

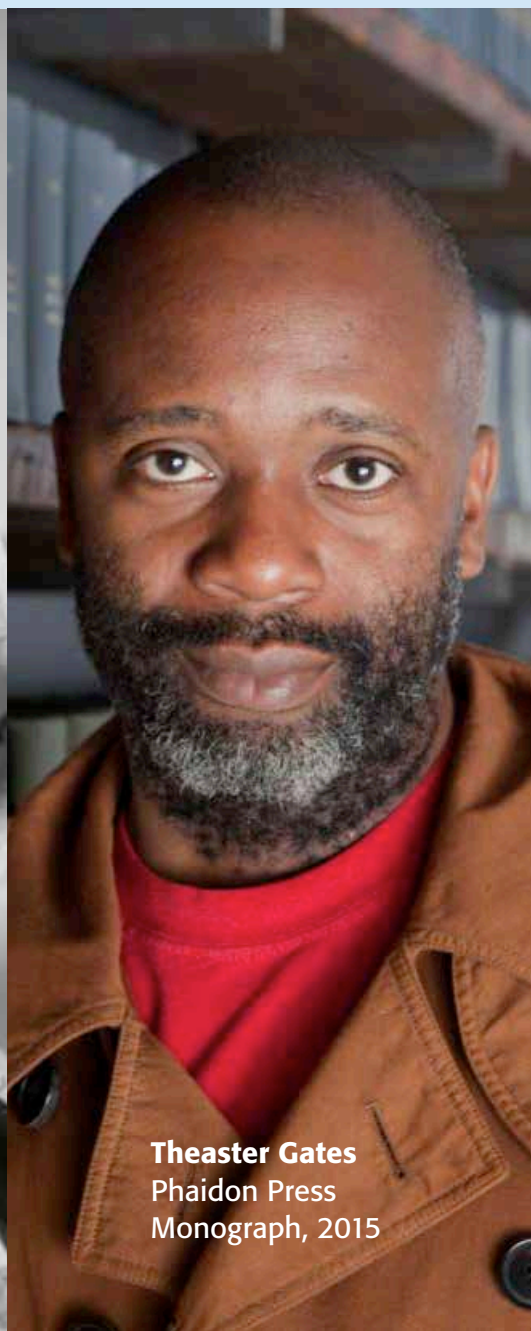
## THREE TOP SUMMER ART READS



**Identity Unknown:  
Rediscovering Seven  
American Women Artists**  
by Donna Seaman



**The Dream Colony: A Life in Art**  
by Deborah Treisman & Anne Doran



**Theaster Gates**  
Phaidon Press  
Monograph, 2015

**What's This Social Practice Art Thing? An Interview with Artist Paul Druecke** Page 11

**The Changing World of Alternative Art Spaces in Chicago** Page 15

**Reviews of Jim Dine, Robert Frank and Arlene Shechet**

## New Art Examiner

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The **New Art Examiner** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

As the New Art Examiner has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The New Art Examiner welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The New Art Examiner welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The New Art Examiner does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology, or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary are welcome. The New Art Examiner has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the New Art Examiner is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

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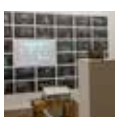
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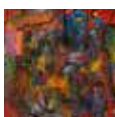
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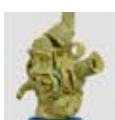
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**COVER IMAGE:** From left, Donna Seaman, Photo by David Siegfried; Walter Hopps, Photo by John Gossage; Theaster Gates, Photo courtesy of Phaidon Press.

# THREE TOP SUMMER ART READS

The art world goes on vacation during July & August. This gives gallery owners, art enthusiasts and editors some needed time to relax, perhaps travel and catch up on postponed reading plans. The Examiner has read and, in this section, has chosen three recent noteworthy books sure to give you much reading pleasure this summer.

Our first selection is the riveting story of a renowned curator and museum director, Walter Hopps, who, during the Fifties and Sixties, mounted some of that era's most groundbreaking exhibitions. (page 3)

Next is an engrossing study of seven 20th century women artists who suffered institutional bias and disparagement for many years by the art world. (page 5)

Finally, there's a needed and detailed critique of the artist of the moment, Theaster Gates, who goes from one museum show and honor to another. In May, he was awarded an architecture prize for his housing reclamations by the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters. (page 8)

Pick one or all three, settle back in a cozy chair, turn off the iPhone and rediscover the rewarding art of reading!

