

FEATURE

Meet the Doyennes of Ecosexuality

In their latest film, Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens advocate replacing an exploitative relationship with the Earth with one based on intimacy, care, and pleasure.



Tulsa Kinney

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Film still of *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency* (2025), directed by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, featuring, from left to right: Albert the mythical white peacock, canine Butch, and ecosexuals Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle (photo Barbara Carrellas, montage image Kate Bornstein and Saul Villegas, courtesy the artists)

SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. — The rainy season is over, and the verdant hills up the west central coast dazzle our eyes; the blue ocean sparkles in the high sun. It's a

straight shot up the 101 Freeway from my house in Echo Park, with only one turn: Madonna Road, the exit for the Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo.

The famous kitschy motel with themed rooms, in all its pink glory, is where we're staying to meet up with filmmaker/artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens; they booked the Swiss Chalet Room. I'm traveling with my friend Philo, who used to be

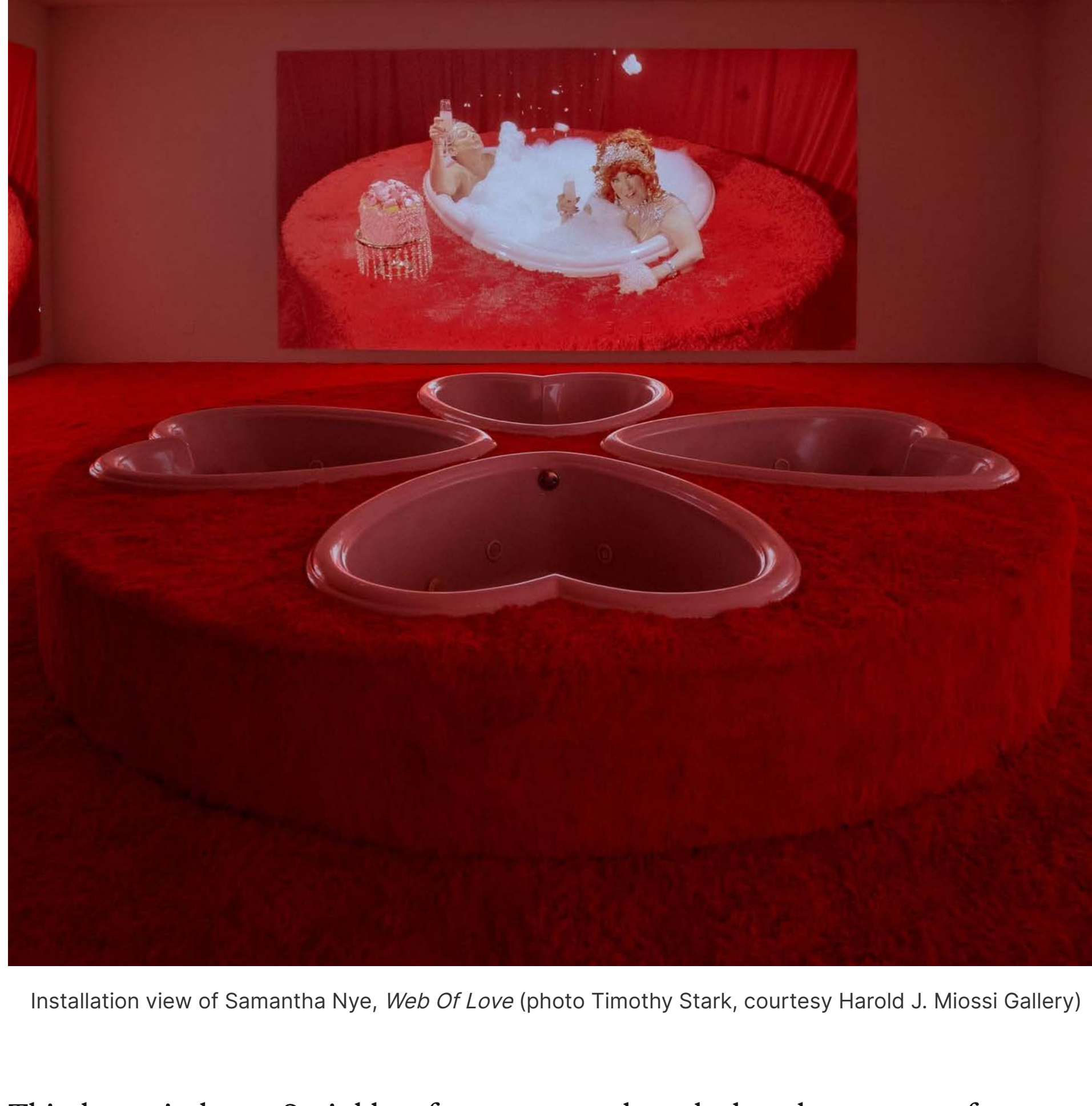
their neighbor in San Francisco.

