

Public Art as Social Infrastructure:

Methods and Materials for Social Action at Environmentally Contaminated Sites

Jason Peters,
California Polytechnic
State University, San
Luis Obispo

This article analyzes the capacity for public art to build a “métis” infrastructure (Grabill 2007) capable of supporting local experiential and performative knowledge about the environment. The article describes the work of UPPArts, a small, nonprofit arts organization focused on promoting environmental awareness. Their long-term cultivation of partnerships with state agencies, NGOs, and community residents resulted in a robust collaborative arts program that engaged the public in making “nonexpert” (Simmons and Grabill 2008) knowledge based on the embodied experience of living within a contaminated urban watershed. Using field research conducted over the course of the author’s work with the organization, the article presents a thick description and rhetorical analysis of UPPArts’ annual culminating event, a parade known as the Urban Pond Procession. The article argues that the representation and performance of community knowledge in the form of community-made arts projects like the Urban Pond Procession helped mobilize a community into a public that could advocate for its right to environmental remediation and protection. The lesson of UPPArts is that the material dimensions of artistic method matter. The close attention that art-making forces us to pay to how we use materials to make things with each other can reconfigure social relations around the idea of a watershed as a rhetorical common-place (Druschke 2013).

“Usually, the great advantage of visiting construction sites is that they offer an ideal vantage point to witness the connections between humans and non-humans. Once visitors have their feet deep in the mud, they are easily struck by the spectacle of all the participants working hard at the time of their most radical metamorphosis. ... The same is true of artistic practice” (89).

—Bruno Latour, *Re-Assembling the Social*

I use this epigraph from Latour as a jumping off point for the way it centers the importance of artistic methods, or “artistic practice,” in the making and re-making of social relations. Latour’s sense that art can be a kind of construction site, where material space and social relations are mutually constituted, resonates with rhetorical theories of how publics take shape. As many scholars of public rhetoric have shown, publics form through the situated discursive work that people do in relation to each other on issues of shared concern (Warner 2002, 67; Long 2018, 15-16). Collective social action is possible when individuals recognize that, despite the pressures of institutional power that often exclude ordinary people from public participation, social conditions can be opened to collective intervention and change through public rhetoric (Ryder 2010, 37; Simmons and Grabill 2007, 423). To this understanding of public rhetoric, Latour adds an awareness of the value of artistic method for doing the discursive work of public making.

I draw attention to artistic method in order to frame a discussion of UPPArts, a community arts organization that formed in response to a contaminated urban watershed in Providence, Rhode Island. UPPArts’s centerpiece project, the Urban Pond Procession, was an annual parade from 2007-2017 that brought attention to a system of freshwater ponds in the Lower Pawtuxet River Watershed, an impaired urban water system in Providence county. The work began when the Rhode Island Department of Health and the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts collaborated to award a grant to a local artist to design a simple multilingual sign to warn the community of the danger of exposure to the contaminated pond waters (Ewald 2012). Rather than design her own graphics, the artist, Holly Ewald, used the funding to create a small arts curriculum at Charles Fortes Elementary School, and she used the students’ artwork to illustrate

the signs. Over the next ten years, the project would grow into a robust nonprofit organization called UPPArts, partnering not only with the Department of Health and the State Council for the Arts, but also with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities, four neighborhood elementary schools and Dr. Jorge Alvarez High School, twenty-seven teaching artists, thirty teachers, and one thousand students. It produced twenty-four different community arts projects, including an oral history project documenting the Narragansett indigenous settlements in the region, all focused on urban freshwater ponds and the social activity that takes shape in relation to them.

In this article, I consider UPPArts's community art-making as a method for enabling public participation in environmental remediation and watershed management. UPPArts's collaborative artistic methods functioned to reorient community stakeholders to each other, to their government, to their local municipal infrastructure, and to the "land community" (Callister 2013) in a way that enabled productive public discourse and political action. To document these methods, in 2011, I began studying the history of the watershed's contamination and the community responses to it, and in 2012, I volunteered as a community organizer with UPPArts. Over the course of these two years, I participated in a pond cleanup; helped create a public art installation at a local diner; helped test a pilot curriculum to teach watershed ecology in K-12 arts classes; attended residents' planning meetings in the surrounding neighborhood; interviewed four key stakeholders working on the contamination problem; studied public documents about the history of the contamination; and helped plan the 2012 Procession. At the same time, I made weekly logs of my experiences and reflections, took photographs at UPPArts events, recorded and transcribed interviews, and made regular journal entries of my site visits to the ponds themselves.

