

The

Commons

Artist

Project:

Joan Giroux

May 1–Oct 7, 2018

The Commons

For nearly twenty years, artist Joan Giroux (American, b. 1961) has considered the nature, identity, and ownership of public green space in her work. Working across sculpture, printmaking, performance, and public engagement, Giroux has developed a participatory project in which visitors are actively engaged in answering the question, “What can we do to prevent the loss of open spaces threatened by governmental forces and commercial development?”

The Commons Artist Project is an exhibition platform in which artists create art forms that engage the public in working toward a communal good. In Giroux’s installation, visitors find city maps that the artist has segmented by political and social lines or barriers, as well as a myriad of social games, learning resources, and calls to action. With these materials, Giroux invites visitors to develop personal agency in preserving the environmental resources of their city.

Over the course of planning the exhibition, Giroux spoke with René King, Assistant Professor in the Design Department at Columbia College Chicago. King and Giroux coteach a course on access and inclusion in urban development. In the following conversation, they consider the complex structures that shape cities and communities.

These excerpts help contextualize Giroux’s work and the opportunities offered to visitors during her residency.

The Commons Artist Project: Joan Giroux is organized by January Parkos Arnall, Curator of Public Programs, with Christy LeMaster, Assistant Curator of Public Programs.

RENÉ KING
 Cities are constructed around a series of complex systems and services, for things like water, transportation, green space, and access to information. How does your work address these forces in Chicago?

JOAN GIROUX
 Right now, I'm figuring out a spatial, sculptural element for the Commons, overlaying maps of different systems—such as political, social, transportation, and park systems—and the ways we order and think about ordering the city. Overlaying these, I'm trying to make visible that complexity you mention as well as the interdependence between systems, which sometimes don't talk well to one another.

RK: When did you begin thinking about how individuals and communities relate to urban and public space?

JG: I was raised as a member of a large family that was politically and civically involved. Both of my parents ran for political office, and the family volunteered for the Syracuse Peace Council. I was raised with an awareness of interconnections between politics and community development. Where I grew up

JG: I think it's an important question.

RK: We talked about how you came into thinking about urban green space and relationships with land. This has been part of your practice for more than twenty years. Can you talk a little bit about how this has evolved in relation to time and place?

JG: This thread has been there for many, many years. The piece I did in 2000 that started this *eco monopoly* series was in a Japanese park being threatened by developers. Thinking about that made me conflate the loss of parks with the Monopoly game, in which you build houses and hotels. The more houses and hotels you have on properties you own, the more rent money you get. Game theory and the idea of cooperative games versus noncooperative games have always accompanied my thinking. I like the idea that we can play together, and it's not necessarily "I win because you lose," but we both gain something from the play, right? In *eco monopoly*, I was trying to call attention to what happens if we lose the parks. Over time I've pulled in information about



Joan Giroux, *the kyoto game*, 2007, with components from *eco-monopoly ii*, 2002. Sculptural installation with tatami mats, tea tray, Monopoly™ game pieces, silk pillows, and salt; overall dimensions: 72 x 72 x 4 in. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

months. People can play with and turn the cushions over and around and connect them with one another to form a whole image. There's going to be a letterboxing challenge, which is also a game. You get clues to find something, you have a passport to stamp, and you stamp a book that you find in a letterbox. I'm also designing some objects for the tabletops, thinking about something where you move things around and create your idea of a city.

for the class that you and I taught moved me out of my zone of comfort. I'm continuing to learn and to make connections with more people, projects, and institutions.

We also cotaught another class, also connected to the Chicago Park District, when we worked with the Alderman in the 48th Ward in Edgewater, your neighborhood, to work on a teen center for Broadway Armory Park. All of that kind of feeds into this, I think.

RK: My last question considers the relationship between teaching and practice and how they inform one another. Last fall we designed a course centered on issues of access, agency, and activism in Chicago. Can you talk about how this experience shaped your view of the city and informed your practice?

RK: What do you hope people come away with from this project?

JG: I want people to maybe step away from the computer for a while and actually experience the physical, lived world. I'm hoping people get out and take in some of this idea that meandering through parks could be part of what they build into their week. That they get out and experience nature and green spaces, whatever they can find in their own neighborhoods.

JG: I look forward to teaching it again in the fall and to bringing our students to the Commons to see this project. It'll be interesting for students to see it and to talk to them about how this work is actually informed by what I learned from you and through my own research about Chicago, development, and what has been designed or not designed in the city.

The other thing I hope is that they come away with a sense that there's no simple solution, and that instead, in order to come up with strategies that help address some of the challenges facing us, we have to actually consider all of these different, complex systems.

People have job obligations and family obligations and self-care and all these things. We tend to orbit in our own zones of comfort. I think that working on this project and preparing



Working models, *eco monopolies in the Commons*, 2018. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

in central New York, I could hop on my bike and ride twenty minutes out into the middle of forests. We had easy access to exploring nature, hiking, canoeing, and hanging around in the woods.

