



PSU conference sees art differently

Opera interacts with the city as Jeff Evans, a music student at Portland State University, sings in the "Bus Stop Opera." Conceived by Dawn Weleski, the piece, which introduces opera at numerous light rail stops, is one of the many social practice art events taking place during "Open Engagement."

"Open Engagement" explores social practice and how we assess something's worth

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

For three days — and one more to come today — artists from around the country have opened their hearts and minds to Portlanders through a series of goofy runathons, cook-offs, and spontaneous moments of opera singing, among other things.

On paper, the artists in town for the four-day conference at Portland State University, "Open Engagement: Making Things, Making Things Better, Making Things Worse," sound like a silly crew of merry pranksters. And in person, it would be easy to dismiss the army of peg-legged jeans, scruffy facial hair and unwashed mop-tops that has descended on Portland as

models from a hipster-metrosexual style manual.

But don't merely be amused by these droves of social art practitioners and related observers in town for this modestly scaled, first-time event.

Analysis

"Open Engagement" captures the powerfully idealistic philosophy of a growing art practice, maybe even the zeitgeist of a generation.

The gathering, directed and conceived by Portland State University professor Jen Delos Reyes, is an extraordinarily ambitious confab presented by PSU's Art and Social Practice department, with support from Portland Community College and Pacific

Northwest College of Art. Since Friday, the event, which will probably become an annual happening in Portland, has sponsored scores of workshops, lectures and shows across town, including a talk by one of the leading voices of social practice, artist Mark Dion.

But beyond the usual offerings of a conference, the event provided attendees — and thus, the public — an opportunity to think about the meaning of social practice.

Broadly speaking, art history taught at most colleges emphasizes the significance and value of art objects — say a sculpture, painting or photograph. Within this master narrative, artists and artworks assume different levels of critical importance and



On OregonLive

Watch video from the weekend's "Open Engagement" events, including "Bus Stop Opera" at oregonlive.com/art

financial worth as a result of critical evaluations made by historians and institutions over time.

But the art of social practice eschews the master narrative. Rooted in past anti-materialistic movements such as Dada in the early 20th

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HOW WE LIVE



Natasha Liorens (left) and Harrell Fletcher (right), a PSU professor who started the university's social practice program, take part in Ariana Jacobs' "Speed Dating" performance. Inspired by speed dating, Jacobs' work gets people to connect with one another through the quick sharing of ideas.

MOTOYA NAKAMURA
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PSU: Conference teaches via experiences

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century and Fluxus in the 1960s, social practice openly challenges history's value system and the institutions that champion it. In social practice, art is about forging deeper bonds with people and society, not creating a critical system that judges worth and profundity, separates greatness from mediocrity.

An anti-art form

So what does the art of social practice look like to those who've never embraced it?

A quick weekend immersion in "Open Engagement" revealed an anti-art form, experiences more familiar in anthropological, psychological or sociological terms.

Los Angeles artist Melanie Nakaue, for example, turned strangers into friends by gathering groups of two people at a time at a small table. She then asked them to draw a portrait of each other, during which time they got to converse in this intimate situation.

"The Wild Food Cook-Off," conceived by New York artist Michelle Illuminato, nourished an awareness and viability of natural food sources. Artists made specialty dishes using only wild or foraged ingredients, including nutria chili and salmon and asparagus-flavored ice cream.

Meantime, at Buckman Park, Nashville artist Jonathan Paul Gillette presented "What Are You Running From-Athon." Runners at the Buckman track had to first confess the fears driving them to run. Some even got to talk to one of three counselors hired by Gillette for onsite counseling.

The traditional lover of craft and beauty may ask sniffily: What's the point of such goofing around, skits that aren't too dissimilar from those seen on David Letterman's show?

"I'm literally trying to confront people, give them a venue in which to be vulnerable," says Gillette, who says the runathon event was inspired by a friend's nervousness at the start of a marathon some years ago. Gillette realized his friend's intense running was fueled by an ambivalent relationship to her mother. Everyone, Gillette now believes, is running from something. Some quite literally, however.

Challenging is OK

Such consciousness raising frames the payoff for those involved with social practice, which can be anyone, not just an artist with a degree from Yale. Revelations about yourself or the world are thus made, new relationships with others formed. Society aligns in deeper harmony.

Or maybe in greater unbridled passion.

I was impressed by the earnestness of just about everyone I spoke to at the conference. On the walls of a room inside PSU's art building, for instance, were scrawled numerous ardent challenges to the art world hierarchy: "Why is a Picasso more valuable than a Native's blanket?" "Who decides what is art?" "Why are

art programs mostly white?"

Those questions unearth salient conflicts in art and society. But it might be equally salient to recognize these questions are being articulated by a group that is mostly white and educated by, or working within, those very institutions of critical judgment they wish to challenge.

There is also this: more universities and colleges across the country are introducing social practice programs, just like PSU did a few years ago. And social practice works are increasingly programming staples at major museums. This outlier art form is now becoming institutionalized, moving into the mainstream system.

But challenging the value systems is OK. It feeds idealism, keeps it in a state of suspended longing that, for artists, feeds creativity.

It also communicates this rarefied art form's emotional appeal, even to those who can't find a place for it in their personal art historical narrative.

We live in a time of immense globalization that allows someone in Iceland to become virtual neighbors with someone in Portland. Technology has changed the manner and frequency of human communication.

But it hasn't abolished one enduring affliction: The loneliness that transcends the virtual world and pushes people to seek a community where real human connection is all that matters.

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"Open Engagement" continues through Monday. Go to www.openengagement.info for a listing of events.