Studies of community engagement through public art tend to focus on the representational power of art to raise awareness and bring visibility to important social issues. Moya and Nuñez's (2013) analysis of the *Nuestra Casa* traveling exhibit, for example, focuses on its ability to immerse participants in a moving representation of the dangers of

tuberculosis at the U.S.-Mexico border. Public engagement with the exhibit, however, is limited to visiting it as a spectator and then posting written thoughts and reflections in an area of the exhibit designed for audience response (135). The works produced by UPPArts are certainly important for raising awareness of urban water quality and for making visible the interconnectedness of the waterways that make up a local watershed. However, over the course of my work I came to a greater appreciation of the importance of artistic method itself for enacting what Elenore Long (2018) calls a responsive rhetorical art: “a purposeful, collaborative literate activity—one that is situated in local public life, carried out over time through the work of everyday people, committed to dialogic discovery across difference, and that informs humanizing responses to contemporary conditions that thwart people’s capacity to thrive” (13).

I argue that UPPArts provides a useful case study for understanding how the material dimensions of artistic method—the close attention that art-making forces us to pay to the use of materials to make things—can reconfigure social relations around the idea of a watershed as a rhetorical common-place (Druschke 2013). Simmons and Grabill (2007) claim that in order for ordinary people to participate in public deliberative discourses on environmental issues, “they must be able to use complex information technologies and know where to go to do their own science. And they must be able to produce the professional and technical performances expected in contemporary civic forums” (422). Their work with community-based organizations shows that this approach of democratizing access to science can lead to productive social change. The story of UPPArts suggests that artistic method also has an important role to play in creating the capacity for public participation on environmental issues, precisely because it draws a different attention to ways of knowledge-making and public formation than is available within technical discourses.

Similar to the way Simmons and Grabill describe “nonexperts” participating productively in public discourse on the environment by inventing ways of “doing science” with limited resources (434), UPPArts engages social actors in the very processes of making themselves into a public by collaboratively making art out of everyday objects. A brief example of three interconnected projects illustrates

this approach. In 2012, UPPArts partnered with the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island to create a K-12 teaching module about runoff, using plastic storage bins, sand, rocks, pieces from a children's playset, water, and blue dye to model how water carries environmental pollutants over impervious surfaces in a neighborhood, showing the effects of soil filtration and the vulnerability of groundwater to contamination. At the same time, they partnered with Big Nazo, an internationally-known performance art group located in Providence, to develop a "Creature Creations" workshop. The workshop taught K-12 students how to use foam and fabric to make life-sized wearable puppets inspired by the effects of contamination on aquatic life for use in street theater. Finally, these two modules helped shape the 2012 Urban Pond Procession, as the parade route followed the path of the watershed's underground aquifers and included the Big Nazo creature creations, as well as projects from multiple other schools and nonprofit arts organizations that UPPArts had partnered with over the course of the year. In this way, UPPArts uses artistic methods to collaboratively make knowledge about the watershed and then to embody and perform that knowledge in the making of a public. All combined, the projects raised public awareness about the existence and condition of the watershed while at the same time enabling the formation of a public around shared concerns for the watershed and their connection to it.

The lesson of UPPArts is that methods matter. Long (2018) explains that "the methods of rhetorical art matter; that is, even without promising guaranteed outcomes, they do carry consequence because they engage in the world in both material and symbolic ways" (25). Similarly, Janet Atwill (2006) describes the capacity for art to create ways of knowing in social situations where there is a recognized need for change but a lack of stability or certainty about the rules of social engagement (168). As the next section of this article makes clear, there are no set rules for addressing the many complexities of the Lower Pawtuxet River watershed and no guarantee that water quality will be restored to a swimmable and fishable status. By working towards that outcome, however, the methods of UPPArts build something else: a knowledge-making "infrastructure" (Grabill 2007, 16) that reorients people and organizations to each other and to the land in a way that sustains their civic engagement. Scholarship in environmental communication describes the need for such collaborative methods of

public participation (Druschke and McGreavy 2016; Brulle 2010). As Brulle notes, “broad based civic participation cannot be brought about by expert advocacy”; rather, it requires individuals themselves “to actively participate in the creation and maintenance of their civic institutions” (91). The case of UPPArts suggests that artistic methods can create a collaborative, knowledge-making infrastructure resilient enough to effectively respond to situations lacking certainty or stability.