**Walter Hopps**  
Memoire  
The Dream Colony



**Donna Seaman**  
Author of  
Identity Unknown



**Theaster Gates**  
Phaedon Press  
Monograph





# Remarkable Curator's Life Begets Sparkling Memoir

*By Tom Mullaney*



Walter Hopps by John Gossage.

**I**t was major art world news when noted contemporary art curator and museum director, Walter Hopps, died in March, 2005. His passing was featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Art in America*. The *Post* obituary termed him “a sort of gonzo museum director...outlandish in his range, jagged in his vision, heedless of rules.”

He was that but also intuitive about art, friend to artists, innovative, and iconoclastic. And perpetually late for meetings. The Corcoran Gallery of Art staff, during the brief period Hopps was director, created the button “Walter Hopps will be here in 20 minutes.” Joshua Taylor, whom Hopps worked with at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, famously said, “I’d fire him if I could find him.”

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Deborah Treisman and Anne Doran for resurrecting Hopps, his picaresque life and many contributions to contemporary art. At the time of his death, he had been the founding director of Houston’s Menil Collection along with being its curator and trustee over the prior 25 years.

Hopps was a unique figure who led a charmed life filled with his share of difficulties, mentioned only in passing in the book. Three wives and

numerous women were woven throughout his life (beginning with the three girlfriends he had at one time in the 10th grade). He battled an addiction to amphetamines for many years and suffered a brain aneurysm in 1994 but made an amazing recovery and returned to work.

Hopps held a series of museum appointments (Pasadena Art Museum, Corcoran Gallery, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art) but preferred being a curator, mounting shows and being close to the art and artists he considered the “Dream Colony” relative to corporate America’s “Plantation Colony.”

His deep immersion in art began as a teenager at age 15 when he visited the Los Angeles home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, the famed collectors of Dadaist and Surrealist art. He was so taken by what he saw that he repeatedly skipped class to spend days at the house exploring their collection.

Also at age 15, Hopps began visiting the Copley Gallery where he saw exhibitions of Rene Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, Matta, Man Ray and Max Ernst. He developed a lifelong attachment to the art of Marcel Duchamp and Cornell with whom he formed a close friendship.

Hopps’ first exhibition in 1955 shows the ingenuity he displayed throughout his career. He rented the merry-go-round at the Santa Monica Pier, stretched tarp around the poles and hung nearly 100 paintings by 40 artists, including Sonia Gechtoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still and Jay DeFeo. None of the works were above \$300 but nothing sold. Yet the show is considered a seminal moment in gaining recognition for a new generation of West Coast artists.

He founded the Ferus Gallery at age 24 in partnership with artist Ed Kienholz. Ferus was the first gallery to show Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Cans. His museum career begins in 1962 when he takes the curator/registrar position at the Pasadena Art Museum and becomes its director a year later.

With the Pasadena appointment, Hopps became the youngest museum director in America at age 31. During his five years there, he curated the first museum exhibition of Pop Art with work by Jim Dine, Joe Goode, Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, Wayne Thiebaud and Andy Warhol. He presented the first retrospective of Marcel Duchamp's work, as well as Joseph Cornell's, and gave Frank Stella his first museum show.

When he became director of Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1967, the New York Times dubbed him "the most gifted museum man on the West Coast (and, in the field of contemporary art, possibly in the nation)." He mounted a "Hairy Who" show in 1969.

He continued throughout his museum career to mount landmark exhibitions of Duchamp, Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg and other avant-garde figures. He was famous for curating "outside the box." In Washington in 1978, he curated a show, "Thirty-Six Hours," where he hung all the work well-known artists and total unknowns brought to the gallery over a day-and-a-half period.

We might not have this memoir without Deborah Treisman and Anne Doran's long labor of love. Hopps refused to write his autobiography so artist Doran spent over 100 hours capturing his storied recollections on tape. They supplemented their draft with material supplied by his widow. Treisman, the fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, crafted the manuscript and masterfully captured Hopps' voice and spirit.

The book is chock full of his encounters with artists throughout his life. He had a special ability to "hit it off" (his term) with artists and collectors alike. He willingly surrendered the role of being a director to escape the chains of administrative chores so he could roam free amongst the art. Treisman and Doran end the book on a high note with Hopps' strong, deeply personal remembrances of Robert Rauschenberg and Dominique de Menil.

