

Up the Creek

Public art 'Sound Walk' project well underway

By Nancy Keefe Rhodes

Iranian-American artist Fereshteh Toosi beat HBO to the punch where founding father John Adams is concerned. In 2004, as Boston got ready for the last Democratic National Convention, Toosi and collaborator Carolyn Lambert re-staged the Boston Tea Party. They didn't tar and feather anybody, but over six weeks their on-going costumed performances materialized without warning in the streets and public spaces of Boston. Previously, they impersonated private investigators searching for Pittsburgh's fabled underground fourth river to collect city residents' stories. Toosi has traipsed through Washington DC in a Saddam Hussein mask on the dictator's birthday and posed as a nurse with a crystal ball. Her documentations of these and other projects – video, digital art, sound, writing and photos – have been exhibited across the US, Canada and Japan.

Now she's in Syracuse, a visiting professor, Syracuse University's 2007-08 Ford Foundation Faculty Fellow in Arts and Civic Engagement. Fall semester she taught a writing seminar on the history of public art in Syracuse. This spring, she and her students in Experimental Documentary and Sound Art have taken Onondaga Creek as their subject. This has meant exploring the Creek, collecting stories and creating an art form called the "sound walk."

Last Friday Toosi sat down at 2nd Story Books on Westcott Street to talk about this project, Up the Creek. Here's part of the conversation.

What's a "sound walk?"
It's not really oral history, not exactly an audio tour, not really even like the documentary feature "StoryCorps" at NPR.

I wanted to do a sound walk from the start. Coming out of the sound-art projects in Europe, it's a live event where people go out and listen to the world. For me, to call it an audio tour starts to sound more commercial – for tourists. A sound walk is another artistic

practice of deep listening to your environment. Canadian artist Jane Cardiff did a sound walk in New York's Central Park last year – then you could listen at the museum exhibition and it was available actually for some time.

How did you settle on the Creek?

I wanted to look at historical pathways. I considered the Erie Canal since it's a waterway, but biking the whole length with students was impractical. I found out about Onondaga Lake as a Superfund Site. But I went to a lecture at the Imagining America conference and one of the speakers was Aggie Lane. I'd heard about her and the Partnership for Onondaga Creek. She's a pretty passionate speaker about the Creek in terms of the Southside. I met her, went to some Partnership meetings. Quickly,

it seemed a good match. I was looking for a site here that needed some attention.

You've wound up with seven students in this course. Did you recruit them?

I knew I needed, very specifically, people who'd be engaged and interested. I put posters all around campus. That was my main marketing tool. I had a meeting with pizza and played a couple audio documentary pieces. Many young people don't listen to radio unless it's satellite. Their parents maybe listen to NPR, but that's kind of the first level of understanding of audio work or audio documentary.

In early January you got rolling with a potluck dinner at the Center for Peace and Social Justice on East Genesee Street. About 18 people started sharing their Creek stories. Your students are also collecting sound?

Yes, and I'll have another group meeting too. I'm doing individual interviews now – much longer, one or two hours – maybe 20 so far. The potluck was a way to find people to go back to and do a second interview, generate interest and have a listening event to share story-telling. The students are doing their own interviews in two groups. They'll produce

their own walks. One will begin at Redhouse Arts Center. The second starts at Southwest Community Center.

These are all about the Creek?

From Redhouse you can walk to the Creek – it's very close. We did that the other day in class. We all went downtown and took a walk. I pointed out different things and just extemporaneously made my own sound walk in real time, to show them. Southwest is the origin point for the second sound walk because it's very close to Blain Street where people were displaced from their homes when the Midland Ave. sewage plant was built. And I have stories from people who grew up in the Valley. That's trickier because the sites people talk about are more spread out. That's been a bit different too – really a lot of people tell me how beautiful growing up there was. Even though it was flooding they looked forward to it as a seasonal event. They'd go out in boats. Older people talk about walking to school. And walking is so integral to this project. So, three regions: Southwest, downtown, the Valley. That's where the stories are accumulating now.

How can people access this?

You can access the student projects in May and mine in July on-line or physically check out CD players at Redhouse and Southwest Community Center's library. I'm 98% sure the third site will be Betts Library.

Several years ago I climbed in a canoe with Bea Gonzalez

and Ollie Clubb at the Zen Center and went down the Creek with them for Women's Voices Radio. I had a tape recorder and we just talked about what we saw on the way. About cleaning up the Creek. About this incredibly beautiful hidden, quiet world – you know, this green tunnel. We passed homeless homesteads and enormous graffiti murals under downtown bridges. We were surprised how popular that show was. Have you been surprised at all the topics that come up about life on the Creek?

Part of my choosing the Creek and not knowing much about it led to this kind of over-ambitious project. I've been really excited by the diversity of people who have a relationship to the Creek, the kinds of stories that come up. I think if I'd known how expansive this subject was, I wouldn't have thought I could do it by July!

How about the gathering you're hosting on April 6 at the Zen Center?

My family celebrates No-rooz, the Iranian New Year. That begins exactly on the spring equinox – well, yesterday. It's based in Zoroastrian tradition, also celebrated in Afghanistan, by Kurds, in some parts of India. On the 13th day we have Sizdah Bedar, which means "getting rid of 13" – literally you take it outside. For the New Year, people set up a table in their homes, a beautiful spread. We make a large plate of sprouts, usually lentil or wheat, and set that out. On the 13th day people celebrate by going out to have a picnic. Iranians love picnics. This day



Onondaga Creekwalk

is all about getting rid of any negative feelings or spirits and moving forward. We take the platter of sprouts to a nearby river or stream, send them on their way as a part of saying good-bye to the previous year. Technically the 13th day would be on April 1. But more people can come on Sunday. We'll have a potluck picnic and everyone is invited. I'm inviting everyone I've interviewed so far. I'd like to keep some connection with them. The Zen Center is one of the few places in the city where the Creek flows that it's not fenced off or walled off.

Up the Creek's Web site – 315water.blogspot.com – has extensive links, photos and audio clips. Visit Toosi's Web site at Fereshteh.net. Further updates in our pages as students finish their work and completed projects are installed this summer. Nancy Keefe Rhodes is a contributing writer to the Eagle Newspapers, nancykeeferrhodes@gmail.com.

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