The concept of infrastructure is especially relevant here. Like artistic methods, infrastructure turns our attention to the material dimensions of human social activity and rhetorical invention. Infrastructure is both material and social; it consists of the built urban environment, but it also consists of the distributed activity networks that sustain civic engagement. Grabill (2007) describes social infrastructures as the methods, tools, and institutions that enable ordinary people to collaborate on the mundane everyday rhetorical work of community action (14–16). He points to the need for a particular kind of infrastructure that supports the knowledge work of nonexperts, a “*métis*” infrastructure made from people’s local, situated knowledge and experiences (91). A focus on artistic methods and infrastructure shifts our attention away from scientific methods for studying the environment—the collection and measurement of data—and instead into performative, embodied, and emplaced rhetorical work. While the restoration of the Lower Pawtuxet River watershed may require civil engineering expertise, the larger questions of environmental awareness, activism, and protection, in this case, can only be addressed socially, through a “responsive rhetorical art.”

By using artistic methods to create a “*métis*” infrastructure of local, situated knowledges and experiences, UPPArts makes space not only for nonexperts but also for what early twentieth-century ecologist Aldo Leopold (1966) called the larger “land community” (240), which “enlarges the boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals” (239). Leopold’s understanding of land community enables us to see both human and nonhuman members as equally responsive to and expressive of their knowledge and experiences. Callister (2013) argues that the concept of land community is necessary for broadening what counts as public

participation in environmental democracy, because it offers a way past anthropocentric Western theories of public rhetoric and deliberation (437). Like Grabill's "métis" infrastructure, Callister's model of land community participation makes it possible for experiential, embodied, and performative interactions between humans and the land, "beyond traditional institutionalized environmental decision-making contexts" (441), to count as a legitimate knowledge-making practice. In order to represent the experiential and embodied interactions of the land community as a legitimate, knowledge-making practice, I share two passages written from field notes I made while visiting Mashapaug Pond as a UPPArts volunteer. Composed as they are from scenes that evoke ecological balance and natural beauty, but punctuated by images of human disconnection and placelessness, I hope the passages convey what I felt working with UPPArts, a sense of the land community in tension with itself.

Late February in New England, visitors to the shores of Mashapaug Pond will more likely have their feet deep in snow than mud, although the possibility still holds of witnessing the spectacle of creatures hard at work at their most radical transformations. Dozens of black-tailed and Iceland gulls crouch in a colony across the ice, wintering here in the northeastern states while awaiting the thaw in the far north Atlantic. Seemingly without warning, they rouse themselves into a whorl of flight over the frozen pond and its surrounding neighborhood, agitated by an unseen predator or human presence. Three Canadian geese stand unprovoked. Not far from them, the remains of a snowshoe hare, bright white with gray markings, settles into the dry leaves and grasses of the pond's eastern cove, likely the victim of a hard winter, too little to eat since a recent major snowfall. Along the cove, struggling possumhaw, its bare branches and stark red winter berries out of the hare's reach, tangles with oak and Norway maple, trees that hem much of the pond's perimeter in a lush green during the summer, all but bereft of leaves now (author's notebook entry, 19 February 2011).

OVERVIEW OF THE LOWER PAWTUXET RIVER WATERSHED

Like many urban water systems, the Lower Pawtuxet River watershed suffers from environmental pollutants as a result of the built environment and the legacies of industrial manufacturing. From

the 1890s into the 1960s, the Gorham Manufacturing Company's sterling silver operations were located along a small cove on one of the watershed's ponds. For decades, Gorham was the world's largest producer of sterling silver, and its fine silverware are sought after as collectibles today. The soil at the former Gorham site is contaminated with heavy metals and a large, shifting perchloroethylene plume in the groundwater. In addition, the construction of RI State Highway 10 in the 1960s bisected the watershed's underground aquifers, impacting its natural filtering ability and contributing storm runoff to the waters. Around the same time, most of the land to the west and south in the watershed was developed into an industrial park and a retail shopping center. Due to these developments, much of the watershed is now covered with impervious surface, making it vulnerable to high concentrations of environmental pollutants like nutrients and bacteria contained in storm water runoff. The pond waters and the tissue of fish living in Mashapaug Pond contain high PCB and dioxin levels, and the pond suffers algae and cyanobacteria blooms in warm weather.

The legacies of industrial manufacture and mid-twentieth century development combine with complex sociological issues like the language diversity and high poverty rates of the area. According to the census, more than half of the city's 179,000 people live in the three neighborhoods that map onto the watershed, 43% of them under twenty-five years old. According to RI Kids Count (2019), a local children's policy and advocacy nonprofit, 36% of the city's public school students live below the poverty line, and 41% participate in school breakfast. A majority of the watershed's residents are Hispanic or Latin@, who make up a substantial portion of the 24% of the city's public-school students considered English language learners. In addition, close to 2,000 Hmong refugees were resettled in the neighborhoods of the watershed area from Cambodia following their service for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, and many still reside there along with their descendants (Vang 2011).

