

## EVOLVING INTENTIONS IN PUBLIC ART

CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS  
1050 OLD PECOS TRAIL, SANTA FE

### WHAT IF ART ISN'T AN OBJECT BUT A SURPRISE, A RIPPLE IN THE FABRIC

of everyday life, just lying by the roadside waiting for us to notice? CCA's recent daylong symposium—the morning panel devoted to work and projects, the afternoon devoted to a roundtable, with provocative questions by moderator Michelle LaFlamme-Childs—touched on fundamental issues about what art can mean or *do* in our fragmented social environment, including original elaborations on the eternal question of why artists make art.

*Evolving Intentions in Public Art* explored the heady experimentation and deep commitment involved in long-term projects involving many people, or individual anonymous guerilla actions, unexpected interventions, and ephemeral works. Documented by organizer Christy Hengst, it will be made into a book. Issa Nyaphaga, from Cameroon, who lives in Santa Fe and Paris, started a people's radio station that did not parrot official government views; he was persecuted in his country for a graphic newspaper for those who could not read. The issue of "permission" for art reminds us that there are always boundaries. In America we may be simply ignored, but imagine a society where you are jailed and tortured for your work. Still, there's risk in this kind of work. Anonymous, unsanctioned things allow little control over security. And an artist wants to get credit for her work. Permission for many of these events or interventions, however temporary and non-invasive, might not have been granted, due to the nature of institutions, agencies, and bureaucracies. How does one get funding or even document the work? The strategy of Nancy Holt, who owns the land on which she built *Sun Tunnels*, is not always

available. To reach the general public in their everyday life, you must place things in their path, go to them, not wait for them to come to you, enter a gallery, or deliberately choose to "view" some art.

Paula Castillo, Alysa Shaw, Aly Krekmeier of *El Otro Lado*, Molly Sturges (*COAL* and *Lifesongs*), and Dominique Mazeaud and Bobbe Besold of *Rivers Run Through Us* discussed goals and challenges in their projects in terms of engaging people with their environment or one another—from school children and local residents to elderly dementia patients, who needed some listening to be able to tell their stories. Edie Tsong talked about *Snow Poems*—which solicited short poems—and posted them in large type in the windows of buildings. Christy Hengst installed her delicate life-size porcelain white bird-like small sculptures with silk-screened images of war and peace in public spaces. *Birds in the Park* alighted around Santa Fe (City Hall, the Santa Fe Public Library) and in places as diverse as the Washington Mall and Galapagos Islands. Temporary and fragile, they opened up a space for people to linger, tilt their heads, and ask questions. Perhaps we don't often enough just linger for a moment to notice something subtle and ask *who did that; why did they do it?*

Matthew Chase-Daniels' *Gourdsigns* on local road medians mimicked other more mundane street signage. He saw it as a playful way to give bored drivers something different to look at. He and Jerry Wellman are the force behind Axle Contemporary, whose most visible manifestation is a converted van, a mobile art gallery,

seen around town—like an ice cream truck for the soul. For Chase-Daniels it was important that, while he did not get "permission" for those *Gourdsigns*, they were kept within a public-safety paradigm. Wellman spoke about a kind of "dancing around legality" with this work. One can start as totally "rogue" and seamlessly morph into a commodity, as Banksy demonstrates. For Chase-Daniels' *Dollar Distribution*, fifteen hundred dollars, raised on Kickstarter, was left as individual dollar bills around Santa Fe—on sidewalks, in a tree, or in a book in the library. Though he posted photographs of some of the greenbacks in their spots, they were unmarked; so fifteen hundred people had an experience, unique for each of them.

The point is not whether art should be a commodity or should rebel against that status. The immersive installations now so common may be a transitional form between these two poles. Vince Kadlubek of Meow Wolf talked about the *Due Return* installation, produced collaboratively by numerous artists. For some people it seemed too messy or even "fun" to be serious art, Kadlubek said. True artists are driven to make their work. Certainly they need income, residencies, commissions, and support. But limiting "art" to an object that we look at in a museum or buy and take home is too narrow.

What is it about sports events, Wellman asked, that makes twenty million people tune in and be utterly involved? How could art have that same kind of appeal? Sanjit Sethi, director of Santa Fe Art Institute, referenced scenarios for collective "ritual" forms in some cultures, such as civic or religious processions. We have few public rituals unmediated by corporate products. There are immediatist moments, like Halloween, when people walk around their neighborhoods participating in their own way in a wider cultural ritual. In my neighborhood on July 4, people take chairs into the street to enjoy the fireworks. No one tells us where to sit, when to leave, and we don't buy anything—we even sometimes talk to one another! Maybe such banal times and places are potential points for art intervention—what Hakim Bey calls Temporary Autonomous Zones. How does one create, even for a moment, something that brings into being a sense—perhaps the only sense that might save humanity and our planet—that "we are all in the same boat."

Lewis Hyde's 1983 book *The Gift* argues that certain important aspects of life are badly organized by the marketplace—artistic practice, which is what the book mostly discusses, but also pure science, spiritual life, healing, and teaching. Hyde eloquently demonstrates that the economy of artistic practice is akin to the ancient practice of gift exchange.

—MARINA LA PALMA



Issa Nyaphaga, *Cameroon or Bust*, photograph, 2014