



Episode 119: The Art Of Rewilding With Lauren Strohacker

1-23-2024

[Rewilding Earth Podcast](#)

Lauren Strohacker

Jack: [00:00:00] Lauren, thanks so much for being on the Re Wilding Earth podcast.

Lauren: Yeah, Jack, thanks for having me.

Jack: What have you been up to lately?

Lauren: I've been spending a lot of my career working in public space, which is great doing bigger community centric projects, doing things that have a lot of.

Project management qualities to it. But what I had been thinking about most recently was the difference between asking communities to rethink interspecies strategies, rethink who we want to allow to live in the world with us, who we're making space for. And, suburban, urban and otherwise, large areas of wild space, um, and I've been thinking a lot about my own home.

I've been thinking a lot about how to make artwork in someone's home feel unpredictable or unexpected. A person's home tends to be the final resting place for a final work of art, but I've been thinking about how I can [00:01:00] work inside domestic space to make more of. An unexpected experience. Just recently I was in Arizona.

[Please consider supporting the Rewilding Earth Podcast!](#)

I was in Paradise Valley working with a good friend of mine and collaborator, Karen Bradshaw. She is a law professor ASU. She has written a wonderful book called *Wildlife as Property Owners*, which is the inspiration for this line of thought, our own space, our own territory How can we make that more livable for other species?

And of course, there's things like, putting plants in your yard for pollinators and, not using poison and things like that. But I'm thinking even more radically about The most subversive thing and the most dangerous threshold an animal can cross, which is inside the human home. And so I've been working on these little weird animations of species moving around, popping up in my own home and then went to Karen's home and.

Did this little installation [00:02:00] of black tailed jackrabbits, which is one of the first species I had a really close encounter with when I lived in Arizona. And so it was really, for me, experimental in the way that I had no idea for sure what species I wanted to project. I didn't know what spaces in her house would work.

I have these adorable little Pico projectors that are battery operated that makes, make some things a lot easier. But it was really exciting to project this jackrabbit in all these different positions in her home and what interactions came from it. There's something really exciting for me visually with the juxtaposition of a wild animal body and a domestic human interior.

So part of where I hope this project goes and, is digital and physical. I would love for people, my neighbors, people anywhere to invite me in their home to create some semblance of a wild experience of an encounter. But also I've had some friends in Arizona for this project send me photos of their own home.

I've asked them to [00:03:00] do some weird stuff like moving around their house at night and taking photographs and sending me photos and I'll be sending them a small animation of a species native to the Sonoran desert region to move through their home, theoretically I guess right now I've been working away from, Not away from public space.

I've been working a lot more in these ideas of domestic interiors and private property and how do we open that idea up to something a little more radical, obviously not physically letting, a mountain lion or wolf move through your home, but could we allow them in our yard? Can we allow them in our neighborhood?

Those are things I'm really interested in as an artist.

Jack: I don't think I'd mind a wolf walking through the house every once in a while, there's probably problems with that, but,

Lauren: yeah. I'd take a wolf over a big cat, probably.

Jack: What if way back in time, sometime where we split off. And had a different existence than the one that we chose with industrial civilization versus something where we didn't stray from nature, we didn't set ourselves so far [00:04:00] apart, and how maybe our home decor would even reflect in that universe where we maintained our close relationship with nature, that our homes would look and reflect that.

And as you're talking, I'm like yeah. You're part of that universe. You came here from that universe to help us in this one. I'm convinced of it I love that

Lauren: and I think that's part of it is how can we You know making work that surrounds People with something that is a little, I guess not a little, it's a lot anti anthropocentric I think a lot about comfort.

I enjoy comfort as much as the next person I was raised in suburbia. I've been in some pretty wild places and I've also been pretty scared. I think it's a misconception people think about me as I love the wilderness. I have a really healthy fear of wildlife, but I still think they deserve to exist, in a state that is not glorified outdoor zoos and hard management and controlled basically and I think about interior space is reflecting that not [00:05:00] just a beautiful image, which is part of art making but something that you could almost not hold on to.

So these interior projections I've been working on there. nothing that can last in reality. If someone bought a small projector and a video and did, had my work there forever, it loses its flavor, right? It loses that special moment. I think about, I always try to make artwork that makes me think of how I feel when I have an interaction with an animal.