In 1967, Gorham was sold to the multinational conglomerate Textron, which continued to operate Gorham's plant until 1986, at which point the factory was closed down and eventually demolished. The City of Providence acquired the property in the 1990s through

tax foreclosures, and soon after began plans to parcel the land for redevelopment. When local residents discovered the pollution the company had left behind, they formed two advocacy groups, the Concerned Citizens of Reservoir Triangle and the Adelaide Avenue Environmental Coalition. These groups met with frustration, trying to get the attention of the city and Textron to address environmental remediation. Tensions at the site came to a head in 2007 when the city began to prepare one of the parcels for construction of a public high school without having obtained the proper permits, leading the Environmental Protection Agency to file a lawsuit to halt construction. The school was eventually constructed after the city, state, and Textron agreed to remediate 18,000 tons of contaminated soil, install a turf cap to the property, to include an air filtration system in the school blueprints, and to commit to quarterly air monitoring tests.

The complexities of the site, as described above, foreclose any straightforward attempts at environmental remediation for the watershed as a whole. The combination of nonpoint source pollution from highway runoff; soil contamination; groundwater contamination that shifted underneath multiple parcels that were owned by different stakeholders; the confusing transaction history of city and corporate land ownership that obscured which entity in the end was financially liable; and the challenges of organizing a densely populated multilingual neighborhood into a public capable of recognizing its own rhetorical agency and resilient enough to navigate the complicated legal channels through which they could get the attention of their city representatives as well as state and federal environmental agencies—all of these challenges clearly go beyond the ability of technical science to simply identify the contaminants, execute a remediation plan to remove them or contain them, and communicate that plan to the public.

According to Elizabeth Scott, the Deputy Chief of Water Quality at Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the remediation of the site and the restoration of its water quality to a swimmable and fishable status would require widespread “social change . . . changing attitudes and behaviors” (Scott 2012). Scott describes the value of UPPArts’s work as getting people to “buy in”

to the idea that everyone has a role to play in maintaining the health of the environment through collaborative partnerships (Scott). As a representative of a state agency, she faces a challenge in getting residential property owners to think of their responsibility to the ecological dimensions of the land they own, and their ecological connections to other property owners within a shared ecosystem or watershed, without seeming like the state is trying to encroach on individual rights of ownership. She describes UPPArts as working to change the cultural paradigm of “everyone for themselves...it’s mine, I can do what I damn please” (Scott). In recognizing the need to change this paradigm, Scott is clearly framing the watershed as both a material and social infrastructure that connects residents. In fact, when they attempted to map the watershed in 2010, the environmental scientists working with Scott’s agency discovered that the connections among the ponds and the surrounding landscape—the watershed’s topography and aquifers and its ability to manage natural cycles of precipitation and water flow—had been so manipulated by a century of engineering and development that the watershed had been reduced in size by about a quarter, so that it no longer strictly follows the natural topography of the region but rather follows the storm-water drainage and sewage overflow systems built into it (Scott 2012). This shift in the material dimensions of the watershed marks a need for a corresponding shift in the way we conceive of our responsibility toward the environmental stewardship of it.

The work of UPPArts turns our attention toward how people shape, mediate, and transform their relations to each other through public rhetoric and their relation to the watershed through what Latour (2005) calls the “non-human objects” of technological production (160). The high school construction controversy led directly to the founding of the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island and to the formation of the first Urban Pond Procession as environmental advocacy groups. The Environmental Justice League helped residents advocate for themselves as stakeholders in the political process of remediation. Amelia Rose, the Executive Director at the time, described her work as defining the environmental problem and articulating a path forward in terms that all stakeholders would find reflects their interests (Rose 2012). Rose said that UPPArts, on the other hand, worked to invent a sense of community, in other words, to establish the watershed as a rhetorical common-place (Druschke

2013) that connects residents to each other. While the Environmental Justice League facilitates the community's ability to exercise political power, UPPArts facilitates the community's ability to form itself around the idea of a watershed and to perceive a collectivized need for environmental justice.

