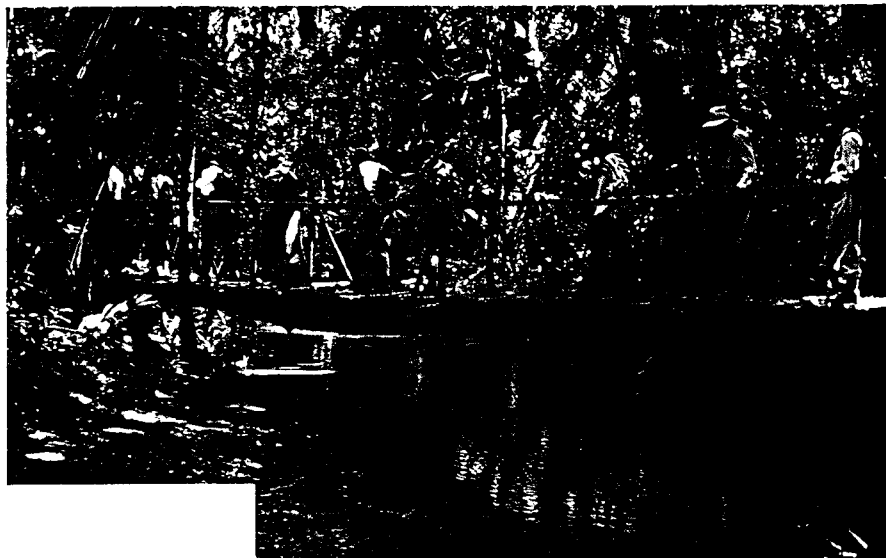


THE CHICAGO URBAN ECOLOGY ACTION GROUP

Mark Dion and The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group

By merging his skills as an artist - a specialist in representation - with those of the scientist, Mark Dion posits that art can function as a productive partner in environmental undertakings. He believes that images can be created that affirm our connection to the environment rather than our domination over it. To do so, he brings to the general discourse of science and conservation, techniques of art that have been untapped for this purpose: irony, humor, metaphor. He seeks to contribute to the ecological movement by raising issues of representation and exposing what images of nature tell us about institutions, societies, and cultures, as well as about the animals or landscapes depicted.

A New York-based artist, Dion considers his art to be an integrated practice – whether it take the form of an object, a museum installation, a book, an ongoing activity in a gallery, a group interaction outside an art setting, or conservation field work. In addition, he looks to the dominant modes of presentation in natural history museums as part of his rethinking of didactic display. Like other contemporary artists, such as Fred Wilson, Dion is interested in manipulating and rearticulating the conventions of museum exhibitions. But because he believes art can have a productive social function outside the hermetic confines of the museum, Dion, like other ecologically directed artists today (like Mel Chin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Mierle Ukeles, among many others), joins forces with those outside the art world, both to bring his art to a larger audience and to find a place where art can be used as an agent of social change.



A unique partnership could express a common commitment to environmental issues through an exchange of materials, ideas, and experience.

MARK DION

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	SATURDAY
28 DARWIN Week	29	30 First Executive Committee Meeting	July 1 Micheline Brown 10:30	2 12:00 Mitchel KANE	3
5 Classification week	6 Phone 1030 Interview Juan Suarez	7 3:30 SKYLINE Ted Allan 10:30 Vince	8 North Park Village Nature Center 2:00	7 Bustour Scula Nature Due	10 BIRDH + FLOO
12 Ecology week	15	14	15 Jack Doven Sierra Club 11:00	16 Bustour North Park Village Nature Center	17 North Prairie Bus tour KINING
19	20	21 Site tour Academy of Sciences	22 Acad. of Science Tour 9:45	23 Bus tour Rachel Abare 9:25 Greenpeace 11:00	24 North Prairie P
26	27 Animal WEEK	28	29 11:00 NEWS	30 2:00 HERB SCHROEDER USDA FOREST SERVICE	31 BUST
2 Alexia Wilson Reading	3	4 Miel Peck North Branch Prairie Project 12:00	5 Mike Paha 6:00P	6 Greenpeace 11:00 Daniel Guldarb 1:00 PM	7 Prairie Restora
8 Boshart Archaeology Center 5:00	9	10	11 Openlands Project Suzanne Holman 2:00	12 11:00 Phil Berkman The Bear	13 Bird houses Bustour Lagoon cl UP 10
15 WISCONSIN FARM	16 Hirsch FARM	17	18 Project proposals Due	19	20 BUS TOUR NANCY CRAB APPLES
22	23	24	25	26 Paul Towell 11:00 project events	27 Open House Cook Out 5:00-7:00
<p>Mark Dion moves assertively into the realm of public art while redefining that realm. At the first meeting about "Culture in Action," conversation centered</p>					

around questions of how an artist can work with the public, involve others in an essential way, establish real exchange and cooperation, and use art as an educational and community tool. He developed a three-part project that would address these concerns: a high-school rainforest study program; an expedition with these students to Belize; and their re-formation as an urban ecology action group, redirecting their efforts to making a difference at home in Chicago.

