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ARTIST AS LEADER

Frances Whitehead on being lead artist for The 606, Chicago's massive public works project

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PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A LEADER

**Frances Whitehead, lead artist
on Chicago's 606 project, tells
Public Art Review about her role
and how she got there**

BY JOE HART



ON A RAGGED DAY AT THE END OF 2014'S ROUGH WINTER, a Chicago wind nudged around the corners of a few construction trailers parked behind a chain link fence on a vacant lot just off the Kennedy Expressway. At the start of the construction season, there wasn't much to recommend this shabby and largely forgotten corner of the big city. But as this issue goes to press, the abandoned lot on North Ashland Avenue will be the busy easternmost access point of what is arguably the most ambitious experiment in placemaking ever undertaken.

The 606, as the \$90 million project has been dubbed, is massive in scale. It turns a nearly three-mile-long abandoned, elevated rail spur into a mixed-use trail that, when complete, will connect five parks in four neighborhoods. The project is notable not only for its size but for its leadership: The primary design team includes not only an engineer and a landscape architect, but also an artist—the sculptor-turned-eco-social-practitioner, Frances Whitehead.

Placemaking, of course, is the topic du jour in public art. In the past few years alone, billions have been invested in the notion that creative artists have a role in defining our public space, and hence our public life. The 606, which began as a garden-variety rails-to-trails project before it morphed into its current form, is perhaps the biggest test of the principle.

If that sounds like a lot of pressure, you are right. But Whitehead, who turned 60 this year, is in many ways the ideal candidate for such a grand test. For one thing, she possesses a coiled, vibrant energy suited for the breathtaking pace of the project. In conversation, she frequently interrupts herself, building excited sets of parentheticals that eventually topple of their own weight. She's opinionated and blunt. But she has a way of delivering truths with a twinkle in her eye that makes them palatable.

She also brings the insider art-world cred of a gallery career and tenure at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and she is an outspoken advocate not only for her artistic ideas but for a broader ecological agenda that transcends human time, to say nothing of artistic time. Most importantly, Whitehead has spent the past decade and a half making artistic experiments in the public realm—specifically, in civic planning and infrastructure.

"I have spent ten years consciously preparing myself to work at this scale—the scale of the city," Whitehead says. "I had to ramp up in every way."

In most large-scale public art projects, the artist's handiwork is self-evident. Chicago's Millennium Park, for instance, is a smarter, savvier, more user-friendly and interactive version of the kind of signature public art that we've been used to since the dawn of monumentalist public art. Call it Plop Art 2.0.

By contrast, in her role as "lead artist," Whitehead's hand is, if not invisible, camouflaged by the scale of The 606, by its long history, and by the collaborative nature of the team charged with its completion. Her work on the eastern trailhead is as good an example as any. Early in the design process, an idea emerged to expand the existing Walsh Park to include a new skate park, and Whitehead inherited the idea.

Constructed from energy-intensive concrete, skate parks aren't exactly an ecologist's dreamscape. "Skate parks have a high-carbon, impervious footprint, so one strategy for efficiency is to get more bang for your buck," explains Whitehead. "I said 'Skate park/jazz club.'" When the skaters go home, out come the musicians with cocktails. To that end, Whitehead designed a space that uses energy-sipping LED lighting to "de-ghettoize skating" and welcome in adults. At dusk, the landscape will literally begin to glow and the skate park features will transform into a stage, lights, sound system, and seating area for an outdoor amphitheater.

The lighting in the park is based on the acorn-shaped glass fixture that's been ubiquitous since the advent of urban street lighting. In this case, however, Whitehead's design turns the acorn-shape upside down. "Skaters flip upside-down, so I flipped the light upside-down. And so we're flipping expectations. The kids are upside-down, the light fixtures are upside-down, we flip the park at dusk. In every way, it transforms, right? It's a shape-shifter."

