The Recology Artist In Residence Program

with **Deborah Munk**

and artist in residents

Ferris Plock & **Suzanne Husky**

photos/ interview **Kid Yellow**

Can you give a brief overview of the program and what it's about?

The Artist in Residence program at Recology San Francisco is a one of a kind program for Bay Area artists who are given 24-hour access to our facility (the dump), a stipend and studio space for four month intervals while they talk to tour groups about re-use. This is a great opportunity for the artists (and for us) because they are given the chance to develop their art practice and we have the opportunity to talk to visitors about resource conservation and recycling. We accept applications once a year in the summer for residencies that begin the following year. Right now we are scheduled through 2011. At the beginning of each residency, artists are given a shopping cart and access to a well-equipped studio; they basically have free reign to scavenge and work on their proposal for the entirety of the four-month time period. They gather materials in the Public Disposal and Recycling Area, which is where the public can drop off materials for a fee. After they fill up their shopping cart, they weigh what they've collected (so we can keep track of how much they are diverting from the waste stream), then they roll their shopping cart back to the studio. Usually, two artists share the studio and work towards an end of residency exhibition. The actual time they have to work is closer to three months-- there is a two to three week acclimation period in the beginning, and then towards the end, it takes us two weeks to prepare for the art exhibition. The first two weeks can be exhausting both mentally and physically. Pushing a shopping cart around is physically challenging and coming face to face with the amount of materials that get thrown away on a daily basis is overwhelming and shocking. It also takes a while for the artists to learn how to safely maneuver in the midst of forklifts and front loaders and the unfamiliar sounds, noises and strange smells can be disorienting. Our exhibitions are on a Friday night and Saturday afternoon, which is different from a gallery exhibition where the work is usually up for a longer period of time. Our work space doubles as a gallery which makes it a challenge to let the artists work unencumbered while reminding them to keep paint off the floor so it looks clean for their exhibition. The shows are very popular, very well attended and we sometimes have bands and a barbeque, weather permitting. As we all know, it is very expensive to be a working artist in the Bay Area. Hopefully, this residency allows for a short reprieve and gives artists time to concentrate on their work. Over 100 artists, both student and professional, have been in residence since our program started; many of them return years after their residency to scavenge for special projects and we continue to show their work at off-site exhibitions. As part of the residency agreement, we keep three pieces from each artist and exhibit the work in a variety of off-site locations including galleries, store fronts, offices and government buildings. This helps us promote our mission and the artists. We also have a three-acre sculpture garden that houses over 25 sculptures made by former AIR artists. Jo Hanson, our founder, was an early environmental artist and worked with local kids on street sweeping campaigns in San Francisco in the 1980s. Her sweeping campaign was well received with city officials who held an exhibition at City Hall and later invited her to our facility to see where her sweepings eventually ended up. She was surprised by the amount of useful materials that were thrown away, so she pitched the idea of an art program to our upper management. She was also influenced by what Mierle Ukeles was doing in New York. The timing was perfect because it coincided with San Francisco's implementation of curbside recycling and we are lucky to have a very progressive management team who has supported the program since it was implemented in 1990.

Can you tell me about your background in the arts community and how you got involved with this program?

I was in graduate school at SFSU in the Department of Education and I kind of stumbled into the Art Department and took a class by Mark Johnson called Exhibition and Design. I loved the class; I enjoyed installing, curating, and working closely with artists and I immediately knew this is what I wanted to do. I took a lot of art history classes as an undergrad in Humanities, but the additional hands-on component was very attractive to me. Mark introduced me to curator and writer Diana Fuller and I helped her on a publication titled "Parallels and Intersections, Women Artists in California" which was one of my first major projects working in the arts. And then ironically, I ran into one of my former Ed Tech instructors, Paul Fresina, who had just been hired as director of the Artist in Residence Program at Recology, then Norcal Waste Systems. I was so intrigued by what he was doing and I really wanted to work with him so I asked him if he needed help and he graciously said yes. I often think about that day and how close I came to walking away without saying anything and how different my life would be. I started as a temp the next week; that was eleven years ago. Paul was a wonderful director and an important mentor of mine for many years. I became the director in 2007

and it is very exciting and there is always so much to do. No two days are ever the same; actually, no two hours are the same. I work with very disparate groups of people ranging from school kids, to the guys who work out on the line, from the folks at corporate to the artists working in the studio. We are constantly involved in so many projects and there is never a dull moment.