In space, and I think about my face to face interactions with coyotes. I think about knowing I'm surrounded by jaguars and mountain lions in the reserve. And I think about how we can keep bringing that into our spaces and I guess more, maybe it's too saccharine but into our heart, right? The things we want to know we're around us, even if they scare us a little bit and that inspiration definitely still comes from things I've learned. I'm not an expert by any means, but. When I was in grad school ASU, I took a course called art of the Arctic and Northwest [00:06:00] coast.

And that was something I found really beautiful of some of the indigenous people of the Northwest coast and the Arctic that their interiors had images of wildlife everywhere. The outside was inside and obviously that's reflected in the ability of certain people in place in time currently and otherwise to live alongside large animals and dangerous animals.

And all animals, I have a fascination with predators and the things that in theory are above us on the food chain. Should we not have weapons? turning the interior a little bit more undomesticated is something I'm focused on currently. And I don't think that's a new idea by any means.

Jack: Yeah, I remember Dave and Dave Foreman and Nancy Morton's house going over there and feeling like it was outside in a bit with the art that they chose and the paintings and the little knickknacks and things just made me feel like they, they always [00:07:00] did a really good job of surrounding themselves with the images and icons and things that they love about wilderness and wildness and individual species and I always felt different there.

Lauren: Yeah, I think about Diana Hadley's house to write the CEO of Northern Jaguar project And even I've been to a turtle's home and Megan Southern in Tucson and very bespoke, very much, foliage and animal iconography.

And it's you can explore your home in the same way you could explore the woods. The same way I ran around the woods of Ohio as a kid, flipping over rocks and digging and looking and you feel at home, but you also feel like there's something just around the corner. And I think that.

Anticipation of the unknown is really exciting and a really rich topic to explore. As a creative, but I think as you're touching on anyone can have those [00:08:00] experiences, I think if they wish. And yeah, our domestic interior, I think we could do some work to better have it reflect our outdoors and maybe our.

Ethics on what we think our immediate outside should look like and feel like

Jack: speaking of outside. Your public art especially on the border. I think if anybody knows you, they probably know you the best from that because you really got a lot of coverage on, on, on that with the Jaguar, the border wall and all of that.

Can you talk a little bit about that campaign? It might be old hat to you, but Yeah, It's it's something that still I'm very excited about when I think about it. If I'm scrolling through social media, I see one of your images from that, it just immediately strikes up. That was hyper creative and it must have been so incredibly effective and profound for the people who were able to experience it.

Lauren: Yeah. And thank you. That work was profound for me. I still would say that's the best moment [00:09:00] I've had as an artist. And that's not to diminish other work in any way. But how I felt in that space that night and everything that led up to it was really magical and important and it's because it felt like it wasn't about me, which is what I always want.

I don't want to make artwork anywhere and have people think, oh, Lauren Strohacker this or Lauren that. I want people to think about wildlife and I want people to think about community and that was really the most brilliant part of that project was how many Entanglements we had to have to pull it off.

I had very, I'm a very kind of pushy artist for myself and I just decide I'm going to do things and I'm like figure out the logistics later. I had given a lecture maybe early in 2020. similar 2015, 2016, and I had put kind of future ideas and I was like, I want to do these projections of Jaguars on the U.

S. Mexico border wall. And at the time I wasn't really sure how it would pull that off. Of course you can go rogue and project anywhere you want.[00:10:00] But when I started talking to people that I knew down there someone I really admire and someone that I hope your listeners can look into is someone I went to grad school with.

Her name's M. Janae Sanchez, and she runs a program called Border Arts Corridor down in Douglas, and they partner with art organizations and cultural institutions in Agua Prieta, and they create these cross border community art projects. They've been doing it for years and so Janae was the first person I contacted saying, could we get this done through, through BAC, through Border Arts Corridor, and she was fantastic and, In speaking with her was really.

And her work in the community was what really drove me to this community work. And so she was really inspiring on that front saying we can get people, from both sides, we can get organizations, we can do education in Mexico, we can do education. In Douglas in the United States, and that [00:11:00] was really exciting to bring so many people in a, in an art world where a lot of artists stand alone as islands.