OUT OF THE GALLERY

Whitehead never set out to become a public artist—much less a rabble-rouser. As the daughter of two artists, the studio was literally where she felt at home. She went straight to college out of high school, then to graduate school at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, where she earned her M.F.A. Her artistic practice evolved in those years from printmaking to sculpture. Her work resonated, and her career blossomed. She exhibited in increasingly important galleries and museums. She earned tenure at SAIC. As an artist, she had arrived.

But *where* had she arrived? That was the question that increasingly nagged Whitehead, even as her career took off. It was a personal gardening project that first gave Whitehead pause. "I was gardening in this place where crap was in the soil from a house that had been there. After a freeze-thaw cycle, you'd see this little piece of fluff, and you'd go to pick it up—and it would be an eight-by-ten-foot rug that would come out of the soil," she recalls. "I was

perceiving a 'dis-ease' around me, and it threw me into a personal, artistic crisis."

This personal crisis had something to do with art, something to do with the reality of life in postindustrial America, and everything to do with the role of an artist in society. Whitehead had always been interested in science, especially biology, and her sculptural works frequently explored environmental themes. In the garden, she literally dug into these themes—touched and smelled them—in a very different way. The complexity and severity of our ecological problems was beyond the reach of making, displaying, and selling sculptural objects and installations.

"I'm digging every day and pulling this shag carpet out of the ground, and then I'm in the studio making art about what? The *death of nature!*?" she says. "The postindustrial just was knocking the *stuffing* out of any pretense I made at meaningfulness. I knew the gallery was a bankrupt metaphysic for me."

Fifteen years later, Whitehead can discuss this artistic crisis in detail—and even joke about it. But at the time, she says, "it was terrifying." Gallery art had provided the language, values, and structure of not only her life's work but her family's. Without it, she recalls, "my studio practice kind of went black. I walked away from a very vigorous gallery career. One day I woke up and I had stopped believing."

Faced with the complete disruption of her career, Whitehead did what any self-respecting artist with a well-developed sense of curiosity and an outsized capacity for abstract thinking would have done: She started looking for a new metaphysic—a fundamental understanding of how and why the world works that could give meaning to her work.

