

A M U S E U M O N

AT 8:00 A.M. ON A SATURDAY
IN PHOENIX, COFFEE BREWS
INSIDE THE CITY'S SPRAWL
OF DESERT-COLORED
HOMES AND APARTMENTS
AND A CHORUS OF AC UNITS
STARTS A MORNING HUM.
ABOUT A DOZEN PEOPLE
WITH SENSIBLE SHOES
AND WATER BOTTLES
GATHER IN A PARKING
LOT NEAR THE BANKS
OF THE RIO SALADO.
THE NEARLY HORIZONTAL
RAYS OF SUN HIT THE
PALOVERDE TREES,
MAKING THEM GLOW.

In the shade, Angela Ellsworth, the founder and managing director of the Museum of Walking, takes a head count and passes around a clipboard asking folks to sign a liability waiver for a contemplative nature walk through the Rio Salado Habitat Restoration Area. The activity promises an easy three-mile loop. The paperwork, albeit bureaucratically par for the course, is part of the process—a commitment to a mostly silent, two-hour hike led by our “curator of walking” for the day, a local musician and interpretive ranger named Amber Gore.

Desert finches rustle in the brittlebush as Gore leads us along the trail. She instructs us to listen to our feet crunching on the path, and as we do, the noise of the highway fades away and we're surrounded by the sounds and smells of Sonoran wetland.