Only a few months earlier, Sprinkle and Stephens were back at the Madonna Inn, having a ball, clowning around in the Romance Room while filming for artist

Samantha Nye's video, "Web of Love," a hilarious lesbian spoof on the 1966 Scopitone film of the same name, included in her titular art installation at the Cuesta College art gallery. Now everyone is back for Sprinkle and Stephens's film screening/lecture at

the campus, which coincides with Nye's exhibition — a sort of reunion.

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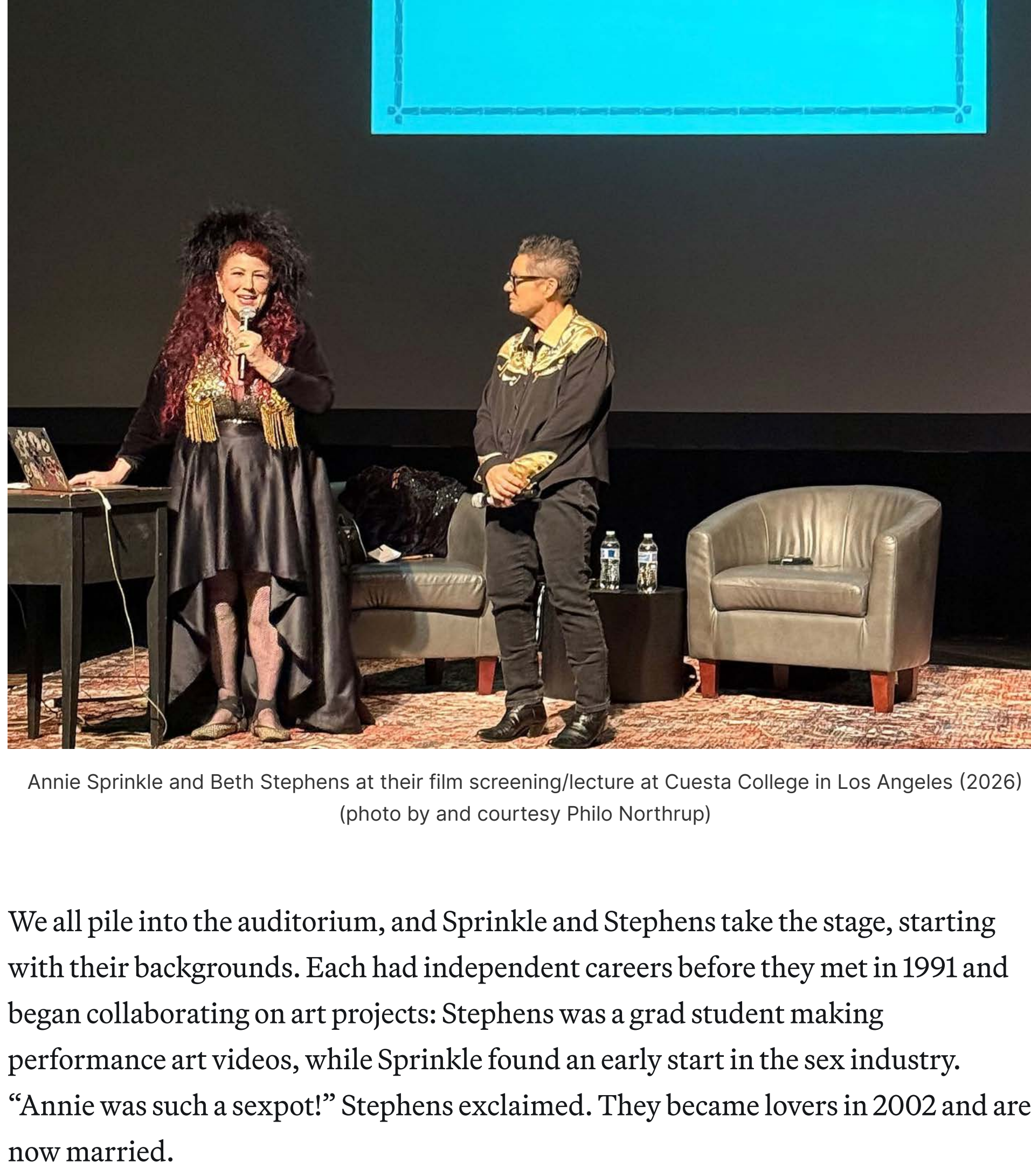


Installation view of Samantha Nye, *Web Of Love* (photo Timothy Stark, courtesy Harold J. Miossi Gallery)

This dynamic duo — Sprinkle, a former sex worker who later became a performance artist, and Stephens, an art professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz — are at it again. Their latest film, *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency* (2025), is the last in their documentary trilogy that includes *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2014) and *Water Makes Us Wet: An Ecosexual Adventure* (2019). All three films deal with environmental assaults such as mountaintop removal, water sustainability, and now fire. We're here to see a sneak preview before

Sprinkle and Stephens go on tour with their film, stopping in Germany at film festivals and premiering this fall at the REDCAT theater in Los Angeles.