While the task as mapped out in December 1991 would require considerable work by all those involved, the artist trusted that "the result of our effort would do a great deal to widen the discourse on art in the 'public realm' ... to strengthen the discussion around the ideas of the use of a monument." The comprehensiveness of this project – the first to be defined by an artist participating in "Culture in Action" – helped to define the characteristics of the program:



The students who commit to join this environmental study group will be encouraged to become personally involved in a global concern - that of wildlife conservation.

MARK DION

a defined constituency which would work directly with the artist; a collaboratively executed project; a commitment to working together over an extended time; the incorporation of the process of exchange and programming aspects as intrinsic parts of the work of art; and a consideration of the public or audience for art. Key among these emerging concepts was the fact that the primary or initial audience - the collaborators - were relatively small in number. Rather than a program that claimed matter-of-factly to be public because it was advertised in an agency's mailings, yet ultimately attended by a small, predictable constituency, these projects tried to bring in new audiences and build a fundamental relationship with them, exchanging the number of hours involved for number of people through the gate. In Dion's case, the selection of students was restricted to fifteen. He hoped that his investment in them would pay off as they assumed a leadership position during the summer, public phase or in their future life, thus extending the number of people served by the project and augmenting its publicness in a ripple effect.

As the artist described it, this art project in the form of a student program aimed to give these high-school juniors a chance to know other options at a crucial time in their lives, to give them a chance to consider a career in art or conservation, and provide an edge as well as direction for their college applications. But it was also an opportunity to explore together the often unacknowledged relationship of art and science which Dion uniquely felt was a fundamental, "natural," and useful alliance. In October 1992, The Chicago Tropical Ecology Group, as they were initially called, began meeting.

As someone who has worked with many international conservation organizations, I have witnessed this need for creative visual input, as I have also experienced the productive value science can inspire in artistic endeavors. My first trip to the Cockscomb Basin in Belize several years ago had a tremendous influence on the direction and sensibility of my artwork. With firsthand knowledge of the rainforest, the students could traverse the vast physical and mental distances that separated them from the rainforest: they might discover the ways they could personally aid in this world crisis of overwhelming proportions and learn as well about concerns close to home that likewise affect the ecological balance. MARK DION

On December 28, 1992, the students and artist departed for Belize on a ten-day trip. Dion chose this small Central American country as the site of their field work because it is a peaceful, independent, liberal democracy with low population density and large, unspoiled wilderness areas. Reverence for nature, reinforced by governmental policy, is shared by the resident Indian groups, Caribbean Blacks, Chinese, and others. While Belize possesses no museum or university, it has a world-renowned zoo and wildlife sanctuaries that are models for Latin American conservation efforts. Dion had visited the country several times, and in 1989-90 had worked on a public art and education project with the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center. Founded by Sharon Matola, an American biologist, the zoo is a source of national pride. As a primary site for visitors, it has become influential in the development of other ecology-minded tourist attractions. Dion proposed to create for the zoo a system of didactic signage; up until that time, visitors had been greeted personally and escorted around, but its growing popularity was making this impossible. In his graphics, Dion opposed a factual zoological text (typeset) with a conservation-minded statement (hand-printed to evoke the hands-on, personal stewardship that was the zoo's origin). He also juxtaposed Mayan and British colonial renderings of the species under discussion.