And I think that's an illusion. In a lot of sense, the bigger artists you are, the less you do work by yourself, regardless of what you say. So that community aspect was number one, the most important thing. So I have Janay and all the partnerships I created to make that work. Even.

Having to get permission from border patrol, which is a highly contentious organization and I can't speak to every individual or the organization as a whole in a sweeping statement. I don't tend to do that, but I can say when I first met them down in Douglas, it was just me meeting three border patrol agents in a hotel and it was really intimidating, the green suits, the, um, automatic weapons.

It was really intimidating. And it was really fascinating how as soon as I said they would be projections, and once they realized that I wasn't asking to touch the border wall necessarily or alter [00:12:00] it, they moved on and were like yeah, we can make that happen.

That can work. But then they started talking about this this pair of, I think, great horned owls that would come and make their roost every year at some station some border patrol building and that every time they would see these owls, they would radio each other and people would stay out of the owls way.

They'd stop whatever construction or painting or whatever they were doing. And I found that so fascinating. And I think that's the biggest part of my work that I love, is when people see my work or talk about my work, they almost always talk about their own experiences with wildlife.

And I think maybe that's always been the true artwork, is that conceptual bubble of me and these animals. And for that moment you talk about it, you're maybe speaking it into existence in some way or reminiscing about it. But yeah, so then once everything happened and it was a go it was a huge event, we had [00:13:00] politicians, we had ecological people, we had all sorts of speakers, and they are being translated in real time, it was truly this most community centric work I had done to date, and it still inspires me how you can bring people together.

In a space that's so controversial, right? The wall itself is such a hindrance for people and plants and animals and water and all of that. But we could still come together in that space and feel truly undivided with these images of jaguars erasing the border wall for an hour and a half.

Jack: To me, it feels really weird to think of it as a one day event. I never did until you just said that day. Obviously because all the work that led up to it and that resulted from it, that certainly went way past the day. There's some kind of power to it that I can't really label.

That makes me optimistic and hopeful in the way that art can be [00:14:00] used to affect actual change, and that's never going to happen unless it affects something in people. That's where the, I believe the change really actually ends up coming from the energy for it, the creativity for it the willingness, and it just From afar, I wasn't there.

I just saw all the different stuff in the campaign, leading up and after. And I just felt man, this must be like a week long festival of there's probably other art installations going. It just had that vibe. But I wonder if you could talk about where do you see Things like this going that had to have really set you off with new ideas of bigger and better and more Maybe?

Lauren: I feel like I'm always a bad artist in this way is I do a project and I know that It has legs to go further quicker, but I'm always like, okay, I can come back to it I got some different ideas.

I want to work on I do have dreams of doing the binational Jaguar And they were in your Jaguars and other borderland species in, in El Paso and [00:15:00] Juarez and other border cities. It's been something on my mind to do more of those and to bring a binational community together to talk about it.

And it's not it's not to go into spaces and tell people how to live their lives by any means. But I think people everywhere can come together to some extent on their environment. And that, that was the big thing for me is all those people on both sides of the border were thinking about jaguars and thinking about themselves and thinking about it was so much bigger than artwork.

It's so hard to call myself an artist sometimes too because I'm not traditional in certain ways. But it, yeah, it was, it's almost like the idea of asking for space. For my art reflects the idea of asking for space for wildlife or finding carving out space for wildlife. And that leads into, doing these projections in people's homes or in the yards of museums.

And so what the border wall project taught me was [00:16:00] that, communities come together to make their spaces better and we, I think that's what we kind of circle back to what we were speaking about earlier is online communities. It's really hard. Even though I found a couple really great collaborators from places like Twitter.

It's really hard to just do something without thinking it to death. I think art allows us these imperfect spaces and imperfect moments to have conversations about seemingly controversial things, right? Bringing back predators. That new jaguar just popped up in Arizona and how serendipitous.

With everything happening and speaking about this work, I all flooded back to me again and made me think I have to do these border wall projections again, um, somewhere else and because that's all we have. Art, I don't think in on its own can save the world in any way.

Art doesn't dictate society. I don't believe anyone that thinks that. I think art has that much power. But the power art does have is to bring people together to talk about topics they don't necessarily [00:17:00] otherwise have in their everyday life, right? We talk about this industrial world. We have to go to work.