After we check into our rooms — Philo chose the Swiss Rock Room (one of six cave-themed rooms); me, the Sir Walter Raleigh Room (don't ask) — we take a quick dip in the fabulous pool, then head over to the campus to see the shows. As we wait in the lobby, suddenly, the bejeweled Sprinkle, a formidable figure with long red hair and a hat that adds at least six inches to her height, walks through the door, draped in layers of black lace, silk, and fringe. Stephens, bespectacled with short-cropped hair, is right behind, clad in cowboy shirt and boots.



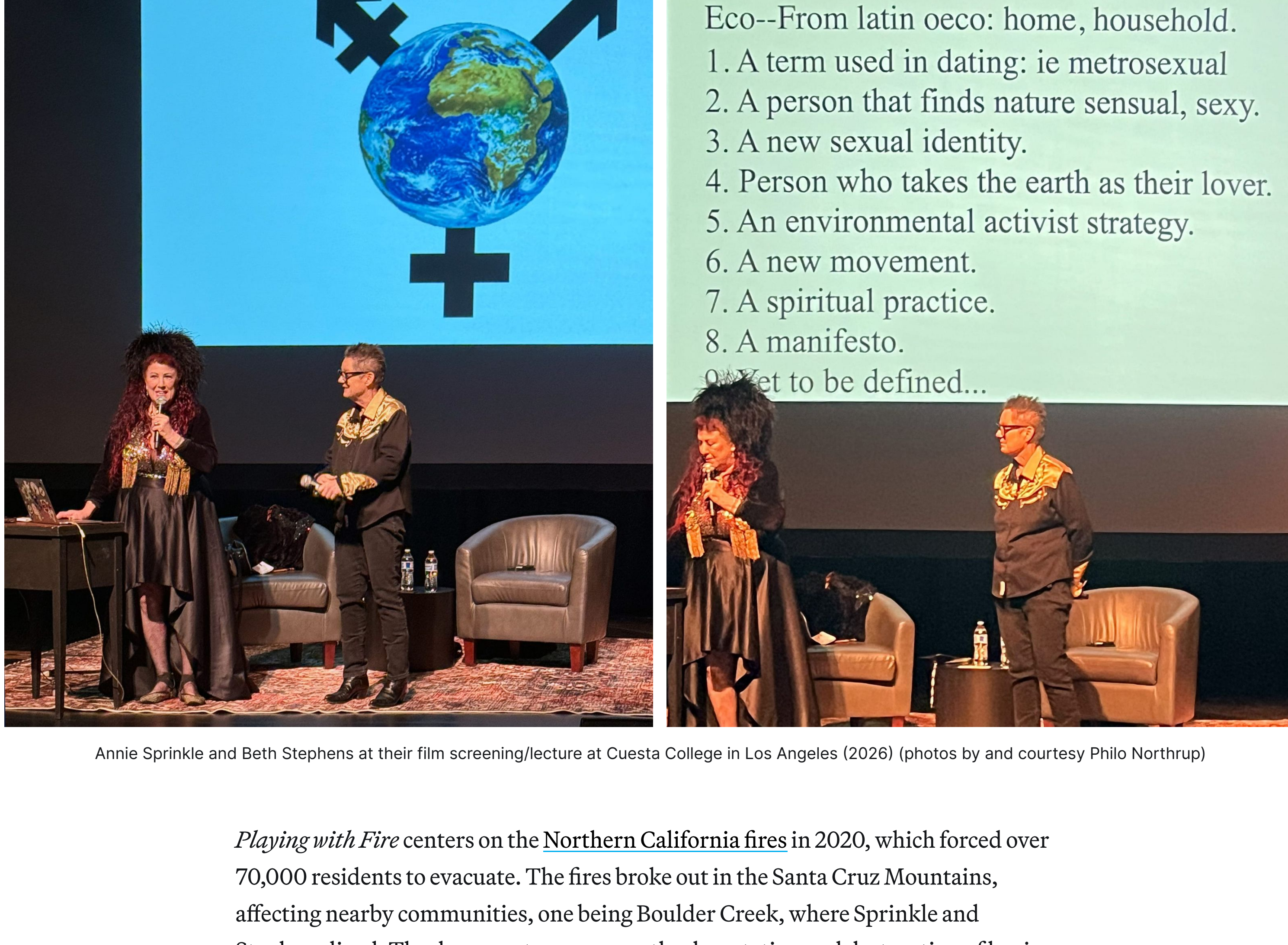
Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens at their film screening/lecture at Cuesta College in Los Angeles (2026) (photo by and courtesy Philo Northrup)

We all pile into the auditorium, and Sprinkle and Stephens take the stage, starting with their backgrounds. Each had independent careers before they met in 1991 and began collaborating on art projects: Stephens was a grad student making

performance art videos, while Sprinkle found an early start in the sex industry. "Annie was such a sexpot!" Stephens exclaimed. They became lovers in 2002 and are now married.