The book contains a highly useful Chronology at the back. I would urge readers to consult that reading aid as you go along since it contains useful details that are not mentioned in Hopps' recollections.

I read the book with a mixture of admiration and wonder at Hopps' vision and accomplishments. I closed it feeling I'd gotten to know an unforgettable character and museum man so unlike the more button-down figures of today. This incomplete account, which skimps on his time in Houston, should still be required reading for a new generation of students and curators who missed the chance to know and learn from this remarkable figure. ■

#### **"The Dream Colony: A Life in Art"**

Deborah Treisman and Anne Doran  
Bloomsbury, 2017

Tom Mullaney is Senior Editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He wishes he had gotten to know Walter Hopps when he and Hopps both lived in Washington in the early 1970s.

Robert Alexander, John Reed, Wallace Berman, Juanita Dixon, and Walter Hopps in the alley next to Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, ca. 1957. The Getty Research Institute, Charles Brittin papers, 2005.M.11.9. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Photo by Charles Brittin



# Seven Artists Who Languished in the Shadows

*By Elizabeth Hatton*



**D**onna Seaman's poignantly titled, "Identity Unknown: Rediscovering Seven American Women Artists," is a bold exploration of the work and lives of seven female visual artists who lived and created in the 20th

century. And were largely overlooked by galleries, museums and the art press.

Chicago author and editor Donna Seaman's survey includes mystic/sculptor Louise Nevelson, painter Gertrude Abercrombie, painter and progressive academic Loïs Mailou Jones, multimedia artist Ree Morton, painter Joan Brown, painter and quilter Christina Ramberg, and fiber artist Lenore Tawney.

Each artist shared common experiences of sexism, restriction, confusion, creativity, liberation, and strength. All these women were self-made artists with sharp minds, wit, talent, drive, and passion who were largely dismissed due to their gender and societal roles.

Most also had to find balance in a society where women artists were disregarded; their art seen by society at large as a pastime or hobby rather than a serious endeavor, especially in comparison to their male counterparts.

All of these women artists exhibited strength and daring by simply following the compulsion to make art. They also were a mixture of educators, scholars, world-travelers, mothers, wives, lovers, friends, innovators, groundbreakers, and inquisitors.

Seaman offers a 360 degree view of each person as a whole being, contextualized within their social, personal, physical, and political lives: the troubles they faced personally and publicly, and how the questions imposed by their subjugated status translated into their art.

Seaman highlights threads of similarity that bound these women together in their individual brilliance and societal discrimination. Beginning with Louise Nevelson, an art world diva whose work was as confident as her male colleagues,

she reveals some of the stereotypes women artists had to face.

Nevelson, a late-bloomer who became recognized in her 60s, shattered expectations by being incredibly fashionable while creating robust work that easily rivaled her contemporaries (including her influencers, Joseph Cornell and Pablo Picasso). However, one egregiously sexist (or possibly jokey) reviewer wrote, "We learned the artist is a woman, in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among moderns."



Louise Nevelson, *Royal Tide I*, 1960, Painted Wood 86 X 40 X 8," Collection of Peter and Beverly Lipman

A particularly unifying trait among all of these artists' work is the impulse to both conceal and reveal. This is particularly true of Nevelson whose work tends to shroud itself in mystery and secrecy. While it could be argued that most art has this duality, it seems particularly important that these seven artists created work that really reflected both their internal egos and externally imposed identities.

Gertrude Abercrombie's dark, haunting, dreamy, and poetic imagery formed surreal landscapes that often included female figures and felines as stand-ins for Abercrombie herself and metaphorical objects representing her various, at times tumultuous, relationships. These dreamscapes also echo another Chicago artist, Christina Ramberg, who dealt with her own physical insecurities and fascination with the bondage of the body and fetishization of the feminine ideal.





Gertrude Abercrombie, *The Chess Match*, 1948,  
Oil on canvas. Gift of Gertrude Abercrombie  
Trust/Collection of the Illinois State Museum

Ramberg's faceless, reduced female bodies are restrained and seemingly powerless. They are often cut off at the knees and intensely focused on the torso and genitalia in an exacting visual autopsy. Her figure's identity was constantly obscured, the body becoming identity itself.