How is the artist in residence program funded?
The program is funded through the San Francisco refuse rates. Recology is the parent company of all of the collecting, disposal and recycling companies in San Francisco (Recology Sunset Scavenger, Recology Golden Gate and Recology San Francisco). Recology San Francisco operates the transfer station, recycling and sorting operations and supporting services, the Tour Program and the Artist in Residence Program. We are a private employee-owned company and we work closely with the San Francisco Department of the Environment with a goal of reaching zero waste. Our programs support that goal.

Does the work being created here ever transcend its context? In other words, would you call the work being created here called Eco-Art?
I don't think the work is Eco-Art by default just because someone is working with found materials. I think intention is as important as the types of materials an artist uses in his or her practice. Often artists use found materials because they can't afford anything else but they wouldn't consider themselves an environmentalist or an eco-artist. We don't require applicants to work with recycled materials because once they get here, they will. Everything is transformed here..made into something new and hopefully the viewer gains a new perspective on an otherwise familiar object. We hope to change assumptions about what art made out of recycled materials is supposed to look like. I don't necessarily want the work to look like what it's made out of--I hope the work transcends the materials. If someone visits us and says "I can't believe someone made that at the dump", that's great, and if you can tell it is made from a particular material, that's great too. For instance, this piece from The Borroco Series by Ellen Babcock looks like marble and rocks, but it's made out of Styrofoam and paint, and it's shocking when you touch it and expect one thing and find another.

San Francisco seems to be ahead of the curve in terms of waste reduction in America. Would you say that this program facilitates other cities to get on board, or have you noticed any similar programs anywhere else?
San Francisco is ahead of the curve when it comes to recycling and composting. Our landfill diversion rate is 77%, one of the highest in the country, and we attribute this not only to local policies but also to our progressive programs like the compost and recycling programs and the education and art programs. I've received numerous inquiries from individuals and organizations who would like to implement programs like ours but they often hit roadblocks, usually financial. We're a private company, so we can choose which programs are important to fund and what we want to support. Resource conservation and protecting the environment are an essential component of our core values so supporting these programs makes sense. As far as I know, we are the only established residency program at a resource recovery company in the U.S. We are in the process of implementing a similar program in Portland, Oregon and are very excited to get it going.

James Sellier, Sharon Spain, Micah Gibson, and Deborah Munk - Recology staff.

Bad habits involving consumption and waste might be attributed to a lack of education from an early age. Can you talk about how this program works with children?
We work closely with the Department of the Environment, and they schedule field trips for San Francisco schools. Each year, they send 45 third to sixth grade classes our way. Most schools in San Francisco have an environmental component in their curriculum and recycling is an important part of their daily activities. It's part of their reduce-reuse-recycle mantra they hear a lot. Their visit reinforces what they are learning in school and hopefully, the kids go home and convince their parents to recycle. We provide another 20 or 30 tours for high school and college students and an additional 100 tours every year for community and public groups; over 5000 people visit the facility annually.

The starting point for all of the work being created here is trash or found materials. If there is a general aesthetic produced, where would you say it fits into the fine art community?
There isn't a general aesthetic here, it's so varied, but much of what is created does fit in the fine art community, especially since more and more galleries are supporting artists who use repurposed materials. Initially, most of the work that came out of the AIR program was sculptural and easily identifiable as "recycled art". Now we support artists who work in a wide range of mediums including photography, video, and installation and it isn't as easy to point to the work and say "that was made from found materials". I want the work to transcend expectations. Artists have been incorporating found materials in their work for a very long time, so what we are doing here isn't entirely new. At our last exhibition with artists Zach Scholz and Val Britton I overheard several comments from visitors who said things like: "Oh my, this could be shown in a downtown gallery". We've been around for a long time and we can't limit the type of work we support to one medium and be considered a viable and respected arts organization. I want to continue to grow the program and stay current while respecting our roots.

