

One Hundred Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct: An Interview with Lauren Bon

KCET's Chief Creative Officer, Juan Devis, talks to Lauren Bon about her *One Hundred Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct*. This is an edited transcript from an interview conducted during the filming of KCET's *Artbound* documentary about the project in 2013.



Juan Devis

Lauren, could you tell me more about how *100 Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct* relates to *Bending the River Back Into the City*?

Lauren Bon

100 Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct is perhaps a prelude to *Bending the River Back Into the City*. The latter action highlights the link between Los Angeles and the source of much of its water supply, which journeys from the Owens Valley to the city along the LA Aqueduct. Both *100 Mules* and *Bending the River* symbolically and manifestly re-incorporate the Owens Valley back into the narrative of the LA watershed. The Owens Valley has paid dearly for its gift to Los Angeles – the valley's agripotential has consistently shrunk over time. The Metabolic Studio's engagement in the Owens Valley has also involved soil production. We have worked with Julie Fought and numerous growers to turn compost into soil by adding carbons that come from the mule packing industry

in the Owens Valley. We distribute soil in the Owens Valley in exchange for community engagement, which is defined by people in their own way – we don't qualify that for them. I was so impressed with the mule packers that I met up there. I realized there was potential to walk the entire LA Aqueduct and commemorate its centenary in collaboration with the Owens Valley team that we were already working with. *100 Mules* was born of several years of work with real people doing real things in the Owens Valley.

As we headed toward the 2013 LA Aqueduct centenary, I also realized that all of my experiences of the aqueduct were from the highway as I drove from LA to the Owens Valley. I would see it out in the distance but had not taken the time to experience the places that our water is moving through. One of the things that I've been working on at the Metabolic Studio since 2005 is a speculative, "post-apocalyptic" idea of philanthropy – the idea that it's reasonable to assume in our life span that the world as we know it could change, that capital and the entire system that surrounds capital will no longer be the way the world is organized. In that case, how would we survive? Where would we get our food? How would we get our water? And in a city like LA, I couldn't really envision how you would get the very basic needs of survival met if your ATM card didn't work. Together with my studio team, we've been trying to look at some of those modalities of survival. The mule packing industry is an interesting place to start thinking this through. The incredible labor force of mules was used to build the aqueduct; they were used at the same time by Teddy Roosevelt to build the Panama Canal. They are a major force in the construction of the western world as we know it and they have never been properly acknowledged for their role in agriculture. Their story in the making of the United States is massive; their story in the history of war is massive. The rubric of an inquiry into post-apocalyptic philanthropy and mapping a future life off the grid – the passage of one hundred mules literally drawing the line between the source of our water and the city that benefits – fundamentally shaped this action. Many people who came out to watch us knew nothing of the centenary of the opening of the LA Aqueduct. But they came to see that many mules and wranglers move through space. The mules, the wranglers, and the artists on the trip formed a community that "walked the water." We sang to the water in key locations where it was freed from a pipe or ravine. We offered flowers in Pine Tree Canyon that were brought from the *Anabolic Monument* in the LA State Historic Park. We developed an intimate relationship with the aqueduct as well as firsthand experience of what some of the first explorations of the American West might have been like.

JD

When we first discussed this journey you described it as an act of asking permission. And now that I hear you talking it seems that *100 Mules* has been a way to reconcile sign and signifier for you.

LB

Thank you for bringing us back to this. In order to approach a project like *Bending the River Back Into the City*, I needed to ask permission of the river because that's the way teachers of mine, especially in the Native American tradition, talk about our commons. Water is the commons of all living things. For the last hundred years, we have thought of water as a commodity that we can export from one place and then distribute as a right of our citizenship. But there are much older and earlier ways of thinking about water as commons for all living things and that we all need to ask permission of and honor the water. That way of thinking is deeply embedded in nearly every culture. I wanted to take a month to walk the aqueduct on and with a mule and spend time asking the river if I could be of service. I really felt that I was able to do that.

JD

We've talked about the past one-hundred-year period in which we have not had a direct relationship with our water source. This gesture, and the way that you are describing it, is like going back to the source to figure out what the next hundred years are going to be.

LB

That round figure of one hundred allows us to draw a line in the sand. For myself, and as a private citizen and as an artist, I have tried to create and enact a shift. There has been a very high price tag for the lifestyle that we enjoy in LA. It's not simply about the water we have, it's about the power that we use because most of our power comes from water. The last century has largely been underpinned by a dependency to water from the Eastern Sierra and the Rocky Mountains. We can certainly as a society do a lot better at managing that resources and using them more wisely.

