

JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL
PROPOSAL TO THE MASSACHUSETTS FOUNDATION
FOR THE HUMANITIES

Introduction

Stretching from its origins in Berkshire County through western Connecticut to Long Island Sound, the Housatonic River is a 150-mile natural landmark. To celebrate the river and the communities that surround it, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival is initiating a community reflection on the river and its place in our society. The river will be explored as a metaphor linking one community to another, industry to resident, nature to human intervention, past to present.

The Housatonic River Project will be coordinated by Jacob's Pillow in collaboration with Project Director Susan Sgorbati, Dean of Faculty at Bennington College, and a consortium of community representatives throughout western Massachusetts and Connecticut. Coalitions of artists, scholars, environmentalists, school districts, historical societies, and other community members will be engaged in building a celebration and examination of the Housatonic. The resulting project will take many forms, including events in settings such as a nature preserve, a city park, a school gymnasium, a local church, a truck stop, or a series of bridges. These events will not be static; nature walks, canoe trips, site-specific performances, river crossings, visual art installations, and public actions are viable possibilities as the vehicle for expression. The creation of a travelling exhibition, publications, and other documentary components will also be included.

One of the primary objectives of the river project is to fulfill the potential that the arts and humanities have for increasing public awareness of environmental and social issues. The ultimate goal of the Housatonic River Project is not only to coordinate and produce a series of events along the river, but the process of community decision-making that exists from the earliest stages of the project.

The Planning Phase

Jacob's Pillow is applying to the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities for the initial stages of the Housatonic River Project. For the purposes of planning and organizing this series of events, the river has been divided into three zones, reflecting the environs along the river, including pastoral, rural farms, heavy to light industry, and "thickly settled" communities. The project directors have identified up to 20 community leaders in each zone and contacted these potential participants to enlist their expertise and interest.

In November of 1991, a series of three community meetings will take place in Lee, MA, New Milford, CT, and Shelton, CT. The purpose of these sessions will be to give an overview of the project, and to facilitate a conversation among members of these communities, including scholars, corporate representatives, local government officials, environmental organizations, and local artists. From these sessions and further contacts in the region, an alliance of individuals and organizations who have a demonstrated interest in the river and its environs will be created around the project to raise the issues and themes to be addressed.

For a period of five months following the community meetings, the project directors will act as catalysts in the formation of specific projects to be produced in sites along the river. A planning committee will be engaged to suggest potential teams of individuals, and to select the projects to be produced. At present, Nan Jenks Jay, Center for Environmental Studies at Williams College; Lynn Werner, Housatonic Valley Association; Russell Handsman, American Indian Archaeological Institute; and Ben Ortiz, Curator, The Barnum and Housatonic Museums have been identified as participants.

The planning phase of the Housatonic River Project will culminate with a retreat to be hosted by Jacob's Pillow in May of 1992. Up to forty individuals representing different facets of the river community will convene for an intensive forum. The structure of the retreat will feature prominent artists and scholars speaking on a range of issues, as well as focus group sessions around particular topics or themes. The retreat will represent a laboratory environment where specific project ideas will take shape and working partnerships will be formed.

At the conclusion of the retreat, the project directors, in conjunction with the planning committee, will confirm an overall plan for the series of activities. At this point, it is anticipated that up to ten events, exhibitions, or other activities will be planned. These core activities will vary in their structure, either as Jacob's Pillow-produced events, collaborative co-productions with a variety of organizations, or independently coordinated events. However, the River Project will not be limited to the coordinated collaborations. Existing events, community actions, and local happenings will be catalogued for the entire river community in a calendar publication to be produced in the fall of 1992.

Artists from the disciplines of dance, music, visual art, and interdisciplinary work representing the local river communities, the Hudson Valley-New England region, as well as international perspectives will be identified for the river project. Artists currently under consideration include Sardono Dance Theater, Surakarta, Indonesia; choreographer Merian Soto and visual artist Pepon Osorio; Hudson River composer Annea Lockwood; choreographer Ann Carlson; Cape Cod visual artist Jay Critchley; and a number of clay artisans and photographers who utilize the river as an inspiration and source for their materials.

The Housatonic River Project will be launched during Jacob's Pillow's 1992 festival season, with publications and announcement of the activities to take place over the next twelve months. Audiences for the events will be as diverse as the projects; the public will be encouraged to experience the river from source to sound, through publications, press involvement, and direct enlistment of specific communities.

Conclusion

Jacob's Pillow brings to the Housatonic River Project a national perspective on artistic work that integrates community experience with artistic innovation, coupled with the ability to produce events from a broad variety of aesthetic and cultural viewpoints. The objectives of the river project are to heighten awareness of the Housatonic River in the lives of the people who encounter it daily, and to raise issues of importance to the contemporary artist, the liberal scholar, and the community at large. Jacob's Pillow can act as the conduit for a dialogue among a number of facets of the community, as well as identify artists with a body of work that reflects the process-orientation and collaboration appropriate to this undertaking.

With a program such as the Housatonic River Project, the planning phase is as integral to the overall concept as the events and other activities to occur in 1992-93. The support of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities will ensure a fully-realized examination of both public responsibility for the environment and the sense of place the Housatonic provides the residents along its banks.