

Strawberry Flag: An Interview with Lauren Bon

Lauren Bon discusses *Strawberry Flag* (2009-10) and the actions that resulted from her engagement with the West LA Veterans Administration.

Charlotte Cotton

Lauren, it's a pleasure to interview you in your studio. We are standing in the installation of the *Indexical* project – a constellation of sculptural works that came from your time on the West LA Veterans' "home." Could you start by talking about the impetus for this body of work?

Lauren Bon

I've been working on the *Indexical* sculptures pretty much since *Strawberry Flag*, which was an action I took with Metabolic Studio in 2009 and 2010. It has taken a long time for me to bring this body of work to a place that I feel it's mature enough to show. I think it's an important piece of mine and part of the narrative of what the studio has been committed to. Through the work that we've done, we have leveraged a dialogue about how we treat our veterans in the City of Los Angeles. In that respect, *Indexical* carries the agency of moving the social agenda.

I trained in architecture and when I started to really look at the VA of West LA, I was struck by the elegance of the buildings there and the marked absence of people. I really wanted to showcase those buildings so that people who aren't veterans but who live in Los Angeles could see the history of the city that the site embodied. That property that is now the WLA VA was built before almost anything else in LA existed – starting in 1888 – and it was an open and flourishing place that included war veterans at its center. A trolley car used to go from where we're standing, by the LA River in the historic core of the city, right to the VA Hospital – then called the "Old Soldier's Home" – and then on to the beach. Tea was served there every day as part of what the city did for recuperating veterans. They had a library, they had a theater, and if you lived in LA in the late-nineteenth century, it was a place you would visit for culture and recreation.

I was first taken there by Dr. Jon Sherin, who was head of the psychiatric program at the VA. He showed me the present-day state of disintegration in the services and facilities for homeless veterans, and the historic and unused buildings. I realized that many of the homeless vets come from Downtown LA to the VA on buses, then would find some tree shade to lie under or buildings to rest in among the least visible places on the campus. And then they would take the bus back to Downtown LA and try and get a room in a homeless shelter. On top of that, Jon Sherin had introduced to me an existing program that the VA was trying to put into action, a holistic healthcare concept organized by an outside consultancy called the Planetree Initiative. The Planetree Initiative's role was like a talent scout looking for extracurricular palliative-care activities that could be brought onto the VA Hospital site to

raise the quality of life for veterans. With Jon, I proposed *Strawberry Flag* to the VA of West LA. One issue *Strawberry Flag* attempted to raise was that homeless vets were not being welcomed into property that's been left in trust for them as a home. They could not even sit on the grass. Why were they being kept off that property?

I was interested in using one of the quadrangles – which is the complex's basic architectural-compositional strategy, large buildings surrounding a shared green space. I was interested in taking one of those quadrangles that had under-purposed and abandoned buildings on three sides and transforming them energetically into a unit that was more than a sum of parts – activating the original intent to provide a commons for veterans. The idea of "the commons" comes from European architecture constructed for a feudal system; property and resources that were held in common were called "the commons."

The *Strawberry Flag* proposal was to create an American flag made from strawberries that could be grown by veterans looking for work through the Compensated Work Therapy program in one of the many quads on campus. I was concerned about some of the vets' mobility issues and instead of putting the strawberry plants in the ground we grew the strawberries in a raised aquaponic system so that people using wheelchairs and walkers could work with the plants without physical limitation. Strawberries require a lot of water but you need a lot less of it with an aquaponic system. We salvaged water from the LA River, cleaned in Agbins and tubs containing fish that we collected from Big Bear. This process cleaned the water and added nitrates through the life cycle of the fish, which helped amend the strawberry plants. We collected strawberry plants from a field out in Rosemead, where they pick the strawberries and then plow the plants into the soil at the end of the first growing season. Strawberry plants would keep growing if given the chance and I felt that this was a clear analogy to the salvaging and supporting of lives. We put this project together with veteran labor and made this flag-shaped, living object in the middle of the quad. It became the focal center for what would become an eighteen-month activation of the entire quad.



A quadrangle of the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration, including Buildings 208 (center), 209 (left), and 205 (right), the welcome/reception tent, Metabolic Studio Airstream office/radio station, and surrounding property.

