

# Public Art Review

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## Redesigning How We Live Together

Artists and designers invite  
us to focus on justice, inclusion,  
and human dignity

### Seesaws Across the U.S.-Mexico Border:

*A 40-minute-long temporary  
playground has global impact*

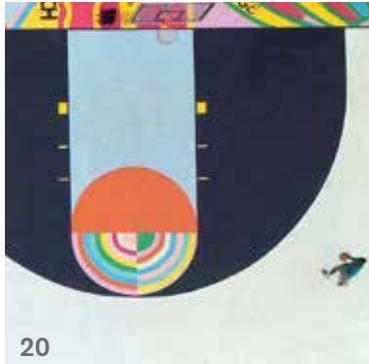


# Public Art Review

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KAREN OLSON**

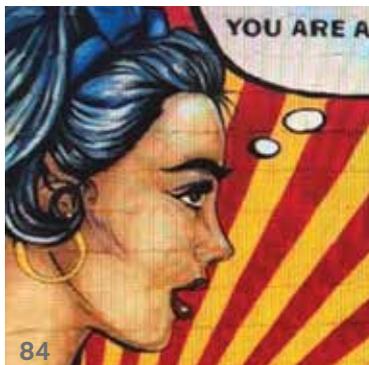
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## City-Scale Sustainability

Artist Mary Miss and social ecologist Adrián Cerezo on the importance of complexity, relationships, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in creating a more sustainable future.

INTERVIEW BY KAREN OLSON

**IN 2015 THE UNITED NATIONS ANNOUNCED** its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A blueprint for achieving a more sustainable future for all people, the SDGs were adopted by every country in the United Nations, including the United States. Among its 17 interconnected global goals to be reached by 2030 are zero hunger, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and sustainable cities and communities.

For the last few years, artist Mary Miss and social ecologist Adrián Cerezo have been in dialogue about the relationship between art and science in creating a world that is more sustainable and regenerative—and about how to integrate the SDGs into city-scale artworks.

Miss has been working as an environmental artist since the 1960s. Today, her work with City as Living Laboratory is addressing sustainability on a city scale. It has received one NOAA grant and two National Science Foundation grants, including one for \$3 million (the direct awardee was Butler University in Indianapolis), for work including a project along Broadway through New York City, and an Institute of Museum

and Library Services grant for WaterMarks, an urban-scaled initiative to help the citizens of Milwaukee increase their water IQ. Cerezo has particular interest in early childhood development. He is an advisor to UNICEF as well as a research fellow at Yale University, and formerly worked in conversation research at the St. Louis Zoo and the Smithsonian.

Here, they talk about their work, what they learn from each other, and the importance of recognizing complexity when addressing sustainability issues.

**What's important to you in your individual work now and what are you aiming toward?**

**MARY MISS:** I was lucky enough to be able to work on an urban scale from the late '80s and early '90s, including a plan for the Grand Center district in Saint Louis with the architect Robert Mangurian, and Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens with Bernard Tschumi. The good part was that I got

ABOVE: Renderings of Milwaukee's Lake Michigan waterfront with illustrations of WaterMarks, a project that helps citizens better understand the city water system.

to work on projects that were of a substantial scale and really urban. The unfortunate thing is that most of those projects didn't proceed beyond the planning stage. But they laid the groundwork for the City as Living Laboratory, where we are focusing on the important roles artists can have in helping to address the complex issues that communities are dealing with, such as those resulting from our changing climate.

As I began to articulate a vision for City as Living Laboratory, I wanted cities to know that artists have enormous capacity to address complexity. I wanted to engage more artists in this territory, and that's led to the work along Broadway in New York City and in Milwaukee. The WaterMarks project has been going on in Milwaukee for five years—we don't presume that a single project, or a single artist, or a single planner or scientist, or any single person, can take on the protection of the city's water resources or the defense of Lake Michigan, but that it really has to be a constellation of collaborators.

I've been lucky enough during this process to get to know a number of scientists other than Adrián, and that was something that they emphasized: the importance of the scale to have impact. So to be able to have this project in Milwaukee evolve to the scale of the city is just really exciting to me, because we're creating a network focused on a particular set

of issues around water that will be implemented in many diverse neighborhoods throughout the city. The idea is to create a conceptual framing, to set up a process, and then to invite other partners to help carry it out: city agencies, community organizations, academic institutions, but in particular, also, artists.

With sites where we are working in New York City and Milwaukee we are seeing how artists can be catalysts, creating innovative means of community engagement, but also how artists can help communities to imagine their own futures.

It's taken quite a long time to get to the point where the project is operating on all cylinders. Adrián and I laughingly call this the slow cooking of public art. There's no end date. We're lucky enough to have the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District say they will maintain the elements of the project. We're putting together a community of people that can help keep it alive and up to date—academic institutions, city agencies, and community organizations. For a project like this to materialize over time it needs to be taken on by the city itself.