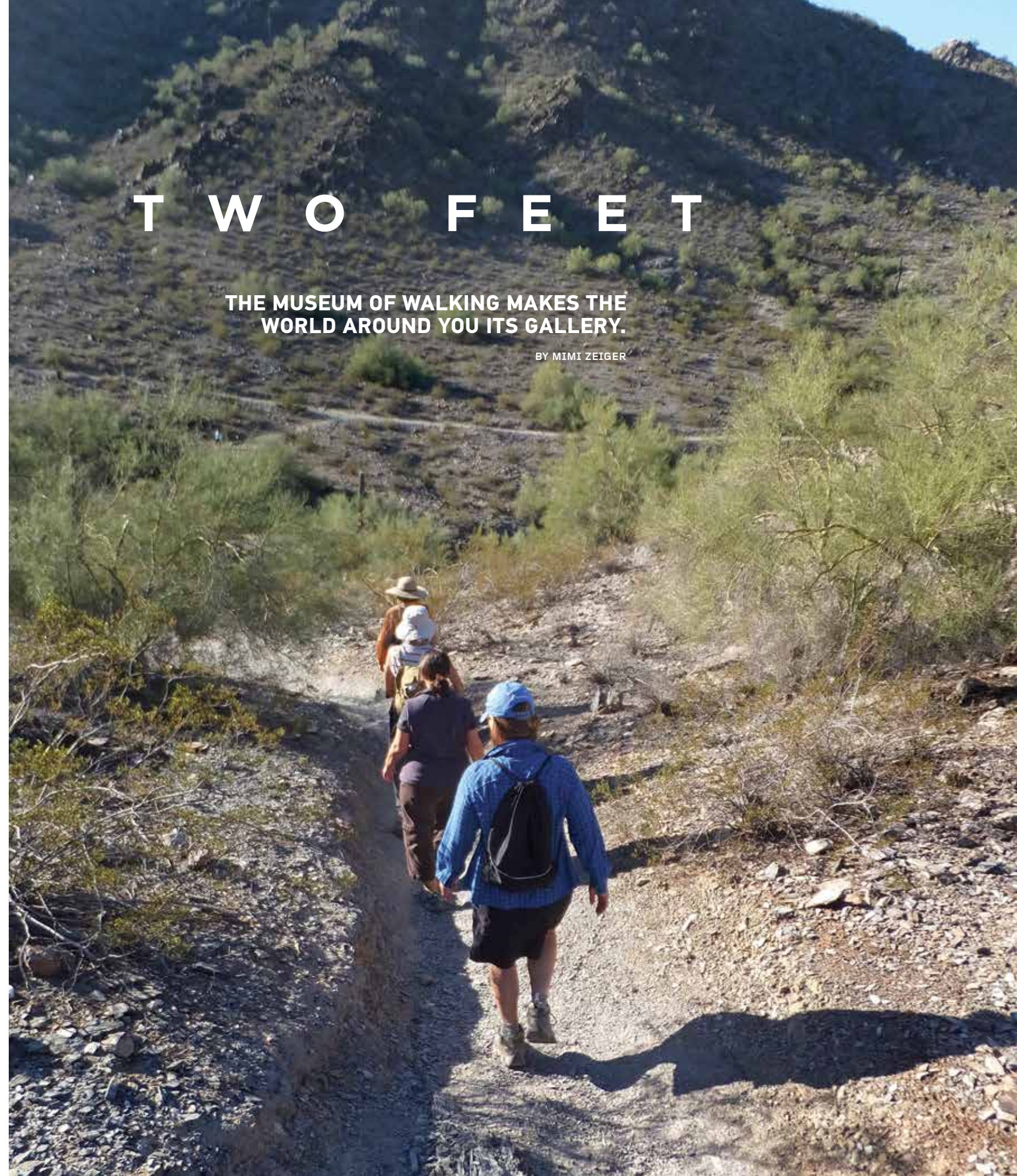
Ellsworth cofounded the Museum of Walking with a fellow artist, Steven Yazzie, in 2014. The title alone is worth the price of admission, which happens to be free. Its mission is to advance walking as an art practice. The museum is actually a place—Ellsworth converted her two-room faculty office at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University into a gallery and resource library—but it is also placeless, a nomadic series of walks, workshops, and site-specific projects. Some of those programs include a contemplative hike under a full moon and a more activist walk along the U.S./Mexico border in Douglas, Arizona, that corresponded with a land art piece by Postcommodity, a two-mile-long installation composed of 26 bright yellow weather balloons tethered in a line that crossed the border. The blue and red graphics on each balloon replicate what the artist describes as an “ineffective bird repellent product.” The eyelike