Do you feel the artists in residence feel compelled to create work that has something to do with environmental issues?
In the past, we required potential applicants to have some sort of experience working with found materials, or at the very least, to have an understanding of basic environmental challenges. Now, we accept applications from artists who might not necessarily have prior "re-use" experience. Artists might arrive not knowing very much about recycling, but when they leave, they are well informed and the experience can be the impetus for profound change in their work. David Hevel, for example, purchased all of his art supplies and materials before his residency, but after seeing these very same materials in the PDRA, he had a dramatic shift in perspective. He was depressed for the first few weeks and then he had a breakthrough and he promised never to shop again for materials, although, I think he has had a few slips.

What are some of the most common materials visiting artists tend to use, or are there any that stick out in particular?
Styrofoam has been a big hit; Dio Mendoza built a Styrofoam tree and then Andy Junge created the Styrofoam Hummer, which is life size and to scale to an actual Hummer. Another material that comes in quite often is wood. Mike Farruggia built office furniture for our corporate headquarters out of reclaimed wood. You would never know it, the pieces are so beautiful. We also salvage tons (literally) of metal, and more paint than we can give away. Many of our artists, including Sirron Norris and our current artist Ferris Plock, found more colors and types of paint than they ever expected to find. Another common item that artists use is lathe, I guess because it also comes in so often. Our other current artist Suzanne Husky is using it to build a porcupine Sleeper Cell on wheels. You have to see it to get how cool it is. And former artist Barbara Holmes used lathe in her geometric wall pieces.

A common criticism of art practices is it has little practical worth. Do you think this program helps changes this type of thinking?
Oh, for sure. A lot of people wonder if art is important especially in these tough economic times. Art programs are the first to be cut. But I believe art is an essential part of being human. It is how we express ourselves and how many of us learn. And for Recology, it really is quite a practical way to teach people the importance of recycling. This is especially true for the kids because when they talk to an artist who is making something really cool out of garbage, they get it and it stays with them in ways other techniques might not. So yes, art does have practical purpose because while we are diverting materials from the landfill, at the same time we are creating a teaching tool for kids and adults and reaching them in a non-literal, non-didactic manner.

What are your thoughts about greenwashing and corporations using "going green" as a method to sell products but not necessarily employing those practices themselves?
It is very popular to "be green" right now and many companies are taking advantage of this and using greenwashing to basically get people to buy more stuff they don't need. The flip side is that more and more people are paying attention; that's the only reason the companies are changing their image, so hopefully, this will effect real and genuine change in the future. I was shopping recently and saw a reusable bag that read "I'm recycling what are you doing?" The bag itself had a natural looking design, it was a pretty green and blue and on the inside there

was this beautiful picture of a tree, but the bag was made out of virgin plastic, the marketing was genius but there was nothing "green" about the bag. The company is selling the idea of being green, but they aren't recycling anything. One of our classroom topics is plastic and we encourage kids to use less of it whenever possible. Plastic has many important uses but it has become ubiquitous; we use it for everything. It is a very durable material, and it should be used sparingly especially when it comes to single use items. When I went to see the movie Wall-E, which is all about garbage, the theatres were giving away these little plastic one-time-use toys that lasted for a day before breaking. Perfect example of the gap between the message and the reality of what we should be doing. However, it's exciting right now because I think a lot of people are trying to do the right thing and make better choices.

