, as well as schools, libraries, parks, sometimes even in theaters—with neither heads of state, nor major, or minor critics in evidence. Using rod puppets, masks, large body puppets, and live music, we created original puppet pieces based on folk traditions from around the world. We played where we did because we wanted to make puppetry accessible—physically accessible by taking theater to places people lived and worked; economically accessible by grant-funding free performances and workshops; culturally accessible by using a variety of source material often ignored by mainstream theater, such as Polish science fiction, Haitian folk tales, Japanese folk plays; hands-on accessible by creating workshops in which participants designed, built, and performed their own pieces.

Over time, my emphasis has been developing and presenting workshops and residencies that use the arts to connect nature and culture, that restore the traditional role of the arts as a bridge between people and place. We had been doing puppetry workshops for a number of years when a sponsor asked me to do a workshop series on endangered species. While preparing for this workshop, I realized that the forces that endanger species also afflicts the traditional cultures and arts that are

important sources for our puppetry work. Our contemporary push towards what Vandana Shiva calls “monocultures of the mind” endangers the traditional convolution of people and place and the arts. Not only have local landscapes furnished the bulk of materials for art making, dialogue with the local landscape has also formed the content of the arts. Additionally, many of the traditional forms seem to emphasize community expression foremost, with individual variations secondary. This emphasis contrasts sharply with the intense individualism prevalent in our contemporary arts.

In pursuit of the connections between people and place, I did graduate work in environmental education, conservation biology, and resource and organizational management, emerging from Antioch New England Graduate School with a masters degree in landscape interpretation. My work there, together with my puppetry experience, forms the base of my inquiry in my Community Landscape Projects.

Rather than present a simple list of methods and means, which methods and means may or may not be simple, let me share what I consider my basic technique. This technique centers on one tool: the Bostitch P6C-8 plunge staple pliers with 3/8” staples. Our puppet workshop participants use the stapler to make giant puppet heads formed from a lattice of cardboard strips; to attach reinforcing lengths of black wire; to “sew” seams in fabric puppet bodies; to augment the basic head and costume by affixing raffia, foam, pipe cleaners, leaves, and any other stapleable materials. The stapler is easy to use, simple to learn, connects diverse materials. Staples may be easily removed. The plunge tip allows stapling in the middle of planar surfaces. Participants may revise their work at any stage of construction. This tool makes it possible for participants to quickly and easily build giant puppets of their own design. The tool and related techniques are responsive to individual imaginations while ensuring something of a common look.

For the Community Landscape Project, my current concern is to find the digital equivalent of the staple pliers: something that will connect various media, is simple and easy to use, easily revisable at any point, flexible to respond to individual imaginations, shareable between Projects and the general public. I’ve considered, seen and thought about using Adobe Acrobat to see if it can be my digital stapler, connecting digital images, sounds, maps, and databases. At the moment, I’m optimistic, probably because I haven’t done much. I will begin working with Acrobat this fall.

I’m also looking for the organizational equivalent of the stapler: something to connect a community’s historical society, conservation commission, arts council, planning board, recreation committee, library, schools, business sector, and just plain citizens. Is it possible for each community’s Project, given an initial supply of external energy, to become self-organizing while remaining flexible and responsive?

I’ve been working on the community arts events aspect of the Project for some time, and my methods and means will be easier to convey in discussion than in writing. Similarly, I hope to be able to share some initial work on the interpretation and documentation stages with the Millers River Environmental Center in Athol, MA and with the Musketaquid Art and Nature Program at the Emerson Umbrella Center for the Arts in Concord, MA. Throughout the coming year, as a stock of investigators, sites, and documents grows, I’ll be able to update you on the middle stages of digitizing, mapping, and connecting to planning and development. Hopefully, by this time next year, there’ll be more in the methods acted upon column and a new set of methods considered, seen, and thought about.