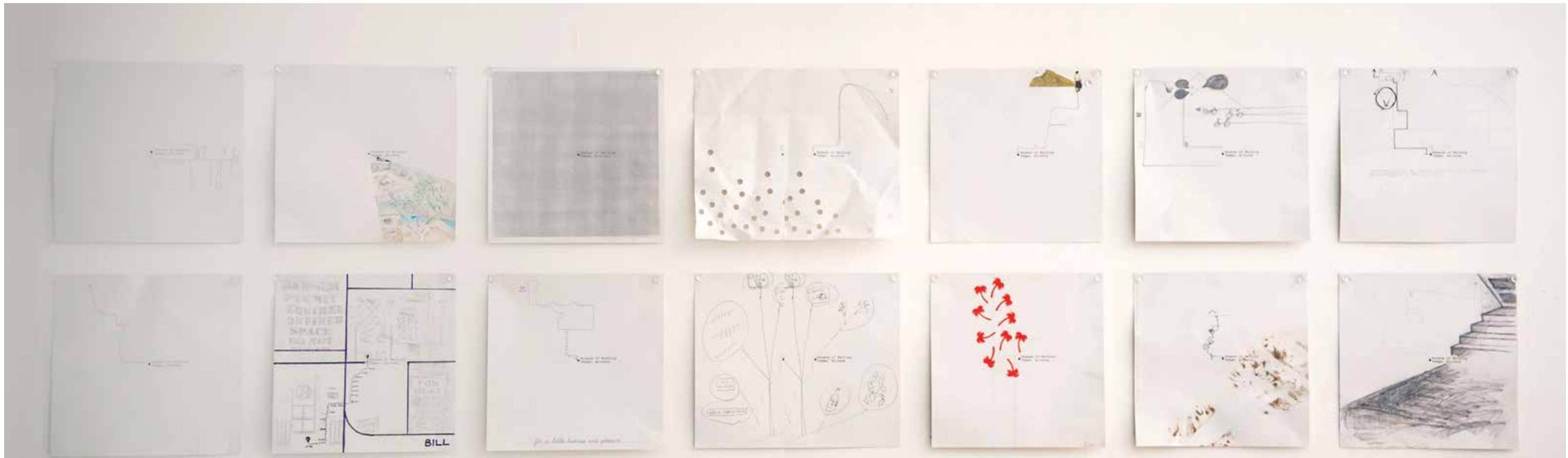
T W O F E E T

THE MUSEUM OF WALKING MAKES THE
WORLD AROUND YOU ITS GALLERY.

BY MIMI ZEIGER

COURTESY MUSEUM OF WALKING/ANGELA ELLSWORTH, OPPOSITE





balloons stare defiantly out over the landscape. A group from the Museum of Walking trekked several miles along the looming steel border fence.

“And we got stopped by border patrol, who were not checking our IDs because most of us were white,” Ellsworth recalls. “They were, like, so nice...‘Are you okay?’...and we were advised not to go,” mainly for safety reasons. The group ended up deciding together to go anyway. “When we got to where we needed to be, the balloons all were going up, so we got to see them go up on the northern side and then the southern side, and it was really special,” Ellsworth says. “And the fence, I mean, it’s really tall. It’s steel.

“A Museum of Walking poses new possibilities about what a museum can be,” she explains, sitting in the museum’s office. “Museums exist because people go to them. A walk happens because people come to it. The audience comes

to see something, to learn to be open, and that’s what I hope is happening on a walk—that we’re open to something new rather than things being hung on the wall.”

The museum’s small library contains texts by Rebecca Solnit, who wrote *Wanderlust*, but also a field guide to New York City’s High Line by Mark Dion and books by the site-specific performance artist Ernesto Pujol. All are nominally about walking, performance, and art; however, there’s a rule to the collection: Accessions to the collection must be able to be carried by two people for at least 10 blocks.

From a shelf, Ellsworth pulls a slim yellow book, Paul Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. She opens to a doodle on a page accompanied by the modernist’s famous aphorism, one that is foundational in linking the act of walking to the act of art making: “Drawing is taking a line for a walk.”

COURTESY MUSEUM OF WALKING/EMILY JEAN THOMAS

Movement figures heavily in Ellsworth’s own artistic practice. She regularly incorporates large-scale drawing, performance, and mapping into her works. Once, she transformed the Arizona State University Art Museum into a fitness club, filling the main gallery with treadmills. She tracks this proclivity back to her own personal history and a cultural history she ran far away from. “I was raised in Utah and was taught all about how my ancestors walked thousands of miles to Utah...nonstop,” she says, recalling the Mormon children’s tune she grew up singing. Its lyrics begin: *Pioneer children sang as they walked and walked and walked and walked.*

Before the Rio Salado was restored into a 595-acre habitat area protected by the City of Phoenix in the late 1990s, it was, owing to upstream dams, a dry riverbed and default landfill. Gravel pits and industrial areas flanked its banks. A thousand tons of old tires were removed from the five-mile-long site before it could be replanted

with native trees and shrubs. Our curator/ranger, Gore, guides us along the trail, pointing out cottonwoods, willows, and blooming red spikes of chuparosa. She had scouted the walk over the previous weeks, taking note of what could be experienced with the senses and charting a narrative route. “I created a thematic map and practiced the walk on location and at my house,” she says.

We pass over a water-control dam and, later, over a runoff channel choked with invasive palms and plastic bags. There’s a waft of sewage followed by a dry wind and a hit of sage.

Signs of urban life punctuate our nature walk. There is a lesson, that the river ecology and city infrastructure must coexist. About an hour and a half into the walk, Gore leads us into the shade of a concrete overpass that spans the waterway and asks us to look up. It takes a moment of peering into the gloom to register the hundreds of small

ABOVE
The recent exhibition *Radius* presented artists’ responses to the 15-minute walk that urban planners say most people are willing to make.