Christina Ramberg, *Sedimentary Disturbance*, 1980  
Acrylic on masonite

Similarly, Joan Brown's striking female figures, while wholly rendered, become totemic representations of women somehow either devoid of life or in a constant state of shock. Their flatness and placement in these stiff scenes become decorative, melting into the wallpaper.



Joan Brown *Self-Portrait*, 1977, oil enamel on canvas,  
90 x 72 inches, Collection of Sandra Shannonhouse

For most of these artists, there appeared to be a prevailing ambivalence between their drive to create while trying to find balance in expectations of them as caretakers and lovers. Their relationships were in constant flux, with separation and divorce being common. Seaman hones in on this in her afterword when asking, "Where does this all-consuming need to create come from? This bizarre commitment to impractical, even implausible pursuits requiring enormous personal sacrifice? The compulsion to make art complicates every aspect of life, from personal finances to close relationships."

This compulsion led to questions, and many of these women utilized and transformed feminine clichés, such as Morton's anthropomorphic bows, Ramberg's paper dolls, and Tawney's deconstruction of feminine craft. All of them are cross-examining these modes while looking inward.

Ree Morton, *Solitary, or Rarely 2*, 1974





The book references political themes that are impossible to ignore. The advent of feminism and the civil rights movements certainly impacted the work of these artists. Loïs Mailou Jones—an icon of the Harlem Renaissance—stands out as a pillar of resolution in the face of these conflicts.



Lois Maillou Jones *Self Portrait*, 1940 Smithsonian American Art Museum

For her, the mission was simple: she wanted to go down in history. She faced double-discrimination being both a woman and an African-American, and she endured this ostracization both socially and academically. She persevered to create an immense body of work and developed a close-knit exchange with Africa, leading to a collection of over 1,000 art slides compiled at Howard University during an incredibly prolific and hard-won teaching career.

Lenore Tawney likewise became a groundbreaking artist as the first in a wave of new fiber artists. She faced contention with craftspeople when she deconstructed this ancient, feminine craft and effectively turned it into painting and sculpture. She also lived a very quick-paced life as she traveled and relocated. Seaman describes Tawney's wanderlust not only regarding her physical location but also in her work and personal life, stating that, "[j]ust as Tawney knew when to extract herself from relationships and situations that she felt were holding her back, she recognized that it was time to make a clean break from expressively figurative images and color."

Her travel impulse eventually resulted in her move from Chicago to an eight-month stint in New York City's Coenties Slip (an industrial area on the East River utilized by artists such as Robert

Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns). This close-knit community was a safe haven for lesbian and gay people in a world hostile towards this highly-taboo identity. The relocation and newfound freedom in this cultural oasis led to an incredible body of monumental works that continued to challenge the socially acceptable ways in which women could produce art.



Lenore Tawney, *Drawing in Air VIII*, 1997, Linen, plexiglas  
© Lenore G. Tawney Foundation 2017

While Seaman sometimes seems to veer off into tangential descriptions of the people surrounding these artists, disrupting an otherwise smooth flow of prose, the context surrounding the more well-known artists and the influence that these seven latently-recognized women may have had and shared with them is incredibly eye-opening.

It calls into question the historical emphasis of one artist from another, as well as the inherent bend towards male contemporaries whose works these female counterparts easily rivaled if not bested. The art world's exclusion of these artists from the larger narrative is sharply criticized by Seaman in her fascinating narrative of their extraordinary lives and laudable dive into the world of these 20th century artistic pioneers. ■

### **"Identity Unknown: Rediscovering Seven American Women Artists"**

Donna Seaman  
Bloomsbury 2017

Elizabeth Hatton is a multidisciplinary artist and SAIC alumna living in Chicago. She is looking for ways to encourage public engagement with art through music, conversation, writing, and visual media.

# Theaster Gates, Today's Superstar

*By Bruce Thorn*

**P**haidon Press published "Theaster Gates" in 2015, the phenomenal breakout year for Gates during which he participated in the Venice and Istanbul Biennales, presented a motivational TED Talk, had a solo exhibition at London's White Cube, opened his first public project in the UK, won an Artes Mundi Award (Wales) and took center stage at the Hirshorn Museum's 40th anniversary gala. The book is not exactly new, but now that all the hype has died down a little this might be a good time to get a better understanding of what Theaster Gates is all about.