Although Recology focuses on educating the public about recycling and composting, the source of excessive waste produced is a direct result of a consumer based society. Does the task ever feel sisyphean?
Yes, it does. The only way I can overcome this sense of helplessness is to think about it at the local level, one student at a time, one class at a time, one city at a time, or one less plastic bottle at a time. Because if I look at the big picture, it's too overwhelming. Just think about what is happening in the Pacific Gyre with the so called Pacific Garbage Patch and all of that plastic debris floating in the middle of our oceans. Now they are finding plastic particles two miles below the surface, and the debris is spread out two times the size of Texas! Who is going to clean it up? And even more challenging, how? The local albatross are eating the plastic particles and their bellies are full of it, and the fish are eating the plastic, and we eat the fish. I sometimes feel like we are pushing a boulder up a hill with a toothpick. We have a lot of problems--water shortages, fossil fuel shortages, food shortages, the list goes on. If I concentrate on this then I'll feel hopeless. But when we plant a vegetable garden in the back of our studio using our compost and recycled wood and someone from a visiting school does the same thing--then I have hope, and that's what keeps me going. Some might say this is blind optimism on my part, but we are doing our part to make our community a better place to live.

Ferris Plock and Suzanne Husky at the Recology studios, 2010

Any last words?
I would like to acknowledge Recology's upper management, my boss and all the other Recology employees who support and promote the program; Also all of the incredible artists, and my co-workers, Micah Gibson, Sharon Spain, Amelia Lang, James Sellier, Jessica Connolly, Jim Growden and Kate Clements; they all work so hard to keep the program running. Together, we accomplish quite a bit; we educate kids and adults, we support the artists, we manage a large art collection, we throw great art shows and we even grow vegetables. I'm very fortunate to work with so many exceptional and talented people. Oh, and our next show with Ferris Plock and Suzanne Husky is going to be very exciting. Visit us on Jan 21 and Jan 22.

"A lot of people wonder if art is important especially in these tough economic times. Art programs are the first to be cut. But I believe art is an essential part of being human. It is how we express ourselves and how many of us learn. And for Recology, it really is quite a practical way to teach people the importance of recycling."

-Deborah Munk

Ferris Plock

Can you give a brief description about yourself and your art work?
I am an artist living and working in San Francisco. I have been painting for about 10 years. I collaborate often with my wife, Kelly Tunstall, on all sorts of different projects.

What initially got you interested in the residency program at the dump?
I had been curious about the residency program for a long time before I had applied for it. A few of my friends had completed the residency at the dump and had really enjoyed it. Also, free paint? Free wood and canvas? I have found some very expensive paints and other materials while working at Recology (the dump).

What were some of the challenges you faced when you first started creating work at the dump?
Umm... I collect my art materials in a room with two or three gigantic bulldozers cruising around and picking up equally gigantic piles of discarded materials...
So there's that as a challenge. There are people blindly throwing full window panes out the back of their trucks, rusty nails, and a million other things to look out for while you are collecting materials for your art show... You definitely have to be on your toes. The first time I walked into Recology's public disposal facility I had a hard time concentrating on what things I wanted to collect. There is one of everything in that space. There are way too many things for the brain to register and process when there are items stacked from floor to ceiling. No real challenges though... I mean... It is always a challenge for me to work in a new space, with new people. Its also a roll of the dice with some of the materials... some of the stuff I have picked up has been taken to the dump for a good reason...

Has working with found materials always been apart of your process? If not, how would you say the access to the materials has influenced your process?
It was a huge part of my process when I first moved to the city. Western Addition used to be a gold mine for free materials (people dumping their extra crap out on the street). I still like the idea of being able to pick up something that somebody else thought was trash and convert it into art.

