30 Years of Transformative Solutions:
2019 National Bioneers Conference

by Lindsey Siegele
Polina Smith recites Bertold Brecht’s words while discussing the influence of art and artists at the National Bioneers Conference. As the annual event’s art curator, Smith has witnessed the inextricable link between art and activism.

“Being able to access these big issues not only through our analytical minds but through our hearts is unspeakably important,” she says.

Big issues—from environmental protection and restorative agriculture to regenerative economies and Indigenous rights—are exactly why thousands of attendees from across the U.S. and around the world have been attending the annual Bioneers Conference for 30 years. They come to learn about solutions to today’s most pressing challenges from the top minds and innovators spanning countless topics. More importantly, they come to be inspired.

“Bioneers is a place that’s really understanding the intersectional power of liberation,” says Alixa Garcia, part of the spoken-word duo Climbing Poetree who have performed at Bioneers several times. “This is one of those oases we need in a time of catastrophe, where we get to come together and share ideas.”

30 Years of Solutions

The seeds from which Bioneers has flourished were planted in the ’80s by Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons. Ausubel was a filmmaker and Simons’ background was in theater and...
the arts. Both had a passion for telling stories and envisioned inspiring a movement to build a more just future.

Simons and Ausubel recall a transformational visit to Gabriel Howearth, master gardener and seedsman at Seeds of Change in New Mexico, the company that Ausubel had founded, focused on building backyard biodiversity.

“That garden was the most glorious co-creation I’d ever seen: a garden of relationships,” Simons says. “Gabriel knew each plant better than many people know their own families. He grimly described the cascading loss of biodiversity in the food system. Industrial agriculture and agribusiness corporations were speeding the loss of varieties, a treacherous threat to our collective future.

“As I left the garden, I felt the spirit of the natural world tap me
on the shoulder and say, ‘You’re working for me now.’ I returned home, quit my job and went to work for Bioneers, embarking on the steepest learning curve of my life.”

Thirty years of learning and growing have turned what was once a small seed of an idea into an experience and destination celebrated by changemakers the world over. Veterans of the Bioneers stage include author Michael Pollan, mycologist Paul Stamets, the Biomimicry Institute’s Janine Benyus, actor and activist Danny Glover, author and entrepreneur Paul Hawken and The Pachamama Alliance Co-Founders Bill and Lynne Twist. Bioneers is an inspiring “meeting of the minds,” but it’s also a creative meeting of the hearts.

Art at Every Turn

When walking through the gates of the Bioneers Conference, currently held in San Rafael, California, the influence of the arts is impossible to miss.

“Bioneers doesn’t attempt to separate form and content,” says Conference Senior Producer J.P. Harpignies. “We believe our aesthetics have to reflect our worldview. People are not just nourished by the ideas—it’s also the visuals. We try to be conscious of what the human experience is.”

Walking along the conference grounds in years past, attendees would encounter art and performances in off-stage installations—such as an original “nest” built by natural artist Nate Hogan or one of Lucien Dante’s larger-than-life “Gargoyles” made from wool, hair, wood, metal, paint, clay and natural materials—and enjoy performances by featured musicians. Attendees might’ve even caught a “Trashion” show: a trash-to-high-fashion show developed by Truckee High’s Envirolution Club.
past, including Terry Tempest Williams and Eve Ensler, both of whom will return to the stage this October.

The backdrop of the Bioneers main stage has itself been a canvas. Each year, Cara Romero, a celebrated Chemehuevi photographer and director of Bioneers’ Indigeneity Program, has developed a backdrop concept that makes art omnipresent behind every main stage event. In 2018, colorful, hand-painted animal sculptures by artist Daniel McCoy Jr. (Muskogee Creek/Potawatomi) hung along the stage’s curtain. McCoy will participate in Romero’s concept again in 2019.

Bioneers hopes to be an oasis for years to come. “When people are on the conference grounds, they feel activated,” says Bioneers Executive Director Joshua Fouts. “We view art as a vehicle for cultural change. Often, given the heavy material that people are processing at Bioneers, having a space filled with art serves as a kind of doula for transformation.”

Those who stuck around in the evenings were treated to a series of documentary film screenings, and often given a chance to meet the films’ creators.

Art has been brought into the event’s on-stage programming as well: Attendees have danced to the invigorating main-stage drumming of Afia Walking Tree and Deb Lane, who have often kicked off each day’s events. Performances by talented artists, such as Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company, an Oakland-based multicultural group of teens that creates original performance art combining hip-hop, dance and theater on the theme of violence prevention, have punctuated each conference’s agenda.

Literary phenoms have spoken from the Bioneers stage in years by London-based author and curator Patsy Craig.

A performance by duet OLOX, which combines Zarina Kopyrina’s ancient, traditional Siberian shamanic music with modern sounds.

Oakland’s Vessel Gallery Exhibit: featuring local Oakland artists, including a very special life-sized whale painting.

A recycled-plastics sculptural installation from artists Joel Dean Stockdill and Yustina Salnikova.

Meta-bottles: enormous bottles filled with bottles—from conceptual artist Richard James.

The Planetary Dance: a participants-welcome ritual dance to restore health and peace to the planet.

Don’t Miss the 2019 Bioneers Art

“In honor of Bioneers’ 30th anniversary celebration, we’re hoping to activate the grounds with more art than ever,” says curator Polina Smith. Attend October 18 to 20 at the Marin Civic Center to enjoy these (and many more) pieces and artists:

The Invisible Forest Exhibition: an exhibition of paintings by renowned indigenous Peruvian-Amazonian artists realised

2019 Bioneers Annual Conference

Seeding the Field: Growing Transformative Solutions

October 18-20, 2019

Marin Center

www.bioneers.org