



Debby & Larry Kline

The Electric Fields of California,

Encryption, 2004

Sonoma, CA

Fluorescent bulbs, steel rods, plastic sleeves, power towers/lines, EMFs

8 x 10 x 204 feet



Debby & Larry Kline

Forty Acres, 2006

Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah

Electric mobility scooter, mahogany, whitewash, water-based colorant

45 x 105 x 44 inches



Debby & Larry Kline

PEACES, 2007

Hand-carved Granite

Dimensions: variable

This is an interview with Debby and Larry Kline on May 13, 2008.

J: Larry and Debby, I met you through the Creative Capital workshops when we did a retreat for the artists in Public Address. I was impressed with how the artists in the San Diego area interested in public art had organized themselves into this dynamic group. How did Public Address get started?

D: We weren't in at the inception, but we understand it was initiated in 2000 by a group of artists including Nina Karavasiles and Anne Mudge. They are founding members, and still driving forces in the organization. It started because artists were frustrated by working alone and being at odds with all of the city and governmental entities. They felt that with numbers, there could be strength. That's one of the main reasons. They also wanted to become a community of artists and be less competitive with one another so that they could act as a force within the community both politically and artistically.

L: Although the group is still primarily comprised of studio and public artists, it has expanded to include an architect, a poet, and other liaisons to the larger community.

J: So, the inception of Public Address is a group of artists who got together and decided they would start sharing information and working together to have some strength in negotiating better and more equitable contracts with the city of San Diego.

D: Yes. Not just with the city of San Diego, actually our artists work all over the United States, so it's about creating contracts that would be sustainable and acceptable throughout the larger community.

L: Public art is such a competitive field. These were artists who only saw each other in adversarial roles, meeting only when they were giving presentations or competing on projects. This was an opportunity for them to get together and discuss what was going on in the public art arena: part organization and part commiseration.

J: I love stories like this; a group of artists decide to take what usually are competitive relationships and turn them into a communal ones. I noticed on the Public Address website that you post the Ten Commandments for happy and successful Public Art Projects, which is a fabulous document addressing some of the issues in the field.

L: Right. A certain element was about advocacy and addressing some of the problems inherent in the Public Art system.

D: And in part, we are talking about Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) and the fact that when the legislation was initially written, there was a big loophole that basically allowed the artist's moral rights to be waived. As a result, it is very customary for contractual agreements to specify that the artist's rights, including copyright should, indeed, be waived.

L: That's still kind of an ongoing issue and a real concern for Public Address.

D: And we have actively worked with the city of San Diego and their attorneys to create more of an equitable contract for artists and, of course, keep the city's rights protected as well.

J: So, the problem with the VARA Statute was the fact that in contracts the artist was asked to sign away their copyright. If you didn't sign away your copyright, you didn't get the contract.

D: Everything was supposed to be negotiable, but it wasn't really.

L: The art commissions, developers, etc. say artists retain copyright over their work, but commissioning agencies often require the right to use images for publicity without restriction. The assumption is that this right will be exercised for promotional purposes, but it doesn't rule out using your intellectual property on coffee mugs and T-shirts. There are also some procedural issues that the group seeks to address. One issue is that there are rarely provisions for maintenance of the artworks and no expectations for longevity, making it difficult to create a work of public art that can leave a lasting legacy. A more primary concern is the need to bring artists in during initial phases of projects that include public art elements.

J: The whole selection process?

D: Exactly.

L: The earlier the better. This allows artists to meaningfully integrate their work into the larger project rather than responding to a finished space with mere decoration.

J: How many people are in the collective?

D: I believe that we currently have 28 members.

J: How does one join the collective?

D: You must be nominated by a member. Everyone in the group has to agree that the new person is suitable for membership. If one person says, "I don't think that they are the best selection," then that can be the determining factor. Once everyone agrees, the nominee is mentored into the group by the member who first suggested them.

J: What are you looking for in a new member?

D: People who are engaged in their artwork. People who have some sort of history with their work. People who are committed to their work and the community as well. Professionals who are interesting, creative people.

J: Is it limited to artists from the San Diego community?

D: Not really, we have three members outside of San Diego, one of whom is in Maine, one in Washington, and one in northern California. They have all found the Public Address relationships important to their careers and psyche and asked if they could maintain long distance memberships. We are just now beginning video-conferencing, so they can be included in our meetings.

J: Is there a membership fee or are there some duties?

D: Yes, dues are \$60 for a year. Duties involve commitment to the group, and if we decide to do something together member must support the project and help accomplish goals.

L: We have monthly meetings, so you are expected to be there to participate and take on various roles in the organization.

D: Given that, we also recognize that we are all working artists and that there are times when one cannot attend—so that's generally forgiven.

L: That also means that the culture of the group changes from meeting to meeting, which is an interesting thing.