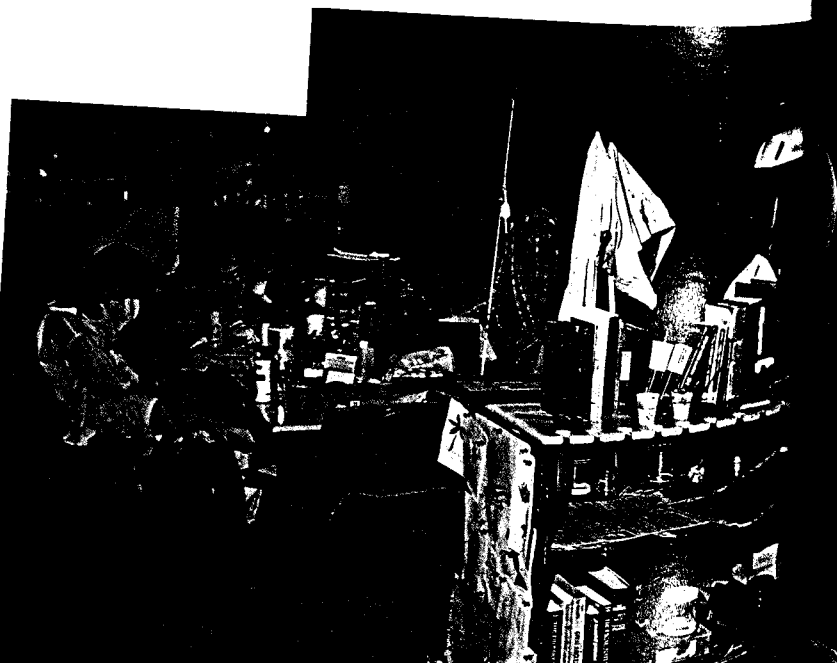
Forming a relationship with Ernesto Saqui, a Mayan leader and director of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, the first jaguar preserve in the world, Dion sought again to make a tangible contribution to Belize's conservation program. The artist became interested in the visitors' reception and educational center, which since construction had remained empty. In an effort to make the facility operational, Dion spent the summer of 1992 in Belize working on displays; returning to Chicago to begin leading The Chicago Tropical Ecology Study Group, he vowed to return at the end of the year with the students to complete and inaugurate the center. In the end, the students brought and installed there a watershed model that they had constructed in part during the fall in Chicago.



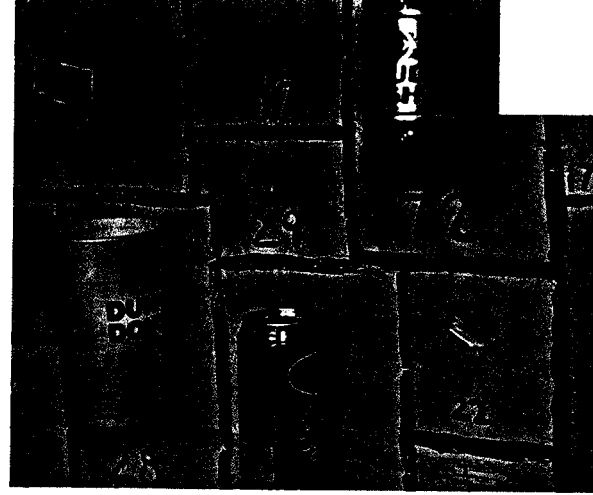
The students came from two Chicago schools – one private, one public. The former, Providence-St. Mel, was founded in 1978 by a visionary principal, Paul J. Adams II, after the Catholic archdiocese closed the facility. Since that time the school has been dedicated to breaking “a desperate generational cycle of poverty and welfare through education.” The school is located west of the Loop in Garfield Park, an African-American area with sixty percent unemployment and one of the highest crime rates in the city. The all-black student body comes from within the surrounding three-mile area. Most attend on scholarship; 100 percent enter college upon graduation. Lincoln Park High School (LPHS), located in a fashionable, gentrified neighborhood, is a magnet school within the Chicago Public School system that draws its diverse student population from around the city. The fifteen participating students, preselected by teachers, met at Providence-St. Mel school each Saturday from October 1992 to June 1993 to work with Dion. While the composition of the group lacked balance (the number of girls far outweighed boys) and few had art training – a situation endemic to the American school system – Dion was deeply committed to the program, despite knowing that his efforts might not bear fruit

quickly, perhaps not at all during his tenure in Chicago.

Upon their return to Chicago, the students, changed by the experience and knowledge they had acquired, renamed themselves The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, and rededicated themselves to the investigation of parallel issues between tropical ecosystems and their own environment. Dion aimed to present a variety of perspectives on ecological problems with conservationists and activists on the ecology and community fronts contributing their points of view.

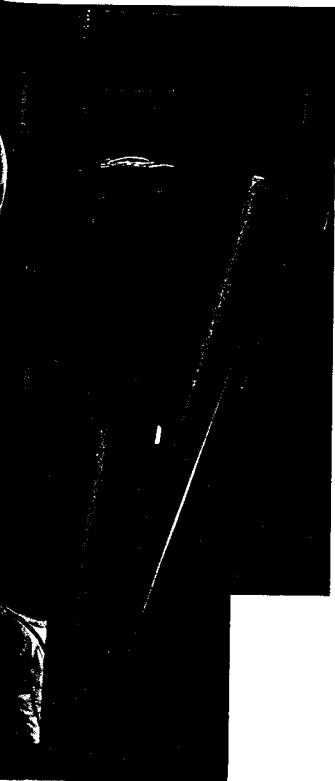


Students were exposed to the workings of groups such as the Chicago Rainforest Action Group, Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Green Chicago, Nature Conservancy and North Branch Prairie Project, Turn-a-Lot-Around, U.S. Dept. of Forestry, Great Lakes Protection Fund, and others. Dion saw to it, too, that they became familiar with other artists whose work is concerned with ecology through contact with Phil Berkman, Phil Kalinowski, Mitchell Kane, Mike Paha, Dan Peterman, Christian Philip Müller, Alexis Rockman, and Vincent Shine.