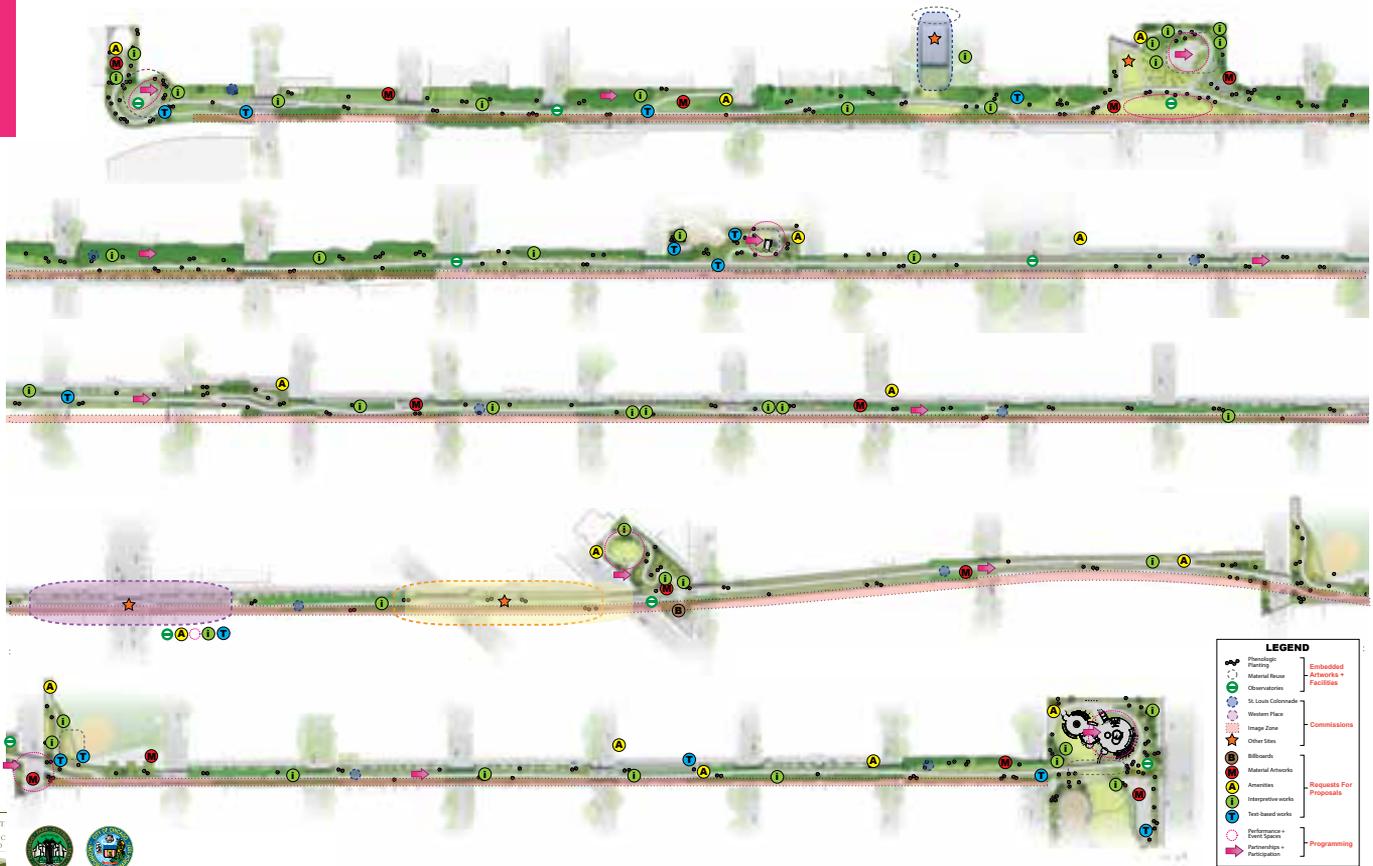
For one thing, she discovered the world of design: On an airplane, she by chance met Stanley Tigerman, a trailblazing architect and socially conscious designer. He became a mentor, and their friendship introduced Whitehead to the conversation and ideas in architecture at that time. The Australian design and sustainability theorist Tony Fry became another important influence.



THIS PAGE: Artist Frances Whitehead.
OPPOSITE: Whitehead on railway spur that is becoming the site of The 606 in Chicago.

ARTS INTEGRATION OVERVIEW

A LIVING WORK OF ART



The Trust for Public Land is The 606 project manager, in partnership with the Chicago Park District and City of Chicago.

An overview of the nearly three-mile-long abandoned railway spur that will connect five parks in four Chicago neighborhoods.

What Whitehead found useful about design was the scale at which it works—its seriousness in addressing ecological issues. “The intellectual discourse coming out of the design world is deeply philosophic,” she explains. “It’s not about ‘green,’ and not about ‘do-it-yourself.’ It’s not the kind of stuff that goes on in the art world, but deep conversation around change and around sustainability, and what it’s going to take. It captured my imagination, and there was no going back after that.”

It was a turning point that led, step-by-step, to her role on The 606. Today, Whitehead has no regrets. “I didn’t turn away from something,” she says. “I turned *toward* something.”

INTO THE FIELD

In 2008, Whitehead approached Chicago’s director of innovation, Matt Guilford, to propose that she be “embedded” in the city government. The idea led to her being placed, first, in the Department of Planning and subsequently in the Department of Environment, where she was given the task of exploring a new approach to sustainable brownfield cleanup. Many of Chicago’s brownfields are abandoned gas stations and, as is true in cities like Detroit and St. Louis, there’s no demand for the property—they simply sit there. “There’s

no development pressure,” says Whitehead, “so the asset we have is time itself.”

