

THE ANABOLIC MONUMENT

PROJECT DATES:

February 2006 – ongoing

PROJECT LOCATION:

The Cornfield, a.k.a. the Los Angeles Historic State Park

CHAPTER ONE

There is an anabolic monument in downtown Los Angeles. It began in February 2006 as the last act of *Not A Cornfield* (2005-06), a metabolic sculpture by Lauren Bon. The *Anabolic Monument* engages the idea 'monument' for re-discussion in a new century.

CHAPTER TWO

Seeds are extraordinary things. Plants in embryo, they lie dormant until the right conditions prevail. Wedged behind a stone, nestled in a pavement crack, sunk in furrows, a layer of pure potentiality, they wait.[i]

When conditions are right the seeds begin to stir. Their metabolic rates speed up, their cells enlarge, and the embryos begin to uncurl, splitting their tough outer seed coats as they go. Pushing through the splits, tiny roots search the soil for water and minerals, while small green shoots reach up to absorb sunlight.

Transforming water and light energy into chemical energy, an infant plant provides itself with both the material and the fuel it needs to grow, molecule by molecule, into larger stems and leaves.

At once wondrous and commonplace, anabolism – the biochemical process by which organisms build large complex molecules from smaller more simple ones – is not magic, but it is magical. On the north side of the Los Angeles State Historic Park (a.k.a. the Cornfield) there is a monument to this process and its constructive transformations.

CHAPTER THREE

Anabolic Monument is a circle of twenty-two bales that were made from corn plants grown on site and harvested by NAC.

Shortly after installation the bales were hydro-seeded, along with the surrounding 19-acres of earth, with a mixture of water and wildflower seeds. For two years, although Farmlab Artist-In-Residence Gerardo Vaquero Rosas carefully tended the monument, the majority of the seeds lay dormant. Conditions were just not right for them to grow.

In March 2008 however a three-day downpour signaled a change and, seemingly overnight, the whole north side of the Cornfield became smothered with wild flowers and grasses, while the air became pungent with sage, dappled with butterflies, and laced through with tiny explosions - the sounds of seedpods releasing their load.

Since they were first set in place, the bales of *Anabolic Monument* have slumped and spread. Rotting slowly back into the earth, they host a plant mix that includes white and golden yarrow, sage, lupin, California poppy, and bush sunflower. The bright fragrant plants attract insects, which in turn attract small birds and rodents, who themselves draw the larger avian hunters; and so the cycles of life go on. In an interesting contrast to the towers of the Los Angeles skyline that provide its southern backdrop, *Anabolic Monument* has vibrancy, color, fragrance, life, and the most comfortable sag.

The bales of *Anabolic Monument* are now at work producing endless seeds for planting in urban gardens. They represent half the yield of corn stover that was generated by the NAC project.

The produce of *Not A Cornfield* – both seeds and stover – was the subject of much discussion during the life of the project. With *Anabolic Monument* that produce is being used in part to continue to tend the site and in part to engage the public in dialog. In particular, as materials about *Anabolic Monument* are increasingly used in cultural institutions and appear in museums and galleries, dialog about the meaning of the work culturally.

CHAPTER FOUR

"*Metabolism*" derives from the Greek word for change. It represents the sum of the chemical changes that transform nutrients – the raw materials necessary to nourish living organisms – into energy and the complex finished products of cells.

Anabolism, the biochemical process by which larger molecules are made from smaller ones, is one of the two processes that comprise metabolism. The other is catabolism, which entails the breakdown of complex molecules and the release of energy.

Photosynthesis, the process by which plants capture the sun's energy, is a quintessential example of anabolism. During photosynthesis a plant absorbs sunlight in its green cells and uses it to generate oxygen and glucose from carbon dioxide and water. It releases the oxygen as a waste product but stores the sun's energy in the bonds of its glucose. The glucose is either stockpiled in the form of starch, used to build complex proteins and acids, or combined with other sugar molecules to form cellulose – a.k.a. plant fiber – the most abundant of all naturally occurring substances.

In complement to anabolism the process by which plants harvest their stores of solar energy is catabolic. Known as cellular respiration, it involves the break up of glucose molecules using oxygen absorbed from air or water. As their bonds are broken, so the glucose molecules

release their solar energy in the form of chemical energy, which is then used to power all of a plant's life processes.

