

L.A. AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART, ACTIVISM AND AGRICULTURE

By Diana Lind

Los Angeles, the country's second-largest city, has long struggled to define its cultural relevance beyond Hollywood. Often mocked for its car culture and lack of vibrant public space, L.A. has lately proven its brand of art and activism deserves serious respect. Two local organizations — **Islands of LA** and **Farmlab** — promote sustainability through urban agriculture and better use of public space.

Traffic islands — ubiquitous yet overlooked — might seem an unlikely source of artistic inspiration, but Ari

Kletzky (below) has managed to use these slivers of nature to maximal effect. Under the moniker, Islands of LA, Kletzky and the occasional cohort of collaborators have reused dozens of traffic islands as "territories of art." In one project, Kletzky erected signs that mimic traditional traffic signs; instead to directing drivers to stop or yield, they instruct "Shift — Do Art Anytime."



Kletzky, an M.F.A. student at CalArts, sees these art happenings as opportunities to raise awareness of the availability of public space. He recently received the city's approval to plant tomatoes on a traffic island in El Sereno; in collaboration with Fallen Fruit, an urban-agriculture organization based in Los Angeles, he held a harvesting party in mid-August. While city officials worried the plants and party would constitute an "attractive nuisance," they gave the team their blessing (and two sets of hard-hats and safety vests).

As Kletzky says, "Islands of LA believes that we, as individual and responsible members of the community, have the right to use available public space as long as we do so in a manner that is not harmful. This type of activity does not does not require permission because we have it implicitly."

Farmlab is what its name sounds like: A laboratory for discussion about the urban farm. Or "a nascent think-tank, art production studio and cultural performance venue" is how the organization describes itself. Established in 2006 by Lauren Bon, creator of the project Not A Cornfield (below), and funded through the Annenberg Foundation, Farmlab focuses on the "inquiry into the preservation of living things in an often hostile environment." Headquartered in a converted build-



ing beneath the Spring Street bridge, Farmlab hosts weekly salons where local artists, activists, planners and thinkers present their ideas. Other projects include the saving and transplanting of scores of avocado, guava, citrus, banana, olive and other trees from a farm in South Central, which was undergoing development. In July, Farmlab created a temporary garden at the Los Angeles State Historic Park that is open to the public until the end of the year. Using mobile agricultural bins, the project demonstrates the possibilities for urban agriculture to exist independent of land ownership.