Based on this realization, she coined the term “Slow Cleanup,” and enlisted the help of Dr. Paul Schwab, a leading soil scientist who works in phytoremediation—the science of cleaning soils with plants. Together with partners in the city and the Morton Arboretum, they’ve launched several long-term test sites in Chicago, including one seven-acre plot slated to become a “remediation arboretum,” restoring the soil to health.

Through the Slow Cleanup project and other similar works that she’s undertaken since she abandoned the gallery, Whitehead is exploring two connected artistic constructs that have come to define her practice: One is “postnormal art,” and the other a document she calls “What do Artists Know?”

The concept of postnormal art is borrowed from philosopher Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a *paradigm shift*. As Whitehead explains it, Kuhn’s theory is that a scientific paradigm shift takes place when the “normal” way of doing science leaves a growing number of anomalies unaccounted for. Eventually, the anomalies become interesting and attract more and more attention. And the more attention they attract, the more that scientists working in the “normal”

THE LAKE EFFECT



ART

ENVIRONMENTAL SENTINEL

A CLIMATE MONITORING ARTWORK

Use the beauty of a flowering "phenologic" spectacle to visualize and monitor our relationship to Lake Michigan

Why does the Serviceberry reveal the Lake Effect?



American Serviceberry, *Amelanchier x grandiflora*, our most beautiful native ornamental tree, is very temperature-sensitive. Using existing temperature data for the area, a 5 day bloom spread is expected for this planting.

PLANT

Why is The Bloomingdale important for Chicago?



The 2.7 mile length and east-west orientation of The Bloomingdale creates a world-class opportunity to study our climate. The 5 day bloom spread reveals how large bodies of water effect local temperature patterns in Spring and Fall, known as the Lake Effect.

LAKE

What is phenology and how does it monitor the climate?



National Calibration species, Chinese Lilac
Syringa x chinensis 'Red Rothomagensis'

Illinois Calibration species, Weeping Forsythia
Forsythia suspensa var. *sieboldii*

CLIMATE

Phenology is the ancient science of observing nature's calendar and the cycle of biologic events. There has been a resurgence of interest in phenology as it is the best way to understand micro-climate. Additional species that grow throughout the USA and Illinois provide comparative data for the American Serviceberry, helping us understand our local, national, and global climate over long periods of time.

How can I get involved?



Our local phenological efforts will be led by The Trust for Public Land in collaboration with Chicago Wilderness and the USA National Phenologic Network.



The Trust for Public Land is The 606 project manager, in partnership with the Chicago Park District and City of Chicago.

CITIZEN

Whitehead's signature work on The 606 is a climate monitoring planting scheme that will reveal how Lake Michigan's temperatures affect flowering trees.

way see them as a threat. "The people working under the old paradigm start getting conservative and freaking out. This is where we are today," Whitehead says. Eventually, though, the paradigm shifts, when the new way of working becomes more prevalent than the old "normal."

Similarly, Whitehead proposes, artists like her who have left behind the gallery system are entering a postnormal artistic world characterized by "a deeper engagement with systems, complexity, and context." Artists are moving from an old "normal" in which the artist's role is primarily to comment on the world in some way through his or her art, to a new way of working that is hands-on, involved, active in making change and providing solutions. They are, in other words, coming off the sidelines.

If that's true—that artists have a role to play in the larger project of adapting to a changing planet—then what skills do they bring to the table? That's the question that led Whitehead, over a period of several years culminating in 2006, to develop her list of "What do Artists Know?" The eleven competencies include "synthesizing diverse facts, goals, and references," "creative in-process problem solving," "participation and maneuvering in non-compensation economies," and other types of know-how unique to artists.

All this might sound like the age-old battle of the latest art movement against the past, but that would be missing the point, Whitehead insists. "It's not about being the 'un-gallery,'" she says. "It's about how artists can participate in creating the future city."