SIGNS FOR A COMMUNITY

In this section, I explore how UPPArts initially attempted to negotiate the connections and disconnections between expert, non-expert, and land community by examining the organization's first collaborative public art project, a series of warning signs called "Mashapaug Pond Is Sick." I compare the rhetorical work of these signs to that of another sign designed by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM). This comparative analysis of public signs does two things. First, it illustrates the different epistemological assumptions between the DEM's technical rhetoric and UPPArts's vernacular rhetoric. Second, it highlights my argument that methods matter in forming a public around environmental issues. In short, although the two signs approached environmental communication from different epistemological assumptions about knowledge-making, they both shared the same material assumptions about sign-making. These shared material assumptions end up reproducing the same distances between social actors and disconnections from place that later UPPArts projects would eventually seek to undo.

Community members often view environmental scientists and engineers as incapable of seeing their own epistemological assumptions, devaluing the local, situated and experiential knowledge of actual residents in favor of the findings of empirical science (Peeples 2006; Simmons and Grabill 2007, 421; Peters 2017, 248; Edwards 2002, 109). Simmons and Grabill (2007) note that ordinary people are inhibited from participating in deliberative processes that impact them due to the "indirect exclusions" of science's discursive norms, exclusions which tacitly devalue or disallow their input (420), threatening to deny the public "epistemological status" in shaping public policy and constraining public voices to the expression of public opinion or public comment (Simmons and Grabill 2007, 421; Hauser 1999, 17).

The DEM's public sign, "Mashapaug Pond Do's and Don'ts" (see Figure 1), however, shows that it is, in fact, careful to qualify its own knowledge claims. The sign's design separates the do's from the don'ts with a carefully structured scientific argument describing "what we know about Mashapaug Pond," citing "a recent study" as the basis for that knowledge. The sign, then, shifts the authority for community action away from the community itself and towards technical science as the basis by which community action is authorized or prohibited.

Below the claim, three yellow circles include careful technical framing to support three sub-claims about the pond's bacteria, fish, and algae, by pointing to the underling study's data. The first circle says that "Swimming in the Pond is NOT SAFE *because Fecal Coliform levels are high following rain storms*" (italics added). The second circle prohibits eating fish, explaining that "*Analysis of carp & bass samples indicate that fish from the Pond ARE NOT SAFE TO EAT*" (italics added). The third circle notes the dangers of algae blooms, explaining that "*Some types of Algae (Cyanobacteria) found in the Pond can produce toxins that can harm humans and animals*" (italics added).

From the perspective of the technical expert, these qualifications emphasize that what we know about the pond is based on a set of technical methods for studying it.

The language of the sign demonstrates the care that scientists take to limit their arguments to the available evidence: the precision of terms, the reliance on field data, and the careful qualification of causality to explain why the pond is

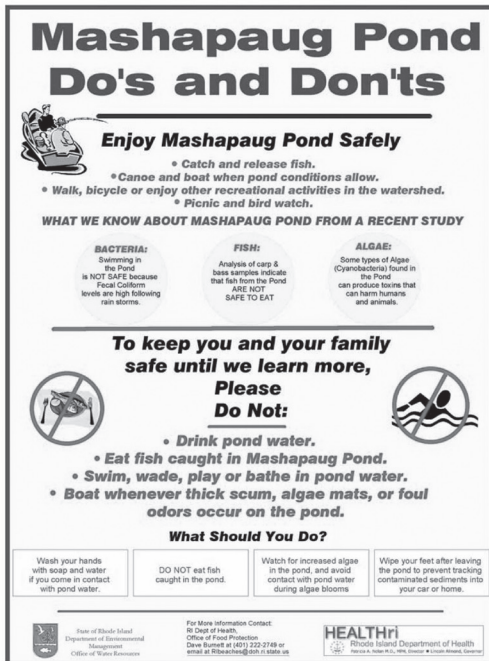


Figure 1. "Mashapaug Pond Do's and Don'ts" (2007).

unsafe. These rhetorical moves serve to establish the ethos of the scientist as a careful observer and analyst, driven by the data and reluctant to make any unsupported claim. I argue that this attention to its own epistemological assumptions is actually what distances it from the community, by highlighting methods of knowledge-making that are not easily available to the nonexpert. By highlighting scientific methods, the same rhetorical moves that establish scientific ethos also distance the expert from the community, laying claim to the epistemology, taxonomy, and discourses that produce knowledge, all of which carry with them the “indirect exclusions” that proscribe the public from participation.