J: So, what would you say is the primary nature of Public Address? Social networking, information, collective action?

D: Yes!

J: All of the above?

D: Yes. I would say it is very social. When artists are working alone in their studios, they may become remotely associated with the art world and feel alienated. That has been a strong point for Larry and I—staying connected to the arts community. The collective actions often point toward advocacy. We've worked to get those contracts in better shape and worked to protect VARA [Visual Artists Rights Act]. We sometimes do things for fun like a field trip together to an interesting art site. Other times, we sit down and hammer out the legal words to use in those contractual

agreements. Information comes in the form of sharing professional standards, vendor suggestions, and even ideas.

L: Since the Creative Capital seminar a year ago, brainstorming has become a really important part of it as well. I think it comes very naturally to Debby and me, because we work collaboratively, but I think everybody has reaped a huge benefit. We've had some people who are working in fields not related to the arts sit in on meetings—one person was dealing with user interfaces for computer software that she was writing. We threw that out as a brainstorming topic and I think we gave her some solutions that were kind of interesting. The power of the artistic mind is thinking about all sorts of problems in creative ways.

L: For Debby and I, that's probably been the most interesting thing—to turn an idea loose and bounce it off of other people to see what happens.

D: And we help one another. Please understand, obviously we do compete. Several of us may compete for the same Public Art project, but the whole idea of non-competition is that we support the artists who win the project, and in the process, share vital information so we raise the quality of the projects submitted and each success is heightened. We also go to the community meetings and support one another whenever we can.

Larry and I, at one point, were sort of unemployed and somebody said, "I'm starting a new project and need some help. Would you guys be interested in being my crew?" and it got us through a six month period of time pretty well.

L: It actually kept us in San Diego at the time. Debby was working at a local art museum and they essentially closed the doors. They fired all of their professional staff. Our first thought was, "Well, should we chase after museum jobs someplace else in another part of the country? Or do we decide that this is going to become our community?" That was a pivotal moment for us and the Public Address community helped us through.

D: The project was a huge installation at the San Diego State University trolley station created by Anne Mudge. We helped build monumental works suspended from the ceiling. And it was incredible to work with her as well.

J: You learned a lot.

D: Yes. Because that kind of help with one another is essential, being part of Public Address makes us all like a family in a lot of ways.

J: It sounds also like she ended up getting two immensely skilled people for her project. It's a two way street.

D: It is. If somebody needs help on something, whether it is physical assistance or finding the best vendor for a project, they call up the collective and just tap the resources that we have.

L: There's certainly a great depth of information. We have created a database of contractors and fabricators.

D: This is a list of vendors who have been successfully used on projects and through positive recommendations, the group will use them over and over again. If we have twenty-plus members, that could turn into some real business for those vendors.

J: How often do you guys meet?

D: We have meetings once a month and a yearly retreat to keep us on focus and define new goals.

J: Where do you meet?

D: We meet at different homes of people who are in the group. We also meet at different sites that we find engaging. This year's retreat was at the Quail Botanical Gardens in San Diego.

L: We've met at a few green buildings.

D: We do things like that all the time. Anything that is interesting and gets us out of our normal, daily existence. We all see that as a good thing.

J: What are some other specific actions have come out of the group?

L: We did an exhibition at Southwestern College, initiated by Public Address member, Melissa Smedley titled, *A Constellation of Evidence*. The exhibition included our members and became a tool to discuss many facets of public art with the students.

D: One of our members, architect, Petar Perisic, began an exhibition space, his PERI-scope Building, and he created it specifically for the nexus of science, art, and technology. He came to one of our meetings and shared that while he was excited and that the building was in the works. He was unsure of locating the necessary artists with a background in art, science, and technology. We all looked at him, puzzled, and immediately gave him a list of several artists that fit his categories. He was amazed that we all had so many names at our fingertips. So, it's that kind of a resource by which we help one another.

Public Address members, Gerda Govine and Luis Ituarte live part time in both Tijuana and Pasadena. They obtained an old building that used to house one of the drug tunnels in Tijuana with an Annenberg grant they have turned it into a cross-border art center, La Casa del Túnel (The House of the Tunnel). As a result, some of the members from Public Address have been involved with that and are on their board. There is a lot of input back and forth. It's also an alternative exhibition space and we may be using that as well. It has been an amazing collaboration. Through those same two people, we have been connected with people in Tijuana both artistically and politically.

J: What is the organizational structure of Public Address? Does it have officers? Committees?

L: We have subcommittees that are project based depending on what it is that we are facing at the time.

D: However, we have made a conscious effort not to become a 501C3 [nonprofit organization] because of the paperwork involved and the structure necessary to accommodate that. It comes up from time to time, because we could obtain funding as a nonprofit. But of course, when you do that, then someone has to write the grants and monitor all the progress. Essentially, we have decided to stay looser in the organizational part of it.