A lot of this thinking is deep in Whitehead's past, but her call to action could serve as a working manifesto for the "social practice" age of public art—the rapidly approaching postnormal public art. As a manifesto, it has a special resonance for artists who are stepping out of the studio and into the streets. It responds to the proverbial question, *Is it art?* with a reasonable answer: *I don't know, but I am an artist, and I possess special knowledge to apply in the real world.*

DESIGNING THE 606

When Whitehead is not in meetings or the classroom, she works from her enormous studio, attached to her home in the near-west side of the city. On the day I was there, she'd hung oversize print-outs of highlights along The 606, as well as an aerial photo of the entire trail. Architectural mock-ups stood on surfaces around the room, and years of projects were tucked into corners, shelves, and storage spaces. Still, the studio is not cluttered, thanks to its spaciousness, and like the rest of the home (which Whitehead



**“I have spent ten years
consciously preparing
to work at this scale
—the scale of the city.”**

-Frances Whitehead

ABOVE: Frances Whitehead. RIGHT TOP AND BOTTOM: The 606 will connect city neighborhoods with an alternative transportation corridor and a living work of art.

shares with her husband, James Elniski, also an artist), it's built with state-of-the-art sustainable technology.

It's lucky that Whitehead possesses as much vitality as she does. The pace has been intense. When Rahm Emanuel ran for the mayor's office in 2011, he pledged from the campaign trail that he would ride his bicycle down The 606 before his term was out. Since then, work on the project has accelerated dramatically. In spite of the complexity of the project, it appears that Emanuel will indeed ride his bicycle over at least a small segment of the trail by the end of the year.

The project manager, land partner, and partial funder—and the organization that insisted an artist be included in the planning—is the nonprofit agency The Trust for Public Land, with Beth Whitehead serving as director of the Chicago Region Office. Along with Whitehead, an engineering group led by Collins Engineers (a Chicago firm responsible for massive infrastructure projects, including the expansion of the tollways) and a New York-based landscape architecture firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, sat at the planning table. So too did personnel from the Chicago Park District and representatives from the City of Chicago, including the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

This collection of people certainly made for some conflicts. But

it also has opened the way for some exciting and unusual public placemaking. One of Whitehead's favorite examples is a bridge project proposed by the engineering firm. Essentially, they suggested moving an original, 100-ton steel railroad bridge from one end of the line, where it wasn't needed, to another site where it could prevent a pinch-point in a busy street that passes under the trail. “It's like a found-object sculpture,” says Whitehead. “This is a work of art made by the engineers.”

Another example of collaborative placemaking is the western park and trailhead. Early in the project, the decision was made to remove some of the dirt and fill that forms the base of the elevated line so that the landscape of the trail undulated for variety. “The problem is that creates all this extra soil—and I'm trying to keep it out of the landfill,” says Whitehead. The landscape architects came up with the idea of making a pile of it at the west end—tall enough to view the trains running on a nearby track. “Well guess what else you can view? Sunsets. So all of a sudden, it's an observatory.”

The park might have been left at that had it not been for Whitehead's passion for science. She took the landscape architects' original earthwork design and brought it to Adler Planetarium. Astronomers there helped her reorient it and design a blade-like structure



that aligns with the sun during the annual solstices and equinoxes. “It was one of the most successful collaborations that we did.”

Other ideas fell by the wayside. One of the stated objectives of The 606 was to preserve the cultural heritage of the neighborhoods and the old rail line itself. Whitehead devised an unusual way to do so. At each access point along the multi-use trail, the engineers must cut into the concrete embankments that contain the earth on which the rail bed was constructed. After making cardboard scale models of these walls, Whitehead devised a number of clever re-use ideas for them, including as the platform of a stage. When it came down to budgets, however, the concrete re-use got the axe.