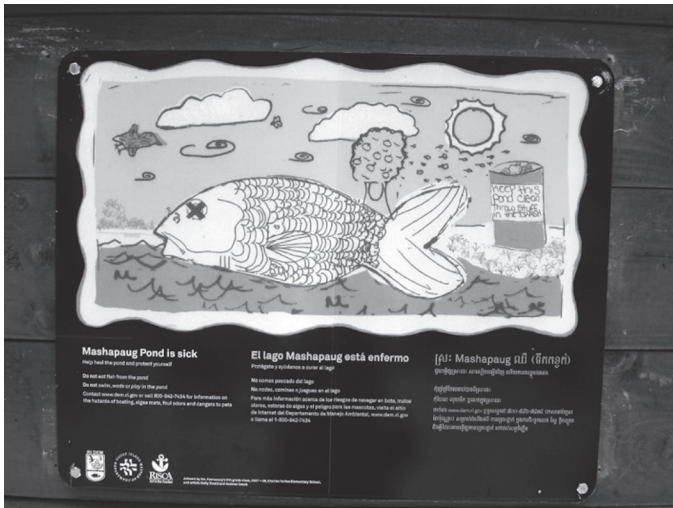


Figure 2. “Mashapaug Pond Is Sick” (2007).

By comparison, UPPArts’s series of signs titled “Mashapaug Pond Is Sick” does not qualify the community’s knowledge claims nor does it point explicitly to its epistemological assumptions (see Figure 2). Visually, the UPPArts signs do not convey the structure of an argument; rather, they imply a collaborative, community-based epistemology in their design—a visual assemblage of individuals, languages, cultures, and agencies that have been put in contact with one another and that constitute community knowledge about the environment. On one of the signs, for example, the dominant visual element is a child’s drawing in blue, yellow, and white, showing a

poisoned fish floating on the surface of the pond. In the background, a large blue trash can on the shore of the pond reads, “Keep this pond clean / Throw stuff in the trash.” Where the main purpose of the DEM sign was obscured by its secondary purpose of laying claim to scientific ways of knowing, the purpose of the UPPArts sign is singular and clear: to alert residents to the dangers of the pond’s bacteria, fish, and algae.

The sign offers no explanation of how we know the pond is “sick.” Instead, it leaves its own epistemological assumptions implied in the presentation of a child’s drawing as the central visual element, surrounded by the same warnings in English, Spanish, and Khmer:

1. Help heal the pond and protect yourself
2. Do not eat fish from the pond
3. Do not swim, wade or play in the pond
4. Contact www.dem.ri.gov or call 800-942-7434 for information on the hazards of boating, algae mats, foul odors and dangers to pets

At the base of the sign are the seals of the three sponsoring agencies: the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts; the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management; and the Rhode Island Department of Health. To the right of the seals is the statement, “Artwork by Ms. Fennessey’s 6th grade class, 2007-08, Charles Fortes Elementary School, and artists Holly Ewald and Andrew Oesch.” All combined, these juxtapositions represent what Grabill (2007) might call the “métis” infrastructure that UPPArts was beginning to build, a distributed and networked system of information technologies capable of supporting the situated and experience-based rhetorical work of ordinary citizens (91). In this example, the information technologies represented consist of art that gives voice to children’s experiences and perspectives; multilingual translation technologies that can render different orthographic scripts; and the institutional structures capable of the “moral humility” needed to engage in a “responsive rhetorical art” in partnership with the community (Long 2014).

From a design perspective, then, “Mashapaug Pond Is Sick” visually represents the distributed and networked social infrastructure that

would become UPPArts's artistic method. However, my larger argument is that methods matter for drawing attention to the material dimensions of forming publics around environmental issues. To that end, the materiality of the signs—considering them as made things, as cultural artifacts in and of themselves—still disconnects public formation from knowledge formation, and disconnects both from the land community of the watershed. Both the UPPArts signs and the DEM sign reproduce the same material distinction between the technical and the vernacular, because the fabrication of both signs is the same. Both deploy the practices of materials science and mechanical engineering in their making, and both are the result of a series of technical choices, such as between sheet aluminum or photopolymer printing processes, and between laser cutting or stamping. In the next section, I'll show how UPPArts evolved to cultivate the development of a *métis* infrastructure through artistic methods using everyday materials, connecting social actors to each other through the very process of making, rather than representing already-formed connections in a fabricated medium like a sign. We might say that rather than making signs for a community, the projects produced by UPPArts became signs of a community.