JD

It's interesting to me that Metabolic Studio's inquiries and actions – especially *AgH2O*—are premised upon going into the landscape to create an image, going back to the source for a vision. With *100 Mules*, there is a continuum in what you are trying to achieve.

LB

Walking the aqueduct is about the mystery of the mule, the first hybrid animal to exist on the planet. We created the mule two thousand years ago to do our work. It's the first invention to shape the world into our dreams of it. *100 Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct* was walking a dream, a month-long meditation. The idea of a pilgrimage is rooted in so many mystical traditions. Of course, it wasn't just my body undertaking this metabolic meditation—it was a hundred mules, my collaborators, and the support team, too. Just to give you a picture of what that walk looked like, to move a hundred mules for 240 miles involves an incredibly organized, urban, movable form. This movable form journeyed about twenty miles per day. The mules were organized into groups of ten, called "strings." Each mule string had dedicated wranglers. There were

about twelve mule wranglers and a "dude wrangler" who dealt with the five riders that were not wranglers, including me, who needed daily assistance. Then we had about the same number of people in the camp crew. We needed someone to set up and break down our mule corrals every day. We had a kitchen truck with people making breakfast and dinner and sandwiches for lunch. We had a water truck with toilets and showers. We had a vet and a mule chiropractor who worked on the mules that needed some adjustments. We hauled food and water for the mules. It was a considerable logistical exercise. The Metabolic Studio had an urban tent that we set up every night for everybody involved. On windy days, we pitched it low to the ground and on hot days we could stretch it up so wind moved through it. We had three or four support vehicles that carried what we needed to make engagement with the community happen along the way. So that's a lot of things and a lot of living souls walking the aqueduct. The logistics of this metabolic sculpture—the logistics of drawing this line—were the most perfect social experiment I've ever participated in. There was not a single problem—no sickness, no arguments, no exhaustion feeding its way into people's lives. It was flawless.

JD

There were other elements in the mule pack — such as the solar mule cam. Can you talk about this very specific kind of setup?

LB

Luckily, we had already discussed KCET joining us through certain parts of the journey. But because it would take significant resources to document the whole journey, Metabolic Studio developed the idea of a string of mules as our documentary team, which included a "sonic mule" and an "optic mule." The optic mule had two solar panels and various hard drives from which four different cameras streamed every day's journey. We made a documentary about the entire journey from the perspective of one mule named Dolly, who had a camera on her head, a camera on her haunch, a camera on her right side, and a camera her left side. We filmed the entire walk from the moment we left Jen and Lee Roeser's 8 Mile Ranch until the time we took the saddles and the pads off the mules at the LA Equestrian Center on Veterans Day. One continuous shot, with a nearly three-week duration, was powered by solar energy generated on the journey. Sound documentation was recorded by Babe, the sonic mule. Babe's rig was designed by Sonic Division's Douglas Lee and it was broadcast live on something called KHOOF, an online radio station for anyone who wanted to listen in to the walk.

JD

Let's talk about your collaboration with Jen and Lee Roeser at the mule packing 8 Mile Ranch, in Independence.

LB

100 Mules Walking the LA Aqueduct would have remained a dream without Jen and Lee Roeser. There is an elegance about their craft that I would call artisanship—the way that they thought about the pageantry of moving one

hundred mules through space made it magnificent. For example, for the final day, Veterans Day, we wanted the mules to carry American flags. Jen knew exactly how to train the mules not to be afraid of the waving flags and let the beauty of the mules shine through without too much embellishment. I had the privilege of meeting with Jen and Lee every morning and every night to discuss that day and the next day. In any performative action, issues come up that require some rethinking. Not a single day went like we thought it was going to go. To have collaborative partners with whom you can sit down and work it out is the ideal. I worked with the very best, and I know it because I could see it every day. I could see it in how Jen and Lee ran the event and how much the other wranglers respected them. They made sure that every mule was well looked after. Even though it was a large operation, they had broken it down into sizes and units that worked. They also took novice mules on this trip, mules that had never gone on any kind of pack trip before, to break them in. We had a lot of young mules that like to play and they had time to play every single night. We put the mules first in every decision we made, so by the time we got to Los Angeles, one thing that surprised me was how happy the mules were. I had expected we would come in dusty and beleaguered, but the mules looked better than when we started. Jen and Lee Roeser have seen the mule-packing industry through some very interesting times up in the Sierras. For them, this was an opportunity to bring consciousness about the mule-packing industry and how we see our public lands. Environmental laws increasingly prevent mules from taking tourists into the Sierras because they are not indigenous to the landscape. Laws about where people can mule pack are getting more restrictive. At the same time, if a fire or someone's injury requires equipment, mules are the first mode of transportation we can turn to for help. Helicopters can't get to a lot of places in the Sierras. Once you squeeze an industry out of existence, it's not something you can simply restart. We share the environment with living things so that we can take care of the world of which we've elected ourselves to be custodians.