For Whitehead, part of the process has been learning which battles to fight. In this case, she deferred. When the engineer’s bridge relocation came into question for its expense, she argued in its favor and helped to preserve it in the plan. (As it happens, the re-use ended up costing about \$300,000 less than building from scratch.)

This collaborative process is work that she feels especially qualified to do after her experiences of being embedded in the city. And she is highly conscious of speaking not only on her own behalf, but on behalf of the very concept of embedded artists in large-scale public work.

“That’s one reason I have worked so hard on the project. I’ve really given it my all. Because what is at stake is that now we have a bunch of pretty powerful people putting big projects together who now understand what an artist can do.”

A PHILOSOPHY BLOOMS

Like everyone who works in the fuzzy edges of “postnormal” public art, Whitehead has struggled with what to call herself and her work. She’s settled on “civic practice” and likens it to citizen science—the practice of enlisting everyday citizens in the task of collecting scientific data, and thereby accomplishing more than could be done without many hands. Perhaps the best-known citizen science efforts are the annual Christmas Bird Count conducted by the Audubon Society, and Project BudBurst, sponsored by the National Science Foundation, which tracks the phenology, or timing, of flowering plants.

It’s fitting, then, that Whitehead’s signature contribution to The 606 is a phenological planting of flowering trees designed to demonstrate Chicago’s lake effect. The trail runs east-west, with the lake at the eastern end, so the idea is that you can see the impact of the lake’s temperature on the flowering trees along the trail as you traverse it away from the lake.



ABOVE: The 606 will include an earth work that serves as an observatory. RIGHT TOP AND BOTTOM: Moving a bridge solves a problem and turns it into a work of art.

“Phenological data is the oldest climate data we have,” says Whitehead, referring to the timing of the Japanese festivals to celebrate the blooming of the cherry blossoms, “and that data is generated by culture, by beauty—not by social responsibility, not by science.”

Whitehead worked with climate scientists, who determined that there should be about a five-day difference between the timing of blooming from one end of the trail to the other. Several different species will be planted along the entire length of the trail for their phenological value, including the apple serviceberry, a small tree; cloned Chinese lilac, a species used in the United States to calibrate the timing of spring blooms; and weeping forsythia, an Illinois calibration species.

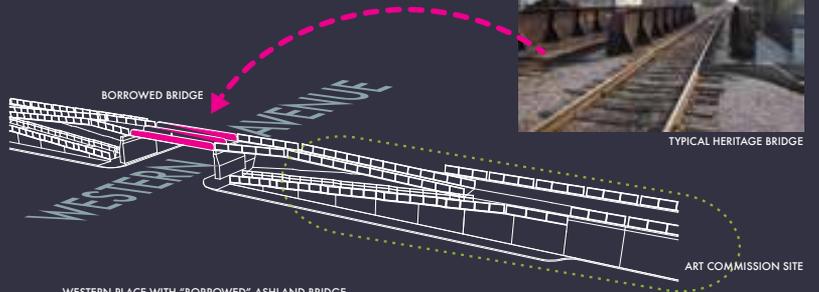
Not only will the plantings show the five-day lake effect, but over the years, by comparing the timing of the blooms, observers will be able to gauge the impact of climate change on the city. “The runners and the bikers are actually going to be observers, whether they want to be or not,” says Whitehead. “And we’ll see if this will grow climate consciousness.”

The phenology project—out of the thousands of decisions and hundreds of individual works along The 606—is among the

most important to Whitehead. “I want to see if we can create a long-term phenological project similar to the cherry blossom festivals in Japan.”

In the postnormal art world that Whitehead inhabits, this climate-change yardstick would constitute success. It’s not that the “artifact” disappears—The 606, you could argue, is one gigantic artful object. But it was the result of a complex, collaborative process, and it’s situated out here in the world—in the city. “That’s really what it’s all about,” says Whitehead. “Artists help make the future city.”

JOE HART is senior editor of Public Art Review.



WESTERN PLACE WITH "BORROWED" ASHLAND BRIDGE



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