That is the metabolic process, but it doesn't stop here, for the sugars that are made during photosynthesis are the fuels that power almost all living things and, rather as waves carry the power of a puff of wind across the surface of an ocean, so the energy of the sun passes from organism to organism through the food chain.

The mechanisms go something like this: plants create carbohydrates from hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and sunlight. Animals eat the plants. They grind them up and break them down into molecules that are small enough to enter the plant eater's bloodstream, where they provide both the energy and the materials necessary to build muscle, bone and fat. In their turn the herbivores are consumed, their components are similarly utilized, and so the cycles go on, up to the largest links in the food chain.

Becoming and disappearing, disintegrating and re-integrating, construction and deconstruction; in this way organisms exchange energy and nutrients among themselves and with the environment. Thus the energy of sun passes through the world and all life, directly or indirectly, depends upon it.

BLOCK FIVE

Monuments are, by definition, "an enduring evidence"^[ii]. Designed to keep the values that a culture holds dear "remaining conspicuous to posterity"^[iii], they are intended to be changeless. Indeed, so inextricably linked to notions of permanence are they that images of fallen or disintegrating monuments have been used to awe-inspiring effect for at least two centuries.

Consider just three examples: the speed with which pictures of Saddam Hussein's toppling statue became iconic symbols of regime change in 2003. The frisson of fear stimulated by a half-buried Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes* (1968). And the chilling knell for hubris that rings in Shelley's description of a vastly broken statue of "Ozymandias, King of Kings" (1818). The power of these images speaks to a bone-deep recognition that monuments are our attempt at 'forever'.

The idea of an anabolic monument consequently seems to be a contradiction in terms, for anabolism is inherently changeful and, while monuments to changeful states (liberty, love, war, victory etc.) are not uncommon in human history, they have commonly been represented in materials that are slow to succumb to entropy.

In contrast to such traditional monuments however, *Anabolic Monument* neither personifies nor symbolizes anabolism, and it positively rejects marble, concrete, and bronze. Indeed this monument to a process does not represent or depict it at all. Instead, in a delicious – even somewhat mischievous – embrace of the modernist dictum that form should follow function,

Anabolic Monument is anabolism at work.

Comprising a form made of dynamic organic matter that is indivisible from the very biochemical process it honors, the *Anabolic Monument* is effectively an anabolic monument to anabolism that leads us back to its own 'humble' origins. For the anabolic monument emerges from and rots back into soil – into “humus”, a word that shares its etymological roots with “humility”, “humble”, and “human”.

In a very human way too, the anabolic monument is durable, it is a monument about duration. Not because its form remains static, but because the generations of seed it supports are infinite, and thus the monument endures.

To put it another way, that which cannot be seen is the monument. It endures and lives in much the same way that spirit lives through consciousness. And cultural monuments are built, after all, to impact consciousness. They are the production of memory

What values would posterity ascribe to our present if, rather than bristling with monumental bronzes and steel constructions, our cities sustained anabolic monuments? What if, instead of concretizing our desires and imposing them on the future, we nurtured more modest monuments?

Traditional monuments suggest that 'forever' is synonymous with 'stasis', a state in which all physical and chemical processes stop. But, as Shelley makes so piercingly clear, no matter how powerful a civilization may be, everything must change.

'Life', 'change', 'forever – these are synonyms. What kind of shift in values will it take for us to celebrate anabolism and let our enduring evidence be future generations who can guess that we dealt gently with the earth? At a time when the future is in doubt, this is the conundrum and the promise at the heart of the *Anabolic Monument*.

CHAPTER SIX

"Anabolic Monument is not an ordinary sculpture, an object solely in existence to perform an aesthetic role, but rather a metabolic, living entity, whose existence evolves as nature evolves, and enriches the soil on which it's placed."

Sarana Mehra: *An Essay on Anabolic Monument*, December 2006

CHAPTER SEVEN

“It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know of wonder and humility.”

Rachel Carson

CHAPTER EIGHT

*“I would rather have people wonder why there is **no** statue of me, than wonder why there is.”*

Anonymous

FOOTNOTES

[i] Sometimes they wait for millennia. In March 2005, Dr. Elaine Solowey, a specialist in rare and medicinal plants at Israel's Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, successfully germinated a 2000-year old date palm seed. The resulting sprout was named "Methuselah".

[ii] *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition) Oxford University Press, 1989

[iii] Ibid