JD

Let's talk about two things. The LA DWP and the permits, and your route.

LB

The overall route is bookended by two feats of engineering: the intake of the LA Aqueduct, which is just north of Jen and Lee Roeser's ranch in Independence, and the Cascades in Sylmar, where the water that's been imported from Owens Valley is released to the city. The route can be divided into four distinct sections. The first section is right in the foothills of the Eastern Sierras, where most of the water comes from and where it mainly moves through open canals. These canals were the most difficult thing to get permission to walk along because they are open. But as I said, there has been a weird mystical thing on this trip: somehow, at the last minute, everything works out. The route that we agreed to walk with the DWP was not on the edge of the open canals but slightly east of them. Ultimately, because the confines of the canals flooded, the DWP had let us walk alongside the open canals. The DWP accompanied us on the first section of the journey. That was wonderful because

it's often very difficult to incorporate bureaucracy into a creative action. We had the opportunity in that first week of the journey to spend the entire time in the DWP's presence. They were with us every day from the beginning of the walk to the end of the walk and sometimes for dinner.

The second section stretched from Olancho to Mojave, where the water is mainly in pipes. Many of us, when we think of the LA Aqueduct, think of the very large pipes you can see from the 395. That section was an opportunity to deal with endurance—it was very hot; they were very long days; and, we thought, we would see very few people because when you drive through those areas it just looks like desert. It was a big surprise that we encountered so many people on the roads there. A whole new sport—"mule spotting"—seemed to emerge. People spent their entire day figuring out where we were going to be and coming to meet us. At Jawbone Junction, the LA DWP joined us with two busloads of people from LA who they brought out for a tour of their new wind farms nearby. We involved students from Lone Pine's high school and they all got to watch the mules traverse the mountains. We camped at Pine Tree Canyon then in the morning made our way back up to the top of the mountain, where we discovered water moving from the top of a siphon down into the next pipe. It was so moving. It was one week since we had left the intake and seen the water—and suddenly it was there again. I called my colleague Olivia, who was growing marigold flowers in the State Historic Park for the Day of the Dead ceremony. She drove all the way up to meet us at the top of the siphon with a big basket of marigolds. We gathered there with people from Mojave and we sang songs and we threw marigolds into the water—we greeted the water.

The third section of the walk was straight through the Mojave Desert to the San Fernando Valley. That was so surreal. We went through the giant forest of wind instruments and camped at night with the buzz of electrical cables overhead. The whole campsite seemed to glow with the energy being transferred around us. We got to Neenac, where the California Aqueduct and the Los Angeles Aqueduct run adjacent to one another. That whole stretch, which was about a week of walking, is rich in the exploration of solar and wind energy. That third week was underpinned by discussions about the energy of water and power.

Finally, the fourth section was the San Fernando Valley. We managed to arrive at the Cascades on November 5, when the LA DWP was staging a re-enactment of the event, one hundred years ago, when William Mulholland made his famous speech ("There it is, take it") and water was delivered to throngs of people. We then spent a week in the San Fernando Valley at Stetson Ranch, at Hansen Dam, back into the Verdugo Mountains, and then finally down into the city on Veterans Day. We walked via Western Ave in Glendale to the LA River and on to the LA Equestrian Center for a grand finale celebration of the mules and their role as a veteran force in the United States.

Juan

At the end of the journey, the mules were set free. Tell me about that.

Lauren

I had spoken to the team about what we were going to do for the finale because it's always difficult to close a project like this. How can you possibly do something big enough or cathartic enough to end a hundred mule walk for a month? I said. "You've got to trust the mules. They are magical and they will deliver everything that we need." I had in my mind's eye that we would bring the mules into the LA Equestrian Center and simply unburden them of all their load – their bridles, their reigns, their bit, their pads, and just let them be. I have to tell you, it was probably the best performance experience I've ever seen, it was absolutely magical. The mules went crazy in there. They started racing around and rolling in the dirt, kicking each other and nibbling. It didn't last very long but there was 30-40 minutes of full-on unbridled exuberance.

There was a fifth section—or perhaps an epilogue—that marked the end of my work on the LA State Historic Park begun a decade before with *Not A Cornfield*. To say goodbye to that decade of work, Jen Roser and I took Dolly, the camera mule, and Babe, the sonic mule, and walked around the park as the sun went down on November 13, 2013. This brought personal closure to both the journey of *100 Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct* and the *Anabolic Monument*—and served as a symbolic opening for *Bending the River Back Into the City*.

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