CC

What was the VA's perception of the proposal?

LB

I think they thought that a garden was something that gets installed, then a gardener tweaks it and that's it. I don't think they thought the Metabolic Studio was going to move in for a year and a half, host tea parties, start a veterans' print shop, and do many other things. Because *Strawberry Flag* was quite hidden on the campus – it was at the back of the back of the campus, as far away as you could get from the working hospital – nobody ever really checked it out. By default, and by indifference, our feral activation of the site was legitimized. I had tried to put together a weekly meeting of all the people involved with the project – to make sure that everybody was fully

informed of the project as we moved along – but VA officials rarely came to these meetings.

CC

How did you utilize the buildings around the *Strawberry Flag* quad?

LB

Once we could gain access, we explored all three buildings that surrounded the quad. Many of the rooms were in disrepair, with ceilings falling in, but you could see by the way chairs were placed that people were still living in those spaces. Building 205's basement contained hordes of art materials left over from past art therapy programs used in the building's former psychiatric ward. I organized a labor force from my studio team and the veterans' Compensated Work Therapy program and we spent a weekend cleaning up the ground floor of one of the buildings. We figured out how much it cost in labor for veterans to work on the weekend to clean up the space, and what it cost to put a print studio into action, and it came out to \$1,500. A small amount of money for a project that gave the veterans a tangible experience of doing something valuable. I'd say that this cleaning up and repurposing weekend was the beginning of the feral action around *Strawberry Flag*. It raised simple questions about the under-purposing of the site. These were spaces that some staff worked in and veterans used. If it took so little to make so much happen, why doesn't that activation happen as a matter of course?



CC

Why doesn't it happen?

LB

I think the answer to that is largely about potential liability. We live in a litigious society, and when people from the VA finally figured out what was going on, they would say, "You are endangering our veterans." We were like, "Uh, you mean the people who've been to war, who are here because of massive explosions that have rattled their brains? In what way are we jeopardizing

them?" I felt there was a systematic infantilizing of the veterans in treatment: they are reduced from warriors to perceived fragile creatures. That is not helpful to them or to their future selves because they like to feel of use – vets really like to feel useful and are driven by teamwork. Eventually, we went through all of the buildings. We built a big kitchen, which became the go-to place for both vets and staff. We engaged a veteran, Ruth, who enjoyed cooking soul food each Friday, and we invited a raw-food chef on Tuesdays to come in and prepare a meal. We had a fitness boot camp with a spin teacher from West LA. The nurses and doctors would come and work out, they'd be jogging around the quad with veterans, and then they would go up to the kitchen for raw food, and they'd all sit together around a table. We found an old piano in the basement and vets would come to sing and dance. We created a lounge and bathroom for the women veterans – the only facility on the campus for them. We put a black-box theater into one building and we were pretty much ready to turn another space into an emergency homeless shelter. I found brand-new beds, blankets, and pillows in one of the buildings and we tried to set up a backdoor "Fifth Season Hotel" for artists and veterans in which rooms could be booked through a no-money timeshare system. It was a fully functioning, unsanctioned happy place.

CC

I imagine that the creation of an alternative structure within a larger bureaucratic system is not going to end well ...

LB

Inevitably. *USA Today* ran a small piece celebrating the collaborative work between the VA of West LA and Metabolic Studio, which was the kiss of death to *Strawberry Flag*. After building that energy and meaningful reanimation – when you've proved that something modest and human can work so well – to not be able to convince the authorities to adopt the methodology leaves you with a heartbreak that's hard to resolve. The studio was providing interesting, creative jobs and skill-enhancement for veterans. To train vets to do work such as aquaponics farming is to train vets to have careers. It's very frustrating that we were not able to continue to employ veterans because the vets who worked with us got a lot out of the experience. It's not like anyone involved ever complained, it was just that the system declared, "No more Metabolic Studio." We were caught in the gap between an artwork, as a highly resolved social-practice engagement during the course of a year and a half, and an inability to translate this into a long-term public/private partnership for the VA.