**ADRIÁN CERESO:** In my career—following on the path that has been opened by other social ecologists—I have been looking at how we make that relationship between humans and



Photo by: NAAAO

## MARCFORNES/THEVERYMANY *Pillars of Dreams, 2019*

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nonhuman nature more reasonable and more sustainable. It's about the relationships that we have with each other, and what those relationships have to do with taking on hard questions in a reasonable way that is equitable, that promotes justice.

So it's a great thing to come into a collaboration with City as Living Laboratory. It's hard from the fields of natural science to understand the incredible power that art has, the power that it can bring to all of these questions, but I'm seeing the kind of quiet, slow, respectful work that Mary does when she's starting to build a process in a community, and how the artistic endeavor itself creates this opportunity for people to make sense of what is basically grabbing sand.

Because the project of sustainable development is so



**“THE THING THAT I REALIZED FROM THE BEGINNING IS THAT ONCE YOU START TALKING ABOUT WATER...YOU’RE CONNECTING SO MANY OTHER ISSUES AT THE SAME TIME, WHETHER IT’S HEALTH, OR EDUCATION, OR SOCIAL JUSTICE.”**

—*Mary Miss*



**“ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS OF ART IS THAT IT ALLOWS US TO GET A HANDLE ON THE IMMENSITY OF SOMETHING WITHOUT GETTING OVERWHELMED.”**

—*Adrián Cerezo*

complex, and so large, the first thing everybody says is, *It's just too much*. Art is beautiful in that it allows sustainable development to become reasonable for people, even if it's not perfectly understandable—because escaping total comprehension is a feature of complexity. But with art you can get a sense of it, and that sense of it is not overwhelming. Art sends the message that it's reasonable, that it's important, and creates a feeling that you can take it on, and that it's good to take it on.

Mary's hope that this becomes self-sustaining and embedded in the community is more possible because it is being created by the community. It's using the power of art to help the community see the power in itself.

**MARY MISS:** I have to say that *complexity* is the keyword in all of this work. The thing that I realized from the beginning is that once you start talking about water, for instance,

and interacting with communities dealing with their issues, whatever their issues are, you're connecting so many other issues at the same time, whether it's health, or education, or social justice. If you talk about any one of these issues you're probably touching at least half of the rest of the SDGs. It allows for lenses to be applied to particular situations, but I think it's also articulating complexity in a very helpful way.

**Do you introduce the Sustainable Development Goals to community members as a tool they can use?**

**MARY MISS:** Yes. Earlier this summer we had this meeting with 26 different groups that we had worked with over the past several years, to talk about how WaterMarks was going to

be proceeding in the future. The head of the municipal sewer district in Milwaukee, Kevin Schafer, is quite a remarkable man. Here is an engineer, the head of this huge municipal sewer district, who has been a tremendous supporter from the very beginning. He had this lapel pin, and he said, roughly, “This represents the UN sustainability goals, and it's just so important to me that a project like Mary's is bringing so many of these issues to the surface. This is not just about water.”

**How do the SDGs and public art inform each other?**

**ADRIÁN CERREZO:** No one institution has the capacity to absorb all of the elements that are included in the Sustainable Development Goals, so it has to be done in a collaborative way that has two features.

One is that organizations involved in the work on the Sustainable Development Goals have to be really good at what they're focused on, whether it is, say, gender issues, or

justice, or water quality, or climate change.

But they also have to be very good at being able to align their work with the work of other participants. One of the functions of art is that it allows us to get a handle on the immensity of something without getting overwhelmed. It allows us to be okay with being in the presence of things we don't completely understand, and to build out of trust rather than out of complete mastery of things.

Sustainability is way too complex to do as just a technical project that doesn't consider relationships and what we can do with our imagination and our creativity. And it's essential that funding organizations, city and state governments, and nonprofits start seeing themselves as part of this larger endeavor.

**MARY MISS:** The work that I'm doing now I started more than 50 years ago. The basis for all of this, this idea of thinking in terms of constellations instead of singular projects, focusing on means of engagement, being willing to take on the complexity and crossing boundaries, is a way of thinking that was really established for me during this early period.

I am absolutely convinced that artists have a profound way of communicating that allows people to connect with this complexity, with these issues.

We have often heard these threats: *If you don't recycle... If you don't...* And that kind of fear that people are being asked to embrace is just so ineffectual. It's not that I don't believe we're in crisis, but how can you provide a path to dealing with it in your work? That's the thing I keep thinking about.

**ADRIÁN CERESO:** It's being able to kind of release the problem and start thinking about it from the perspective of what it looks like when we get our act together. That's the other reason that I gravitated towards City as Living Laboratory. What is it that we can do together to make sustainable development possible, reasonable, respectful? All of those things that are so important to the work of City as Living Laboratory, and so important for the success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**KAREN OLSON** is editor in chief of Public Art Review.

**Funding and the SDGs**

In 2019, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors released a two-volume guide for funders on how to align with the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to practical advice on how to plan, assess, report, and act on the SDGs, the guide gives examples of how philanthropic funders are addressing social and environmental challenges. Available at [www.rockpa.org/project/sdg/](http://www.rockpa.org/project/sdg/).



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