J: Who conducts the meetings?

D: The person whose home it is held in. It's just whoever is there and we all know the process and can take charge. We do have one person who is really good at taking minutes.

L: And then, the minutes are posted online and people can add to it.

J: I like the way you are organized. It asks people to step up and take charge of certain responsibilities when it is their turn or it's their interest.

L: You really have to do it that way. The group is comprised of full time working artists or artists who have other jobs to help support their studio work. This requires a flexible structure.

J: Public Address is nearly a decade old. What challenges are you currently facing?

D: In some ways, the challenges are the same as some of the strengths. The loose organizational structure is sometimes confusing as to who is doing what, but it seems that the important things that the group wants to get done, get done.

J: Do you make your decisions through consensus?

L: Yes, but most things that are voted on at meetings are also sent out online for input.

J: I was impressed that when I asked you to talk about Public Address in this interview, you took some time to send out a questionnaire to the group so that you two could represent the group.

D: I think that has to do with the respect that we all have with one another. We could just say what WE think Public Address is, and to a certain extent WE are, but I wanted to make sure that we are appropriately talking about the group with everyone's input who wanted input. We thought that was a very important thing.

J: Well, I am very excited to be including information about Public Address in my book. I think groups like yours are valuable parts of the art world. Artists do not need to wait for someone else to make things happen for them. Anytime a group of artists organizes themselves is, for me, one of our finest moments. From the moment I met you two and the other artists in Public Address at the

Creative Capital Retreat, I could see how special this organization was. I hope that more artists everywhere will organize themselves like you have.

D: Well, actually, there are other people who have contacted us that want to know more about our group and how it is structured, so my guess is that it will happen more often.

J: Thanks for giving me this time.

Debby and Larry Kline work as a collaborative team creating artworks that focus on social issues designed to question the status quo and effect change. Current projects use a wide range of experimental approaches and materials chosen to take viewers from their comfort zones to a place where they must challenge their own perceptions and preconceptions. Elements of social interaction, participation, and performance are often present in these works, which use humor or surprising context to address serious and controversial issues.

The Kline's collaborative works have received international acclaim and coverage in both fine arts publications and mainstream magazines such as Utne and Orion. The artists have lectured at The Salk Institute for Biological Studies Art and Science Forum, SF Camerawork (San Francisco) as well as numerous colleges and universities. They participated in The Center for Land Use Interpretation's residency program and were recently nominated for Headlands Center for the Arts' prestigious Bridge Residency. They are currently planning a solo exhibition at California Center for the Art Museum. The Klines have been awarded three grants from The Gunk Foundation, NY, and a grant from Potrero Nuevo Fund, San Francisco, for their unusual approach to art in public spaces.

About Public Address

Public Address is a group of artists, many of whom work in the public art arena. Their mission is advocacy, resource sharing, and professional development. The success of its individual members provides the group with greater connections to city arts commissions, architects, developers, boards, and curators. Meetings have included guests such as Robert Pincus, critic for the San Diego Union Tribune, and Helen Harrison, a ground breaking environmental artist. Meeting locations vary to inspire and educate. Sites have included green buildings, museums, gardens, and other innovative sites, as well as member's studios, which help us keep abreast of individual concerns.

Brainstorming is an important portion of the meetings, providing the benefit of shared knowledge and occasionally spawning projects. For example, meetings have inspired several members who are in process of writing books. Sessions helped provide some recommendations for the launch of architect/member Petar Perisic's PERI-scope Building, a downtown exhibition site dedicated to the nexus of art, architecture, science, technology and the environment. On a personal note, Debby and Larry have created a work called Bare Bones, inspired by Wick Alexander, a Public Address member who proposed a group intervention in public spaces using tanks. Their piece later morphed into Forty Acres, a work that they created on the Bonneville Salt Flats during a stay with The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) at Wendover, Utah. Other collaborations include, "A Constellation of Evidence," an exhibition of the group's members at Southwestern College Art Gallery and sub-groups that have received commissions for public art projects.

Public Address also devotes attention to advocacy. They have organized and hosted a seminar with Creative Capital, NY, to help artists assess and develop business practices. Members of the group spoke before city council and were ultimately instrumental in getting a percent for arts program ratified for the city of San Diego. Public Address was also invited to meet with The City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture to address VARA rights (Visual Artists Rights Act) and contracts. They are currently contributing to the national dialogue about public art through contact that Robin Brailsford has made with Lynn Basa and The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC.) and have also formed a cross-border relationship with Consejo Fronterizo de Arte y Cultura (COFAC) and Foro Cultural Ciudadano (FOCUC) to create an ongoing dialogue about issues in the region.