The book is a beautiful, well-made and oversized paperback with an attractive dust jacket. The layout, graphics and photos are excellent throughout. My only complaint is that the gray captions can be difficult to read. The monograph is efficiently organized into sections: an interview with Gates by Carol Becker, essays by Lisa Yun Lee and Achim Bordhardt-Hume, followed by a photo collection, writings by the artist and a chronology.

Carol Becker is Dean of Faculty and professor at the Columbia University School of the Arts. Her interview with Gates provides a good general knowledge of the artists' background, work, projects, ideas and theory. The interview touch-

es upon most of Gates' major projects to date, including: Dorchester Projects, Carver Bank and Sandwich Shop, Soul Manufacturing Corporation, Stony Island Arts Bank and Black Cinema House.

Theaster Gates (b 1973) has degrees in Urban Planning, Ceramics and Religious Studies from Iowa State University and the University of Cape Town, SA. His practice has been called "social practice art" and "real estate art." Starting from a love for making ceramics, Gates has re-conceptualized the process of making things out of clay into a model for how to make other kinds of things happen that involve urban planning and architecture.

Through a variety of deals, he acquires almost worthless buildings in un-favored urban areas ("un-real estate") and then refurbishes and repurposes these properties to fit social and archival purposes. He works with an understanding of the significance of symbolism and gesture. "There's nothing special about rehabbing a building. But then to call it something like "the Archive House" and to make a small residential building public—that does something." (P 8)

Theaster Gates has the charisma, knowledge and familiarity to work with urban officials. He mentions that artists are too separated by individuality to have political influence. Gates' game plan admirably begins at the notion that belief

*12 Ballads for Huguenot House, 2012, documentation photographs, Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012.*





*Dorchester Projects,*  
2009-ongoing, photo-  
graphic documentation,  
Dorchester Avenue,  
Chicago, 2014.

makes things happen. Carol Becker presciently observes: “One of the things that draws people towards you (Theaster Gates) is a joyfulness in your person and in your work, a state that surely would be impossible to sustain in politics.” (P 27)

Gates offers many wise words in Becker’s interview. Here’s a collection of a few of them, some slightly paraphrased:

“I want artists to understand that in the absence of a gallery or a museum, they have the capacity to invent the platform by which they can express their beliefs.” (P 20)

“In my studio, 90% of our time is spent working on buildings and working on projects that we can’t monetize. And then 10% of our time is spent making art that makes 90 per cent of the money that’s helping us grow.” (P 22)

“I have a craftsman’s belief that you should be excellent at something and that there’s a history and a pedagogical approach to a thing. I want to be a good craftsman as much as I want to be a good leader, and I don’t think I have to choose between leadership and craftsmanship.” (P 17)

“I am constantly making decisions that consider the symbolic effect that I want to ring in the city.” (P17)

“Do not approach philanthropic community as in need, approach as problem solvers.” (P 17)

The book’s second section is an essay by Lisa Yun Lee, Director of Art and Art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She provides an excellent survey of Gates’ background, projects and methodology and covers different aspects of some of the ground mentioned in Becker’s interview. She also introduces a few more major

projects, such as the Huguenot House project and Gates’ performance work and musical collaborations with the Black Monks of Mississippi.

Yun Lee’s use of language can be a lot more academic than Becker’s or Gates’ and is probably more convoluted than it needs to be, like this example from page 60:

“The works can be seen as attempts to realize the materials ‘in the syntax’ of the work itself. This claim, of course, draws from Michael Fried’s argument that abstraction is the attempt to establish a correlation between constitutive elements (shape) in an autonomous field and the perception that the constitutive elements fully relate and are purposeful or internally meaningful. They seek meaning from one another and nowhere else.”

Really? Might there be easier ways to get those ideas across, without the dreaded, academic art-speak? Many people would not make sense of this or even want to try. The language serves as a signifier of academia and class. Theaster Gates’ work, projects and goals are easily understood and evocative enough in common language. However, a large component of Gates’ work, especially the “un-real estate” projects, requires the support and cooperation of elected city officials, very wealthy individuals and organizations, architects, artist’s assistants, contractors, zoning offices, corporate officials and permit departments. There’s a lot of creative fund raising involved for the expensive projects. Maybe the academic jargon placates city bureaucrats and donors. A typical Chicagoan might wonder why it is that Theaster Gates can win the support of people like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and



his brother Ari when most people can't get a miniscule straight word, promise or zoning variance out of their neighborhood aldermanic office. Gates himself is seemingly comfortable in academia and carries the esoteric title of "Director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago."

