For nearly twenty years, artist Joan Giroux (American, b. 1961) has considered the nature, identity, and ownership of public green space in her work. Working across sculpture, printmaking, performance, and public engagement, Giroux has developed a participatory project in which visitors are actively engaged in answering the question, “What can we do to prevent the loss of open spaces threatened by governmental forces and commercial development?”

The Commons Artist Project is an exhibition platform in which artists create art forms that engage the public in working toward a communal good. In Giroux’s installation, visitors find city maps that the artist has segmented by political and social lines or barriers, as well as a myriad of social games, learning resources, and calls to action. With these materials, Giroux invites visitors to develop personal agency in preserving the environmental resources of their city.

Over the course of planning the exhibition, Giroux spoke with René King, Assistant Professor in the Design Department at Columbia College Chicago. King and Giroux coteach a course on access and inclusion in urban development. In the following conversation, they consider the complex structures that shape cities and communities.

These excerpts help contextualize Giroux’s work and the opportunities offered to visitors during her residency.

The Commons Artist Project: Joan Giroux is organized by January Parkos Arnall, Curator of Public Programs, with Christy LeMaster, Assistant Curator of Public Programs.
Cities are constructed around a series of complex systems and services, for things like water, transportation, green space, and access to information. How does your work address these forces in the city?

Right now, I'm figuring out a spatial, sculptural element for the Commons, overlaying maps of different systems—such as political, social, transportation, and park systems—and the ways we order and think about ordering the city. Over time, I'm trying to make visible the complexity you mention as well as the interdependence between systems, which sometimes don't talk well to one another.

When did you begin thinking about how individuals and communities relate to urban and public space?

I was raised as a member of a large family that politically and civically involved. Both of my parents ran for public office, and the family volunteered for the Syracuse Peace Council. I was raised with an awareness of intersections between politics and community development. Where I grew up in central New York, I could hop on my bike and ride twenty minutes out into the middle of forests, which had easy access to exploring nature, hiking, canoeing, and hanging around in the woods.

When I moved to New York City, I was so excited, getting up in the middle of the night and seeing people still out on the streets. In the suburbs where I grew up, people would go home and be in their houses. There wasn't a lot of activity. When I was a teenager, I read the book Woman and Nature: The Roaring 20s, 2018. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.


I look forward to teaching it again in the fall and to bringing students to the Commons to see this project. It'll be interesting for students to see it and to talk to them about how this work is actually informed by what I learned from you and through my own research about Chicago, development, and what has been designed or not designed in the city.

People have job obligations and family obligations and self-care and all these things. We tend to orbit in our own zones of comfort. I think working on this project and preparing for the class that you and I taught moved me out of my zone of comfort. I'm continuing to learn and to make connections with more people, projects, and institutions.

We also caught another class, also connected to the Chicago Park District, when we worked with the Alderman in the 69th Ward in Edgewater, your neighborhood, to work on a teen center for Broadway Armoxy Park. All of that kind of feeds into this, I think.

What do you hope people come away with from this project?

I want people to maybe step away from the computer for a while and actually experience the physical, lived world. I'm hoping people get out and take in some of this idea that meandering through parks could be part of what they build into their world. That they think about and experience nature and green spaces, whatever they can find in their own neighborhoods.

The other thing I hope is that they come away with a sense that there's no simple solution, and that instead, in order to come up with strategies that help address some of the challenges facing us, we have to actually consider all of these different complex systems.

The Commons places artistic and civic exchange at the heart of the museum. Here we encourage formal and informal dialogue as well as interactions among artists, visitors, and communities. The Commons is host to an array of programs, community meetings, and a biannual artist project.

Lead support for the Commons is provided by Rebecca W. Knight and Lester B. Knight and the Thomas Wilson—Jill Garling Foundation.
Related Programs

IN PROGRESS: FOOD AND LABOR
Tue, May 1, 6 pm
Join the Chicago chapter of Slow Food, an organization dedicated to advocacy for local food culture and biodiverse community food purveyors, as they share information about their projects and reflect on Paul Roberts’s publication The End of Food. The conversation will be paired with a demonstration of heirloom-variety foods with Jennifer Breckner.

OPENING BRUNCH AND LETTERBOX WORKSHOP WITH JOAN GIROUX
Sat May 5, 11 am
Join artist Joan Giroux in celebrating the opening of her MCA exhibition and her project eco monopolies in the Commons, which examines the importance of public green space in Chicago and around the world. The artist will kick off a letterboxing challenge—an early form of geocaching from the 1800s—asking visitors to extend their experience beyond the Commons to fifteen cultural centers throughout Chicago.

OPEN DIALOGUE: MIGRATION & MUSEUMS
Tue, May 8, 6 pm
In partnership with the Chicago Community Trust and the citywide On the Table event, this open dialogue invites cultural thinkers and visitors to consider the ways that artists migrate through systems, borders, and geopolitical lines. Invited participants include Xóchitl Bada, Director of the Latin American and Latino Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Cesáreo Moreno, Chief Curator and Director of Visual Arts at the National Museum of Mexican Art; and Aram Han Sifuentes, an artist who uses her work to speak to topics of institutions and migrant communities.

GAME NIGHT
Fri, Jun 15, 6 pm
This is an open invitation to Chicago’s analog-gaming community to come and share their latest creations with friends, other creators, and museum visitors. This program is inspired by Giroux’s Commons project and the early use of board games to motivate civic and social connections.

SCREENING: CITIZEN JANE
Fri, Jun 29, 6 pm
Attend a screening of Citizen Jane: Battle for the City and participate in an open discussion. Activist Jane Jacobs upended the field of urban planning with her 1960 book The Death and Life of Great American Cities and was a lifelong proponent of keeping New York City’s public spaces sacred. Jacobs’s life story provides a timely example of the activism and ethics necessary to keep cities livable and functional for all. This screening is followed by conversation organized by René King, Assistant Professor in the Design Department at Columbia College Chicago.

EDIBLE GARDEN WORKSHOP
Sat, Jul 14, 11 am
Artist Fereshteh Toosi guides participants in creating their own edible gardens on the MCA’s Anne and John Kern Terrace. Participation in this workshop is limited to thirty kits, reservable by preregistration through mcachicago.org.

TALK: FOOD ACTIVISM
Fri, Jul 27, 6 pm
Can food change the world? When is gardening a radical act? Panelists lead an open discussion to consider various forms of food activism and guerrilla gardening in Chicago and beyond.

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