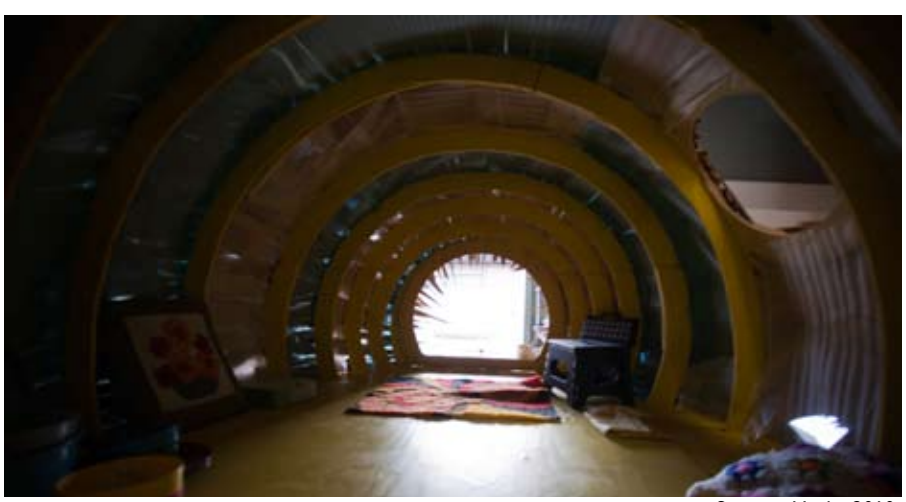
Do you think you will continue to use discarded/found materials in the future?
Heck yes... That is one of the best parts of doing this residency! I get to come back and grab materials for other shows for the rest of my life!

What are some of the most interesting things you've seen discarded?
It's more about the amount of stuff... A huge truck emptied its entire load the other day and it ended up being all food that was one day over its expiration date. Thank God there are no hungry people out there who might want the food... I mean piles upon piles of cheese, bread, pies, cakes, etc... It was insane. So much needless waste.

Any last words or thank you's?
I want everybody I know to apply to this program. It is incredible that San Francisco has a paid residency program and it needs more awesome artists and more exposure. Get well soon Micah (you faker).

Ferris Plock, 2010

Suzanne Husky, 2010



Suzanne Husky, 2010

Ferris Plock, 2010

Suzanne Husky

Can you give a brief description about yourself and your art work?
As an artist, I am concerned with people's intimate relations with plants, animals, and the earth, and how we mingle together in political ways. The exploitation of natural resources, landscape use, and globalization are at the core of my multimedia practice, whether I am working in sculpture, installation, documentary photography, performance, or film. In recent projects, the idealism of historical and contemporary "back to the land" movements and of solitary acts of environmental consciousness have been my main area of focus. The wood piece you saw are Sleeper Cells which are small architectures one might sleep in. My practice has been deeply informed by both my childhood and the eleven years in which I have lived in the Bay Area. My mother was an active participant in the May 1968 strikes. The socialist ideologies of the Mitterrand years and the rural environment in which I grew up molded my upbringing and became important components of my work.

What initially got you interested in the residency program at the dump?
The residency program at the dump provides time, space, endless materials, a stipend, support, media outreach. Every few days we get to expose our work to children and other folks.

What were some of the challenges you faced when you first started creating work at the dump?
I knew that when the residency was going to start, I wanted to be in a production mode and I was therefore ready for action. I had made numerous construction drawings and shape drafts, none of which I used but that informed the final shapes I'm working on.

Has working with found materials always been a part of your process? If not, how would you say the access to the materials has influenced your process?
I have always worked with found and used materials when I sculpt. It was a decision I made during my first year of college after my first and last resin sculpture.

Do you think you will continue to use discarded/found materials in the future?
Yes.

What are some of the most interesting things you've seen discarded?
Furs of wild animal, meat still wrapped in the plastic containers, leather bags. Interesting no, repulsing yes. If you look at the movie "Earthlings" which I did just when I started the residency, you will be reminded of the fur farm, meat and leather industry. Then, you can grasp what was the lives of those animals. Captivity, mild insanity, violent death, shelf life, closet to fridge life, dump. When the meat is still wrapped, then that death really is useless. That is the worst. Along those lines are the few tons of wood that accompany them each day.