The culmination of their activities was an experimental field station that would be a site for their continued studies with frequent guest speakers, and for their experiments and other activities. The field station would also be a base of operations as the students went out weekly to offer practical assistance in community restoration and clean-up projects. For the public, this space would serve as an art installation, a workshop, and an ecology information center in operation all summer long.

Ecology is important because it not only involves the study of plants, animals, and biology, but it also involves human beings and their interaction with nature. So, because ecology involves people, people should be involved with ecology. Artists may not necessarily be interested in preserving the earth, but I know that some of the great artists' inspiration comes from nature. You can look at the works of Georgia O'Keeffe, or Matisse, or Renoir and you can see the influence of nature ... for an artist, Earth Day should be everyday. As an ecologist, you may not necessarily be interested in art, but, whether or not you believe in God or a divine creator, when you look at nature, you can see some form of art. Nature is beautiful and I noticed when I was in Belize that I felt the same aesthetic experience that I feel looking at art. I feel deeply influenced by this whole experience ... and I feel that we should go on and work to preserve art and ecology because they are the most important aspects of human civilization. NAOMI BECKWITH, JUNIOR, LPHS





The search for a suitable facility proved to be difficult and long. Zoos and museums seemed resistant to collaboration and hemmed in by schedules and other priorities, even though contacts began with the initiation of the project in January 1992; other locations seemed isolated and remote. Finally, in April 1993, just one month before the public opening, a site was found in heavily trafficked Lincoln Park, just a short distance from the Chicago Academy of Sciences and Lincoln Park Zoo; both institutions had been of great interest to the artist and could be resources – for the students and for

interested members of the public. With the intervention of Al Neiman, the executive assistant to the general superintendent of the Chicago Park District, this site was secured for an “eco drop-in center and clubhouse,” as the artist called it. During its earlier use as a casting club, entrance to this publicly funded facility was restricted to a select group of men; the hope was that the ecology group, while also small, would nonetheless advance the public nature of this space through their activities on site and around the city. As for the building itself, although abandoned more than a decade ago, it retained vestiges of its former operations that could be of continued use: worktables, lockers, and tools. A lagoon just outside offered additional opportunities for the study of the natural habitat and present-day pollution. Recycling the building – if only temporarily – became a demonstration of urban conservation.

This project merged the modes of art and education into one genre - using art as education, education as art - to frame nature in an art context and to frame art in relation to the natural world. It initiated in the students a way of thinking about nature.



With this project students were asked to consider what art can do to make a difference in the world. Interested in the potential relevance of art to science and ecology, they approached this question without skepticism. As for many of the collaborators working with the artists in "Culture in Action," the public manifestation that they helped to develop did not become a cause for dispute around the definition of whether it was art (as it did for many from the art world), but was a form that gave new meaning to art and nature.

Like the students working with Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, they were brought to a new way of thinking by decoding the images around them – in their case, those of nature; in the case of Street-Level Video, the media's representation of youth. And as for the students in Manglano-Ovalle's project, making the global local was a productive and empowering route. Through their Lincoln Park field station and through their weekly projects undertaken in other neighborhoods, their inquiry and ideas reached a wider public. Beyond the scope of this project, the students will continue to reach others over time.



PARTICIPANTS: The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group; Students: Naomi Beckwith, Sharmaine Hendrix, Nynier Hodge, Tresnita Ivy, Catherine Mach, Dionne Emiko Mason, Charmaine Morgan, Muneerah Muhammad, Claudia Travis, Karlyn Westover, Jerry Winners, Kazumi Yoshinaga; Art Teacher: Lisa Langken, Providence-St. Mel High School; Principal: Paul Adams, Providence-St. Mel High School; Director: Cheryl McWorter, Lincoln Park High School Dance Program.

CREDITS: American Airlines; Phil Berkman; Chicago Park District; City of Chicago Department of the Environment; Frannie and Tom Dittmer; Phil Kalinowski; Kim Sherman, Refco, Inc.; Uncle Dan's Ltd.