Presently, Sprinkle and Stephens's focus is on ecosexuality, a movement they started in the 2000s combining environmental preservation with sensuality to combat both an extractive relationship with nature and human-caused climate change. We are now down to serious business with their lecture — at one point, I wasn't sure if we

might be quizzed afterwards — and a list of ecosexual properties pops up on a screen: "A person who takes the earth as their lover"; "A person that finds nature sensual, sexy," Sprinkle coyly asks the audience, "Are you ecosexual?" The audience (mostly students and faculty) practically shrugs in unison. She then guarantees us we will know what being ecosexual means after the film — maybe there *is* a test!



Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens at their film screening/lecture at Cuesta College in Los Angeles (2026) (photos by and courtesy Philo Northrup)

Playing with Fire centers on the Northern California fires in 2020, which forced over 70,000 residents to evacuate. The fires broke out in the Santa Cruz Mountains, affecting nearby communities, one being Boulder Creek, where Sprinkle and Stephens lived. The documentary exposes the devastation and destruction of having to leave one's homes and communities.

But that's not all. Sprinkle and Stephens turn tragedy into comedy, and sometimes silliness: eco-friendly texting goats munch on hillsides; Albert, a local free-roaming white peacock, sometimes narrates; and the film is spliced with animated montages of Sprinkle and Stephens next to a spewing volcano. There's even an "ecosex scene" filmed in slo-mo with accompanying porn music. Sprinkle and Stephens visit a fire fetishist who performs her magic by passing fire torches dangerously close to their nude bodies, sometimes touching their skin. (Later, I asked them if that was painful — Stephens replied, "It felt so amazing, but do not try it at home!")

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Film still of *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency* (2025), directed by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, in which Guillermo Gómez-Peña (center) is the Hot Officiant for the Wedding to Fire ritual and vows (photo Lydia Danillier, courtesy E.A.R.T.H. Lab SF)

Inserting humor through their singular way of storytelling makes the documentary almost a joy to watch despite its disturbing subject matter. Nothing is sugarcoated, but their humane approach opens a pathway to understanding, acceptance, and hope in the face of calamity rather than simply fear or avoidance.

Fire is presented in all its glory — good and bad. Ex-con firefighters are interviewed; a performance artist sets themselves on fire; parades and rituals of fire worshippers appear throughout the film. In a heartfelt scene-stealer, Sprinkle asks her dying mother where she wants her ashes scattered. Her mom's reply: "Surprise me." Next, we see a cardboard box of her deceased mother (presumably!) bound for the cremation chamber, all aflame, as the door slowly closes.

In the film, Sprinkle and Stephens eventually come to terms with fire — this is how eroticizing it works. It's about respect for Earth, becoming a lover of Earth, eroticizing it, maybe even marrying it? In ceremony and celebration, Sprinkle and Stephens say "We do" to fire.



Film still of *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency* (2025), directed by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, featuring the filmmakers preparing for an ecosex ritual in a burnt forest in Northern California (photo Lady Monster, courtesy E.A.R.T.H. Lab SF)

After the film, we stop by Nye's *Web of Love* exhibition. The gallery is resplendent with wall-to-wall deep red carpet, low lighting, four magenta heart-shaped jacuzzies, and the video featuring Sprinkle and Stephens projected on all three walls with a looping soundtrack. Sprinkle lip-syncs to the song while Stephens plays her sexed-up sidekick. Sprinkle bounces her plentiful bosom upon Stephens's head, and both spill their glasses of champagne while hamming it up in a sudsy hot tub. It's clear they're having an amazing time showing off their humor and playfulness, an important quality in their creative sensibilities. "I made my first porn film at 18 years old. And now, at 71, I'm so proud to be still acting slutty!" Sprinkle tells me.

Driving back down the coast to Los Angeles, the verdant hills were still dazzling, but I saw them differently — even the ocean seemed to lose its glisten. It made me realize why films like *Playing with Fire*, and the commitment Sprinkle and Stephens have to their art, is so *important*. They could be simply painting landscapes, but instead, as they reminded me, "We are activists."



Maid of honor and artist Monica Canilao (left), with bride to fire Annie Sprinkle (center), and bridesmaid Azul Water Witch (photo Monica Canilao, courtesy E.A.R.T.H. Lab SF)

Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency (2025), directed by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, is screening around the world through at least December 21.