We have to take care of X, Y, and Z. We have all these human centric things to take care of. And maybe my practice to me is carving out moments to think about the other non human people in the more than human world. That we, should try to make space for if we choose.

So art for me is really just a way to talk about my hopes and fears and excitement and wonder of if our natural world can get stitched back together with us. In a way that's mutually beneficial and symbiotic, but not, not perfect, not without fear, not without conflict. Human animal conflict isn't a problem to solve to me.

It's an ongoing mediation effort. If we solve conflict, that means we don't have people or we don't have animals, right? At least my kind of understanding of it. I think striving for perfection or total [00:18:00] comfort is something I try to reflect in my art. It's something that can't be achieved.

I'm interested to see if that ever comes through to people. That single night, which did feel like a long time it was just a handful of hours really taught me that, that art's just a way in to a community, it's a way in, it's a way to make people participate in things that are not necessarily their everyday life but could be, should we will that into existence.

Jack: Art as a campfire. Campfires do the same thing that you describe art doing. You get around a campfire and you immediately, the number of choices for distraction and lack of focus and everything just immediately start to melt away and you're in a campfire. I think Dave Foreman sensed that and why he named his ongoing column around the campfire.

And it's also a pattern interruption. One of the things that I really love about yours is people can immediately understand when they see a jaguar projected on the border wall.

It's weird how much I remember from that campaign, which I think really does [00:19:00] say a lot more about how effective art can be in affecting people, And how long that lasts and what exactly comes from it is that beautiful mess part where you can't lay numbers or weights or measures on any of that directly.

And I think that's the beauty of art, but also frustrates a lot of people who need weights, measures. And all that stuff too. They go, how are we going to validate spending our time this way, spending our money this way, or moving stuff around in our house to accommodate this art thing. People who look for those kinds of justifications sometimes are the ones who need the Excel spreadsheet out when they're talking about it.

And I love how art rips me away from that kind of

Lauren: stuff too. Yeah, number one I love, I'm gonna keep that with me forever, the idea of art is a campfire, and I think it's no surprise that I tend to be interested in making art made out of light in the dark so that kind of holds true to, to me too, visually, but [00:20:00] the pattern interruption is that you're touching on something I think about all the time and How can we remember that whatever stability we might feel is very tenuous, it's very, things can change tomorrow for almost anybody in a given circumstance.

And I think about being aware and ready for those changes is the mentality one might need to live alongside predators. Again, people, like me who grew up in suburbia, who didn't, I didn't know jaguars lived in the United States until A few years before I made that project, I'm not an ecologist or a biologist.

So I'm making work as I learn and explore I think a lot of artists get stuck on trying to be experts. Like you just said, the stats, the rigidity, the having to know, I didn't go to Mexico and I didn't go to Agua Prieta and Douglas and ask everyone to fill out a survey. Of the artwork.

I think that would be horrible. And it would destroy the dream. It would destroy that fantasy of that [00:21:00] moment of a wall dissipating. That's the power of art is the things that can stay with us. I can love a beautiful thing and as much as the next person, but the art that really gets me.

Is the kind of artwork that I see or experience and it changes the way I think about something in the world, changes the way I think about a border wall, changes the way I think about my front door. It changes the way I think about the water that I drink. And I think a lot of artists.

In the art world, when I say artists, I know a lot of artists doing great things, but when I say the art world, I'm saying the capital A, kind of western driven gallery, capitalistic, white wall, which is fine in its own way, but I think it you truly are only speaking to such a small niche of people. I think great work can happen in galleries.

I don't think radical work can happen in a white wall gallery. I think radical work has to happen in a community. I think radical work has to happen in unexpected places at unexpected times. And there's no perfect time. There's no safe time. And [00:22:00] so I'm glad. It makes me feel heartened that you're picking up on some of the more nuanced parts of my work because my work is very simple in a lot of ways.

Getting images from, the Northern Jaguar project and doctoring them a little and projecting them on the border wall is not necessarily a hard task artfully in of itself. It's just a looping video. But the work it takes to get there,

the work it takes to understand it afterwards and how it feels with the community effort I could never get that anywhere else.