A disused boat ramp ascends from the water's edge. From higher ground, the pond is clearly surrounded by the fact of the city. Its western shore abuts the back of a sprawling industrial park and a small, derelict playground consisting of a climbing structure and a little league baseball diamond. The empties from a six-pack of Bud Light are strewn around the parking lot. Two spoons, a trademarked "Coke" logo on their handles, lie in the dead grass, a sandy residue in their bowls. A broken Novolog Flexpen pre-filled insulin syringe pokes out from a scattered pile of Marlboro cigarette butts. Out on the ice, the gulls still carry on with their gossip, but their calls are at a far remove now. The traces of neglect and addiction here reveal the persistence of humans' toxic interface with the natural world, a feeling of placelessness that persists in the human-made objects left behind, the social activity and network of associations they enable, traces of the decomposition of the social, and the need to find resources capable of re-assembling it (author's notebook entry, 5 March 2011).

SIGNS OF A COMMUNITY

In this section, I offer a thick description (Geertz 1973) of one Urban Pond Procession in order to highlight the importance of the material dimensions of artistic methods in making a public. As we have seen, the “Mashapaug Pond Is Sick” public signage visually represented a nascent *métis* infrastructure through its juxtaposition of languages in translation, experiential learning, and the coordination of state and non-governmental agencies responsive to the community’s needs. Rather than representing this infrastructure, the annual Urban Pond Procession embodies and performs it.

The 2012 Urban Pond Procession begins orderly enough. The morning of the parade, everyone gathers at the Mashapaug Pond Boathouse, a typical, wood-framed, state-park-style structure. A dramatic, red-scaled dragon boat leans against its eastern exterior, left by the Ocean State Dragon Boat Club, which holds outdoor practices on the pond. All around the boathouse, preparations are underway as participants assemble their materials for the march that would wind through the neighborhood and end at the large public Roger Williams Park. Holly Ewald, the artist who originally set this carnival in motion years ago, announces to the gathering crowd, “we’re going to try to be a little bit organized this year.” Parade marshals are being assigned—they will carry colored flags and will have water and information for anyone needing assistance during the march. Volunteers are handing out drums hand-made from five-gallon buckets, crash cymbals made of painted, Oscar the Grouch-style garbage can lids, and painted cardboard signs that say “Don’t Swim with the Fishes.”

Off to one side, a student is climbing into a “fish costume” from one of the Big Nazo Creature Creation workshops. It resembles a large white hazmat suit with a helmet that is half diving bell and half teapot. This student is the only one from the workshop who could make it to the parade today, so there are extra costumes up for grabs for anyone who wants to wear one. A group of students from a local charter school assembles at the pond’s shore to kick off the procession by launching a floating sculpture out onto the pond. Their sculpture shows a model of the old Gorham factory on one side, and bouquets of flowers on the other. As the students speak to

the gathering crowd, some in the crowd notice that a light breeze is turning the sculpture on the water so that the flowers face us, and the factory is obscured.

Minutes before the parade is scheduled to begin, we all line up into formation: an “Urban Pond Procession” banner first, followed by a group of marchers wearing handmade hats shaped like water vessels, followed by a handmade drum troupe, followed by a painted banner saying “Don’t Swim with the Fishes,” followed finally by the trombones, sousaphones, snares, and police whistle of the Extraordinary Rendition Band. The Extraordinary Rendition Band, or ERB, describes itself as a democratic, guerrilla-style, “thump, boom, honk” marching band, much like the seemingly impromptu street bands one might find in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Their mission statement is “to interrupt your regularly scheduled life with spontaneous moments of raucous musical joy” and to “contribute to making the experience of saving the world a bit more fun and weird.” Finally, Holly encourages everyone to take advantage of the day. She says, “this is an opportunity where it’s okay for us to be silly and act like fools in the street a little bit, so I want everybody to be carrying a sign, wearing a vessel hat, wearing a costume, playing a drum, or holding a banner while we march.”

Our formation holds up until the procession comes to its first stop outside the Liberty Elm, a local diner. In the rear parking lot, surrounded by the neighborhood’s triple-decker apartment buildings, the ERB challenges a troupe of student five-gallon drummers to a drum-off, exchanging cracks on the snare with rat-a-tat-tats on the buckets, all punctuated by cymbal crashes from Megan, an ERB member who plays the “cymbals of the destruction of the patriarchy.” In the middle of the drum off, six life-sized Big Nazo puppets arrive resembling an array of pond cyanobacteria, dancing their way into the crowd, some of them nearly eight feet tall, teetering and twirling almost out of control. Roughly one hundred people are here, many in fish costumes or playing impromptu march tunes on an assortment of instruments, many of them meeting each other for the first time.