When I moved to New York City, I was so excited, getting up in the middle of the night and seeing people still out on the streets. In the suburbs where I grew up, people would go home and be in their houses. There wasn't a lot of activity. When I was a teenager, I read the book *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* by Susan Griffin, which presented voices of feminism, women, and political beliefs alongside voices advocating for nature and the environment. That book really impressed me and, when I was an art student, fed into my thesis. That thread has been there ever since, actually.

climate change and global warming because they exist at a point of tension for responsible development in which both economics and ecology win. Is it possible to develop economies, to provide jobs, to create a sustainable, healthy, productive set of circumstances for people? And to do that alongside taking responsibility for the environment, for wildlife, plants, air, water? One thing I was taught as a kid was that you leave a room cleaner and better than you found it. You might make a mess while you're playing or you might make a mess while you're cooking, but before you leave, clean it up so that the next person is going to find it in a better way. That, to me, is part of this whole underlying project—which is, how are we leaving the world? I understand that sometimes priorities shift. Sometimes you might do something with a negative impact, but are you moving toward improvement?

RK: You bring up an interesting point about coming from a suburban area, about your interaction with green space, and about how you saw relationships differently after moving to New York City. You point out that people were energized at different hours of the day or the evening. There's this notion that at a certain time and place in suburbia, things are accessible during daylight. Parks would have signs: "Open sunrise to sunset." In an urban environment, should green spaces, which exist to promote or engage citizens' energy at different hours of day or night, be designed differently due to their locations and the types of communities that they serve?

RK: One of the interesting things, not just about this iteration in Chicago but about your work in general, is your encouragement of gameplay as a way to understand complex issues. Is that going to be a part of the experience at the MCA?

JG: That's something I'm working toward. One fairly defined aspect is box cushions that you can sit on, part of defining the space that you hold. Satellite images of Chicago Park District cultural centers are on one side, and on the other are fragments of a larger image: a flattened-out globe, a NASA image taken over a period of twelve



Working models, *eco monopolies in the Commons*, 2018. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

ABOUT THE COMMONS

The Commons places artistic and civic exchange at the heart of the museum. Here we encourage formal and informal dialogue as well as interactions among artists, visitors, and communities. The Commons is host to an array of programs, community meetings, and a biannual artist project.

Lead support for the Commons is provided by Rebecca W. Knight and Lester B. Knight and the Thomas Wilson—Jill Garling Foundation.

Related

Programs

IN PROGRESS: FOOD AND LABOR

Tue, May 1, 6 pm

Join the Chicago chapter of Slow Food, an organization dedicated to advocacy for local food culture and biodiverse community food purveyors, as they share information about their projects and reflect on Paul Roberts's publication *The End of Food*. The conversation will be paired with a demonstration of heirloom-variety foods with Jennifer Breckner.

OPENING BRUNCH AND LETTERBOX WORKSHOP WITH JOAN GIROUX

Sat, May 5, 11 am

Join artist Joan Giroux in celebrating the opening of her MCA exhibition and her project *eco monopolies in the Commons*, which examines the importance of public green space in Chicago and around the world. The artist will kick off a letterboxing challenge—an early form of geocaching from the 1800s—asking visitors to extend their experience beyond the Commons to fifteen cultural centers throughout Chicago.

OPEN DIALOGUE: MIGRATION & MUSEUMS

Tue, May 8, 6 pm

In partnership with the Chicago Community Trust and the citywide *On the Table* event, this open dialogue invites cultural thinkers and visitors to consider the ways that artists migrate through systems, borders, and geopolitical lines. Invited participants include Xóchitl Bada, Director of the Latin American and Latino Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Cesáreo Moreno, Chief Curator and Director of Visual Arts at the National Museum of Mexican Art; and Aram Han Sifuentes, an artist who uses her work to speak to topics of institutions and migrant communities.

GAME NIGHT

Fri, Jun 15, 6 pm

This is an open invitation to Chicago's analog-gaming community to come and share their latest creations with friends, other creators, and museum visitors. This program is inspired by Giroux's Commons project and the early use of board games to motivate civic and social connections.

SCREENING: CITIZEN JANE

Fri, Jun 29, 6 pm

Attend a screening of *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City* and participate in an open discussion. Activist Jane Jacobs upended the field of urban planning with her 1960 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and was a lifelong proponent of keeping New York City's public spaces sacred. Jacobs's life story provides a timely example of the activism and ethics necessary to keep cities livable and functional for all. This screening is followed by conversation organized by René King, Assistant Professor in the Design Department at Columbia College Chicago.

EDIBLE GARDEN WORKSHOP

Sat, Jul 14, 11 am

Artist Fereshteh Toosi guides participants in creating their own edible gardens on the MCA's Anne and John Kern Terrace. Participation in this workshop is limited to thirty kits, reservable by preregistration through mcachicago.org.

TALK: FOOD ACTIVISM

Fri, Jul 27, 6 pm

Can food change the world? When is gardening a radical act? Panelists lead an open discussion to consider various forms of food activism and guerrilla gardening in Chicago and beyond.

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