I can never get that in a museum. I can never get that in a gallery. And so I always try to tell artists when I speak to students or anyone, I try to remind them that art can't just be made for the people that patronize galleries. That's a lot of similar mindset, a lot of similar temperament.

And I think we serve ourselves and our art best when we try to put it in spaces that it's not meant for,, or we don't think it's meant for, we're told it's not meant [00:23:00] for, a lot of the artwork I make has been out of spite because I haven't always been embraced by that traditional world but I'm better for it.

I'm better for being pushed into the wild, so to speak of the art world and making kind of work in certain fringe places, or Or in finding the people that are doing that. I guess I don't want to say I'm doing that. Again, Janae has hosted incredible art events down at the border wall, but I think that continues to inspire me to do this weird stuff, like asking people if I can come into their home and, spend a couple hours making an animal encounter and neither of us knowing what that's going to be.

I don't, and not knowing if that's going to work, not knowing if it's going to be beautiful or not knowing if I can make a sellable, a deliverable out of it. I think those spaces. Are good for me to be in, to not be sure, to not be comfortable, to not be rigid. I think being labile and adaptable and thinking again like an animal, as much as I, I am an animal, you're an animal, but as much as I can break [00:24:00] my own domesticity artistically, that's where a lot of, more of the magical things happen for me.

Kind of letting go of some control.

Jack: Going back to something you said a bit earlier about artists and the ones who feel the need to say something with their art. It might be something about politics or culture the ones who do it great for non but Understanders of the finer points of art.

It's like being a naturalist instead of a wildlife biologist by training. In that world, I very much just know what I like. And what affects me and I've always been affected by when I lived in D. C. We had full access, free access to everything that the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art, we had access to the world's art. But then my favorite thing in the entire place in the nineties was the Salvador Dali Last Supper painting that is shoved in the [00:25:00] stairwell between two floors

now, stairs in the National Gallery are huge. You could put 10 people wide on them and they're big. It's an enormous painting. Life size and and it was just at the landing of a stairway on the way to more important things

and I would just be sitting there in the landing of the stairway where everybody's just using it to get from one place to another and stand there like they do in the actual gallery part and just ponder. And I couldn't figure out why. People weren't standing next to me, like why wasn't rested by this incredible work?

It reminds me of Michael Soule, with the idea of conservation biology. Before that, all the biologists were in lab coats and, looking through. Their Petri dishes and everything else, and we're completely apolitical, completely had no opinion about the findings that they were having in the lab.

And then Michael comes along and says, we should have opinions, we should have a heart, we are human beings, and then is born conservation biology. And I think of work like yours in the same way. your conservation biology, your [00:26:00] conservation art, or thoughtful art, or art meant to make someone feel something and maybe even do something.

And a lot of that gallery stuff is just, wow, that's just splotches of paint, man. I don't get it.

Lauren: I think sometimes that's the trap of the academic art world. And I have a I have two degrees in art of a master's degree. I'm a adjunct professor. So I live off of academia. So I'm not necessarily trying to say a sweeping judgment because I'm part of that world.

It's an easy step to try to just show people how talented you are and how smart you are and how shut off that can make people I don't, I, this is one thing I've had out with a couple of artists who I asked them to, when I, read their writing or help them edit, I'm like, you have to take out all these words the everyday person.

They're going to have to do more work than necessary to understand that. Speak to people like you speak to your mom, to your friends, not to other academics or other artists or else you just shut yourself off. I'm not saying you can't be successful or make great things in that way, [00:27:00] but I think you lose the opportunity to work, out of your community and in other communities and,

and yeah that Dali painting in the stairwell, that's a magical moment. That's its own kind of art encounter. I can't remember who, this is just a quote I ran across one time, and I'm gonna, I'm gonna butcher everything about it, but the sentiment will be the same. And he said, this person said, I'd rather her.

Yeah. I'd rather hear Mozart playing from an open window in the city than in the grandest concert hall in the world. And I think about that in art, too, that you can, when art pops up in places that are expected, it will affect me. More than moving from art to art in a gallery. So I really resonate with your Dolly in the stairwell at the National Museum.

I think that's really fascinating and and very true. I really like a wild artwork. I like artists that try to get weird with it that try to break that mold of what is expected of an [00:28:00] artist.

