

What We Overlook Remains: Notes on Chris Sollars' Islais Creek Walk

On a recent weekend, I joined up with artist Chris Sollars and about thirty others—three of whom were his assistants—as we walked the historic route of Islais Creek, from its origins in Glen Canyon (often called the last wild canyon in the city of San Francisco) all the way to the bay where the creek finishes out.

As part of the journey—as gesture—we all traveled with a one city block long piece of rope. That would be 265 feet or so. Each of our party held onto the rope as we walked from the source of the creek, down the canyon, along footpaths, sidewalks and cross walks. Yes, cars had to wait for us. And since the cause of our appearance was not easily discernible to both drivers and other pedestrians alike, we were offered some needed patience as we wound around light poles and street markings. Lights were missed by cars, but not a single one honked in frustration.

Sollars' team was well rehearsed and tight. Each wore an orange vest with the words "Islais Creek" officially printed on a white reflective surface. They tended to the rope whether taut or slack and generally thought well on their feet as we manifested our sure march along the "creek." In fact, an orange vest will get one a little bit of authority without actually being under the guise of authority. At each intersection, members of the brightly vested team would place themselves in front of traffic to assure our safety. Well, let's just say to make it seem like our safety was a little more assured than not. There's a lot of cars, it turns out, that drive really fast over the top of Islais Creek.

Where city streets are in line and often set at right angles at the block, our rope, one city block long, represented, among other things, the meandering nature of a creek finding its way around or through obstacles—as we surely did. At one point, a smarter ass member of our group thought it of interest to wrap the moving rope around a curbside electrical box. The rope was a living, moving thing, attached to the front and back, its fate often determined by what went on in the middle. Wrapping the rope around the electrical box was not a good idea and led some to believe that an unannounced fistfight might also be part of the walk.

Sidewalks and footpaths are always a reference to our body. The possession of the rope amongst the thirty of us made it seem as if we could pick up a city block with our hands and move it at will. In many ways, the accordian effect of the 265 foot rope being coiled up back and forth between walkers gave the impression that we were unmeasuring a city block, making its permanence not permanent at all. The creek was more permanent, ultimately, as we moved over the often concrete top of it, water flowing mysteriously below. We were, indeed, the creek, especially those of us carrying water in our day packs.

All along our journey there were both native and non-native plants that followed the route. Even when the creek disappeared, the plants continued on, in lots behind houses, sticking out of sidewalk cracks or administered into beds along reconstructed sidewalks. In the case of the sidewalks, someone's dollars had planted—gratefully—large natives like California Live Oak trees, Sycamores and Madrones. They weren't giving up on their turf.

The one native plant that followed us all the way on our journey was mugwort (*Artemisia douglasiana*, layman's term Douglas Mugwort), a member of the sage family—and related to the Old World *Artemisia absinthia* from which absinthe the liquor is derived. Both plants have thujone in them, a psychoactive chemical. Tea can be made from it with a variety of remedies. Refer to your local internet for details.

Indeed, mugwort thrives as a member of the riparian community of plants, growing in canyons, along side creeks and rivers. At the source of Islais Creek in Glen Canyon, one can see mugwort right at the center of it all. Then, as we made our way along the historic path of the creek, the mugwort continued, poking out of cracks along the street with the creek nowhere to be seen. I think the presence of these pioneers that won't go away is a kind of Proof of Concept for Sollars' project. What we overlook remains. What we think is the past isn't gone; it isn't even past. William Faulkner made a whole career out of that. What we think we are accommodating—even manipulating—is actually accommodating us. We are, after all, locals but not natives. Like the invasive species of plants that followed the path of the creek—Curly Dock, Hemlock, tumbleweeds—we are visiting—yes, living, eating and dying here for generations—but never as native to the creek as the mugwort that has remained true to its creek all these centuries, from source to bay.

— John Graham
San Francisco,
2014