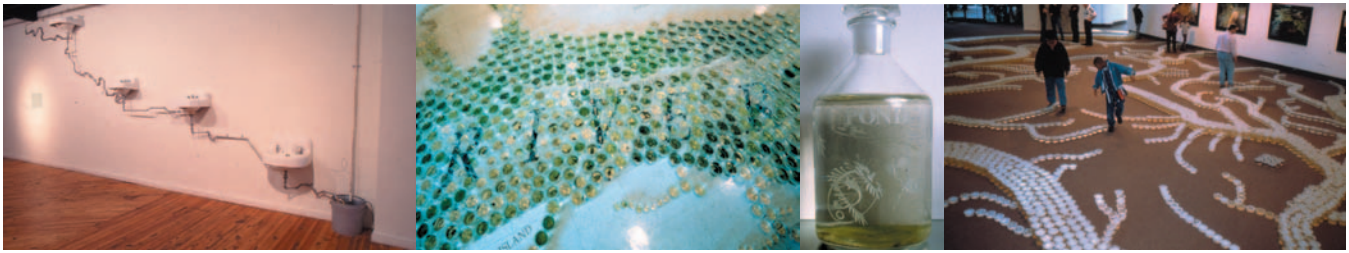


## Stacy Levy



I have always worked with nature. Early in my work I imitated its beautiful forms, but this collected too much dust and did not really respond to the true nature of nature – which is mutability and process. In my day job as an urban forester, as I was adjusting the plants of old fields and woodlands so that they could become more native and diverse, I became aware of the difficulty and joy of having nature as a collaborator. I found that my artwork needed to reflect the ever-changing face of the natural world, and I began to work with a focus on natural process. With this began a long line of work about how nature works: how much does it rain; which way does the wind blow; what lives in water; when is the tide high; where is the moon? My mission has been to show the simple, often overlooked and forgotten aspects of the natural world, and to show that nature resides in every aspect of the land – from the most densely urban concrete grid to the unsuccessfully sterile suburbs. Much of my work diagrams what is too slow or too fast, or too microscopic, or too vast to see or comprehend. I often do not understand how things work, so I try to create visual metaphors for complicated systems. I have done projects on how the moon orbits the earth, where a city gets its drinking water, the distribution of waterways within a watershed, and what plants survive in an urban vacant lot.

As an artist, I am often confronted by a lack of anything interesting or visual on a given site. My job is then to infuse the site with some understanding, some handle to comprehend the layers that make the surface we see. I find it essential to connect the site to a larger system, making it a link in the chain of a larger nature. I have been working on two river projects, on the Schuylkill in Philadelphia and on the Hudson River in Manhattan, in which I try to create a sense of the rivers' patterns and their place in the waters' journey from rain to ocean.

I am driven to find a moment of interest (and hence beauty) in the banal perpendicularity of our built spaces. There is not enough to look at in our everyday life. The visual world has been oversimplified. Only advertisements give us a visually interesting occurrence as we wait for subways or stop at traffic lights. (One might even begin to wonder if the media community has conspired to keep urban and suburban places a dull background to their bright posters and billboards.) Much of the built world is simply too ugly, the richness of the site is locked out by cheap construction, liability issues, lack of human scale, and quick fixes overtop of complicated problems. So what is an artist to do?

I have been working on making the layers and the connections of the site become more apparent. Recently I have been concentrating more on utilizing or processing the stuff that is usually hidden or gotten rid of. I begin by trying to borrow from systems that are not working and retool them, so that they can celebrate the process rather than sweeping it under the rug. One thing I have been celebrating is storm water runoff which is hidden away in drains yet can become a whole new way to enjoy a rain storm, to water a planting bed, to allow the runoff to drop some of its baggage of pollutants and sediments. Working on a site with acid mine drainage in Vintondale, in the coal region of south-central Pennsylvania, the resulting project processed the polluted water while telling the story of the site. This dual use of art – correcting and explaining seems like the most positive way to utilize my art in a public setting.

In the last few years, I have found myself working and collaborating with scientists, engineers, and geographers, along with the usual suspects of landscape and building architects. I feel that the new artistic team needs to combine the problem-solving aspects of science with the broader, more integrated views of art.

Unfortunately, these more complicated projects, which attempt to actually fix a problem, take a great deal of time and do not offer much in the way of financial rewards. Not only do these multidisciplinary projects go on for years and years, but they also require the artist to attend myriads of meetings with all the stakeholders of the site and the team itself. It is difficult to get down to creating the design, let alone begin the construction, when you are sitting in meetings day in and day out. So much of the effort is digested in the bottomless pit of stakeholders needs, that the effect of the artist's energy is greatly dissipated. Getting these projects off the paper and onto the soil is essential, and yet so difficult.

Learning new ways to work more directly with the community while retaining the time and space to create new ways of seeing the site is of great interest to me. I would like to hear how other artists and designers deal with the problems of complicated sites. And so I look forward to this conference.