I resolved it in a little bit of a Steve Martin-esque "jerk" way, which is like, "Look, if I have to go, I'll just take the stuff with me – I'll just take those lights with me, and I will just take all the handrails down. And I really need the front doors, and I need those observation windows, and that chair that says "Interrogation" on it that I found in the basement, and. . . . Oh, and there's that window that the veterans would sit by to watch the sunset." I went around the buildings and I put tags on everything that I

wanted to take with me and my team came in the camouflage of repairmen uniforms and they removed windows, lights, and other fittings and put new ones in.

CC

And the *Indexical* objects are essentially those objects – those memorializing symbols – of *Strawberry Flag*?

LB

Yes, and they still carry the charge of the history of this quad at the VA. Since *Strawberry Flag* ended, Building 209 has been gutted; all of these physical traces would have just been thrown away. What I mean by "indexicality" is that these objects are physically of that space, of what happened in living memory, and index what should not be negated or obliterated. These indexical objects become story components that catalyze questions about why they were made and why they are here. They are sculptural experiences for our moral obligation to understand the cost of war. Soldiers are cited as our nation's heroes but what happens to them is not a story that really gets told. And what happens to the places that are left for veterans if they are cut out of the fabric of the commons and are instead held by bureaucratic agencies which are themselves places of conflict and negation?

For me, the indexical objects are both actual and symbolic. When installed as an exhibition, they become a physiological translation or encounter with the human-scale realities of war and its aftermath. I felt that I should assemble these traces of the VA into physical, sculptural spaces that are mimetic – spatially like the places they were pulled from – but transformed. For instance, the indexical space from Building 205 is composed out of the wire mesh that protected people from jumping through the stairways. I didn't want to re-make or rethink these indexical objects. I want viewers to directly encounter these substantial details of institutionalized systems, of the way that windows are locked so that people don't jump out of them.

The window is from the former psychiatric ward and where I found a single chair positioned. I found it at sunset and I was struck by the trace of somebody who had made a sunset seat for themselves. There was just something about the inability to open the window that faced onto a beautiful place – in this place of two streams; you're looking at it but you can't even reach the fresh air. I found it absolutely chilling and I thought, "I need to take this. People need to see that this is how we treat our people who are in a psych ward." There is also the long desk from the former psychiatric ward. When we found it, it still had many of the records and files of former patients. The desk had been a silent memorial to the veterans who had been institutionalized at the WLA VA and I didn't want that to be lost. The indexical works are not just about the buildings, they're also about the people who were there. It brings the experience into a compassionate space.

CC

Where do you see the legacy of *Strawberry Flag*?

LB

In the *Indexical* installation, I see it in *Isolation Room*. The window faces onto a room of small video screens and headphones that play the video documentation we created during *Strawberry Flag*. It is the piece that's taken me the longest to make. It tells the whole story – of all the spaces we created, the high teas, vets interviewing other vets, the New Directions choir, the print shop, open mic Sundays. For me, this embodies the living system that *Strawberry Flag* created.

With *Strawberry Flag*, we had reinvigorated Arcadia's vision of a home for recuperating veterans and I felt that, as an artist but also as a philanthropist, I needed to carry the torch for her because I was horrified at the systematic dismantling of her vision. As a philanthropist, I was thinking, "Okay, if I were to gift property to the federal government as a home, and there were homeless veterans on the outside of this beautiful place, I would really hope that someone in my position in the future would blow a whistle." It became clear that once the art action was over, the only way to reinforce a paradigm shift in the treatment of veterans was to take it into the court system.

We were kindly given an office by the CalVet organization in their building on the WLA VA campus and I invited a veteran lawyer, Terence Lyons, to work with the writer and curator Janet Owen Driggs. For a year they worked full-time with a Philadelphia-based lawyer who had edited my letters to Donna Beiter during *Strawberry Flag*, preparing the position paper called *Preserving a Home for Veterans*. We sent this proto-lawsuit to the ACLU, which proceeded to sue the Federal Government. And we won.

The result of the lawsuit has been some fundamental shifts at the VA of West LA. The leadership team was changed for correction – not one member of the original team is left. The for-profit leases on VA properties were revoked. Only veterans-related programs and organizations can exist there now – with the exception of a private high school called the Brentwood School. The VA released the funding to turn Building 209 into a homeless shelter. *Strawberry Flag* was a catalyst for this change and what remains of the artwork are these indexical objects that hold the story of the WLA VA and the destruction but also reanimation of Arcadia's vision.

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