TOP
Museum of Walking participants in the shade of the U.S./Mexico border wall in Douglas, Arizona.

INSET
A group on the border wall tour.

mud nests hanging from the underside of the bridge: cliff swallows. The birds roost over water so they can easily feed on insects attracted to the river. Come evening, they form calligraphic flocks as they swoop over the river.

“The artist’s job is to point things out that might not otherwise be noticed—like the swallows,” says Ellsworth, paraphrasing the French artist Annette Messager. The remark suggests a non-didactic way of understanding and questioning the world around us.

Since many of us live so totally mediated by devices and screens, walking allows us to find the beauty and humor in daily experience, ultimately becoming our own curators. “Once we become aware of that kind of stuff in an urban space or in a rural space, then we don’t maybe even need someone to guide us; we are the pointers,” she continues. “Like, why were there boxer shorts in that tree? Did you see them?”

For design professionals, artists, educators, and writers alike, tuning in to the everyday allows us to get a deeper understanding of a place and how it is used. In early May, Patty Talahongva, a community development manager at Native American Connections, a nonprofit support program, led a walk through the former Phoenix Indian School, which was operated by the federal government for nearly a century. Although the site is on the National Register of Historic Places, its complex and difficult history remains unspoken. Talahongva, who attended the school in the late 1970s, curated a walk that makes visible her personal narrative, her connection to indigenous culture and food, and the school’s attempt to westernize Native American children.

In 2015, Ellsworth and the local artists Adriene Jenik and Heather Lineberry led a long, participatory walk across Phoenix. They started in Tempe at the Museum of Walking on the ASU campus and then looped through Papago Park, ultimately arriving at an artwork by Jody Pinto

titled the *Papago Park City Boundary Project*, a 1992 fieldstone earthwork marking the border between Phoenix and Scottsdale. Along the route they stopped at several notable public art pieces made by women, including Laurie Lundquist’s 2008 *Swimming Dream*, an abstract mural sandblasted into the concrete walls of a pedestrian tunnel.

Where the group stopped, however, was somewhat less important than the path it took. Ellsworth had mapped a trail that followed desire lines, trampled down across empty lots away from official trails. Because of this fact, the walk highlighted the informal ways we move through a landscape and defied the official logic of the city. Recently, the Museum of Walking drew



the attention of urban planners and researchers at ASU who trade in metrics about walkability and healthy cities. Ellsworth thinks an artistic approach to walking can put theories into action, giving on-the-ground experience to what would normally be abstracted

data. Recently, she spoke to a group of PhD students at the School of Nutrition and Health Promotion, and she recalls a professor’s telling her, “My researchers aren’t doing what they’re studying. You guys maybe don’t have the data and all those things, but you’re doing it.”



Toward the end of the walk along the Rio Salado, Gore gathers us at the side of the trail around an outcropping of sage and creosote bush. The creosote’s small, deep-green leaves reflect the sun. Bees hover above bright yellow blooms. Gore instructs us to cup our hands around a branch (carefully, to mind the bees) and then lower our noses and smell the plant. An outsider would be perplexed to see our crew in sun hats and sneakers seemingly praying to the desert shrubs. I look over at Ellsworth; her enormous floppy black hat hides her face as she bows deeply over a sage bush. I cradle a few leaves, genuflect slightly, and I’m rewarded with the pungent perfume of rain in the desert. ●

MIMI ZEIGER IS A LOS ANGELES-BASED CRITIC, EDITOR, AND CURATOR.

ABOVE
Ellsworth’s faculty office at ASU transformed into a gallery, research library, and walking headquarters.

LEFT
Each volume in the museum library is cataloged by hand on Ellsworth’s typewriter.

COURTESY MUSEUM OF WALKING/ANGELA ELLSWORTH

COURTESY MUSEUM OF WALKING/EMILY JEAN THOMAS; ABOVE RIGHT, COURTESY MUSEUM OF WALKING/ANGELA ELLSWORTH; LOWER LEFT