Jack: Maybe one day we'll have someone in public somewhere questioning, is that a strohacker? Like a Banksy? Is that a strohack? It's going to be some creature at the corner of a building. That if you were just going by too fast in a New York minute, you'd never see it or notice it. And then when you do, it's Oh God,

Lauren: it becomes a thing of lore.

I want my work to live in like this. The storytelling space in some ways that not everyone gets to see it or not everyone gets to see it in the same way, I did this big red Wolf project at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art that lasted about a year. It just came down I don't know, 6 months ago, something like that.

But what was really fascinating is right before my show was about to happen, the gallery kind of changed, the museum changed leadership. There was a lot kind of coming down from North Carolina Museum of Art, who was in charge of SICA at the time. They changed curators.

I got kicked out of my gallery space that I was supposed to and it was from an art standpoint, really. [00:29:00] Hard. I felt like I had put a lot of work into something for it to not be as big as I had hoped, which happens but this one piece that I collaborated on with my friend and former coworker Dr.

Lisa Tolentino, , we made these, we were trying to think about how to undomesticated light fixtures and how we could light our homes differently. And so we And I say we, I just came up with some of the ideas Lisa coded and created these, but we had these, rope lights, like led rope lights, people can program them to music, they hang them inside, outside, they're popular.

So we did this floor lighting with led rope lights and Lisa coded it so that. All a red line that was all these lights blurred together was the length of a red wolf. And so it would move slowly. It would turn and she had what is called a a stochastic algorithm. Or a staccatic algorithm, but basically it made it not necessarily unpredictable, but unexpected. So these things could move fast up the [00:30:00] stairs or move slow around a corner or come towards you and turn away. And that was part of me trying to make artwork, again, that acted.

Like an animal like everyone's experience would be different or maybe they wouldn't experience it at all. And so when we got kicked out of our gallery, we got regulated to these hallways and alcoves, which some of them worked really well. Part of me was like, Oh, how did I not think of about this in the beginning to just kick myself out of the gallery?

But so these lights would just and it would look like they'd follow people or, and they weren't, they were just, they were coded to do whatever they wanted. We couldn't even make those. We couldn't make it happen like that if we wanted, but the stories that come out of it. And so just looking at the series of LED, coded string light moving back and forth and around was really.

Fascinating. And so I am very dedicated and maybe that's all due if I ever get invited to do another museum show is try to be as out of the gallery as possible, what is it like to make work in the bathrooms or the,[00:31:00] the little alcove that no one walks in or thinks about. Those spaces are really rich.

I think they can be really nutritious for an artist looking for. Experimentation and some risk and some, I think, sometimes some really big reward. But, yeah, those led light intrusions were I'm about to get them back. I hope I can find another home for them somewhere else. They were great.

Jack: What is that distraction over there? I'm supposed to be looking at this really hard.

Lauren: Distraction. Yes. Breaking the pattern and getting out of the expectation of comfortability in the everyday 100.

Yes, that's such a huge goal. Yeah.

I'll end on 1 of my favorite quotes from John Berger, who is an.

Arts writer and he wrote this book called the shape of a pocket and it was this meandering dreamlike essay kind of book that was seemingly not about art, but about how an artist might think or dream. And the title comes from his quote that. That [00:32:00] resistance comes in the shape of a pocket and I believe there are pockets of resistance everywhere.

I don't think we have to do an overhaul of culture. I think there are cultures big and small that believe in this world that you and I believe in Jack and I think hopefully my art and what you all are doing and what other groups I work with are constantly bringing these pockets together and creating passageway and thoroughfare from pocket to pocket until we can convince people and I think that it's important to recognize that there's more people than not that this can be a viable way of living with the natural world and all of the beautiful beasts that should inhabit it.

So I believe that your work is. a resistance that's in the shape of a pocket. I believe that my work is resistance in the shape of a pocket, and I'm so glad that our pockets have merged today, and I feel really inspired at this conversation. I look forward to the future and look forward to what maybe we all can do together somewhere new.

Jack: Thanks so much for taking the time Lauren, and we have to have you back.

Lauren: Thank you. I would love it. [00:33:00] Jack, it truly is an honor for me to be part of this podcast and part of the family now. Thank you.