After this stop, the Procession slowly transforms into a carnival (See Fig. 3). Even the sense of order represented by the volunteer



Figure 3. The 2012 Urban Pond Procession assembles itself into a “weird” public. Photo Credit: UPPArts.org

parade marshals has broken down. A young boy dances around waving one of the marshals’ flags in his hand, having acquired it through a spontaneous barter system that has taken shape among the crowd. He hands the flag—just a brightly colored cloth tied to a stick—off to a woman in the crowd in exchange for her painted trash can cymbals that he now happily crashes. She waves the flag for a minute before passing it on to a man in exchange for a maraca. The “singularity” (Long 2018, xvi) of these objects as they transfer and transform across individual exchanges opens multiple possibilities for identification and meaning-making across participants. Long describes the singularity of moments like the ones described here as being crucial for the invention of new knowledge and new methods for negotiating contemporary life. The particular circumstances of the moment are always both familiar and new, presenting ambiguous meanings and multiple possibilities for action. The impromptu exchange economy of everyday objects during the processions is an improvisational negotiation across participants, playfully establishing the grounds for public discourse by performing the shared ambiguity of our material connections to each other and to place.

As Druschke (2013) points out, following Kenneth Burke, ambiguity is the site from which rhetorical identification can take place, where

the watershed is framed as both “a material and symbolic site for identification” (88), the “slippery” process by which a material watershed can become a symbolic community. The Urban Pond Procession enacts this rhetorical process by collapsing the watershed’s material and symbolic dimensions into a singular embodied performance of community knowledge, a simultaneously meaningful yet ambiguous inducement to work toward social change. At the same time that the procession makes social actors’ material connections to the watershed visible, it also makes visible UPPArts’s cultivation of a *métis* infrastructure of local, situated knowledge distributed and networked across individuals and institutions through its many partnerships and ongoing public arts projects. The infrastructure of UPPArts’s collaborative artistic method extends across the city like a rhizome, year after year, as the organization plans a pond cleanup one week; an arts workshop at a local non-profit arts education center another week; organizes an artist-in-residency program for Alvarez High School; and organizes a meeting with council members of the Narragansett Tribe to plan an oral history project about the pond.

These “small, meso-level changes” (Lamsal and Paudel 2012, 765) of community activism accumulate over time into meaningful social change. In June 2019, after more than a decade of community-building through public arts and partnering with more conventional environmental activist organizations like the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, a large parcel of the former Gorham manufacturing site was officially opened as a public park, just adjacent to the controversial Alvarez High School. Interviewed by a local environmental website following the park’s ribbon-cutting ceremony, Holly Ewald said, “the public interest in addressing the causes and cleaning up the area, and all the wonderful work done by so many, it was amazing to see.... It was gratifying that the arts can really work to create change” (Carini, 2019). UPPArts’s methods of connecting people to each other around local, situated knowledge of living in or near a contaminated watershed also connected them to real deliberative decision-making processes that otherwise might have left them excluded as “non-experts.” Years earlier, Holly credited the idea for the first procession to her experience at a public hearing on the contamination. She explained that she started this work “because I went to one of those public hearings and it was just awful. Nobody had any idea what anybody was talking about” (Ewald, 2012). Rather

than build public capacity in the complex information technologies needed to participate in the technical discourses valued in such forums (Simmons and Grabill 2007, 422), she deployed a responsive rhetoric based on collaborative and networked artistic methods, reassembling the social into what Warner (2002) calls a counterpublic (118), or what Holly calls people just “being weird” together. Speaking at Alvarez High School before the final procession in 2017, she pointed to the way her work enlists the idea of the watershed to change cultural attitudes of disconnection and distance from each other and from the environment:

We’ve helped to change the view of Mashapaug Pond for many people, yet it still is seen by many as a place to be avoided. But we know differently. It can be and is now seen as a place of learning.... Pay attention. What if we change our ways, pull up more asphalt, plant gardens, pick up pet waste, ride bikes more, drive cars less, cut back on fertilizers and pesticides? The pond would be healthier, our air fresher, our landscape more beautiful, our kids would have a place to play (Urban Pond Procession, 2017).

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Jason Peters is an assistant professor of English at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. He earned his doctorate in English with a specialization in Rhetoric & Composition at the University of Rhode Island, where he was a Jacob K. Javits Fellow in Speech, Rhetoric, and Debate. He also earned an M.F.A. in creative writing at Emerson College. His work appears in *College English* and in the collections *Economies of Writing* (2017) and *Unruly Rhetorics* (2018). He is currently working on a history of the sponsorship and eventual abandonment of bilingual literacy in the U.S. Catholic Church. He teaches courses in first-year writing, composition theory, and environmental rhetoric.