Yun Lee's "Survey" does a good job of contextualizing Theaster Gates' art making. Gates clearly states: "I am not interested in making beautiful objects." His artwork funds the "un-real estate" projects. These artworks are not ready-mades or found objects like Duchamp's. Though Gates' works are dependent upon history and context, the act of handwork is an important aspect of his aesthetic. Things might get deconstructed and re-purposed, but the fire hoses, the tar paintings and shoe shine stands all derive their potency from historical implications without which the works would fail. The Gates Show succeeds as a total package. The actual art objects really aren't that particularly engaging if you divest them of their narrative.

Theaster Gates' genius and gifts are his broad curiosity, his ability to organize and inspire, his positive attitude and charisma, along with a personal relationship to the historical implications in the work. Gate's aesthetic successfully melds the organized and planned with a beautiful, authentic funkiness that has been absent for a while in the visual arts.

The book's shorter third section is "Focus, A Maimed King" by Achim Borchardt-Hume, current Head of Exhibitions at Tate Modern in London. Borchardt-Hume's essay focuses on

themes found in Gates' work and shines a light on the artist's motivations and his engagement with African-American history, beginning with the example of Gate's artwork called *A Maimed King*, which consists of an image of Martin Luther King Jr., which has been caught and crumpled, in the closed locking door of a discarded, institutional glass display case that had been "abandoned, delivered and repurposed."

The book's fourth section offers a collection of photos from Gates' studio and project locations. The last section of the book presents short writings by Gates' presented in extra-large print that mimics sandblasted or engraved marble grave-stones, like the "Bank Bonds" that helped finance the Stony Island Arts Bank. The book ends with a rather promotional chronology of Gates' career.

Phaidon's "Theaster Gates" is an excellent monograph about an interesting and inspiring man who successfully manages, organizes and utilizes his own individual strengths and expertise to make ambitious projects happen. I'm not so sure that the book makes a case for the actual art objects made by Theaster Gates, or that it even attempts to. As Gates says, making art objects is only a small part of the show. ■

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor to the New Art Examiner and a contributing writer to Neoteric Art.

*12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, 2012, documentation photographs, Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012.



# What's This Social Practice Art Thing?

## An Interview with Artist Paul Druecke

by Tom Mullaney

Paul Druecke



### A SOCIAL PRACTICE ART PRIMER

Jen Delos Reyes is associate director at the School of Art and Art History at the University of Illinois Chicago campus and a recognized authority on social practice art.

While the term “social practice” has gained wide currency in the past decade, art historian Claire Bishop writes the movement has a much longer history, starting with Dada and social movements like the Zurich nightclub, Cabaret Voltaire.

According to Reyes, the post-World War I period was a period when artists were creating social scenes around art practice. It was “a tumultuous time when artists were defining what their role in society was and how art could be involved in that reshaping.”

She identified other movements throughout the 20th century including Duchamp’s found objects, Arte Povera in Italy, Latin America’s Tropicalia, Joseph Beuys’ ideas on “social sculpture” and even Andy Warhol’s Factory as a social practice workshop.

Students at the California College for the Arts earlier defined the term as “artists working with the social as their material”. Their work cannot exist without people engaged in social intercourse. “With someone like Theaster Gates,” Reyes says.

“He (Gates) creates physical objects for exhibit purposes but his work with Dorchester Projects is so much about the neighbors and the nature of public housing. That’s work that could not exist without people.”

Socially-engaged art has changed since Druecke’s project and Nicolas Bourriaud’s term “relational aesthetics”. Since then, Reyes cites other seminal publications: Suzanne Lacy’s “New Genre Public Art” (argues that neighborhood people should be involved in creating public art) and Ted Purves’ “What We Want Is Free” (speaks to generosity and exchange in art).

Other social practice artists are Cuban artist Tanya Brueggera’s work on power and control around immigration, Rick Lowe, whose public housing work in Houston predates Gates’ and Mark Bradford.

Paul Druecke, a Milwaukee conceptual artist who enjoys a national reputation, started the Social Event Archive project in 1997. The Archive is now on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum to mark the 20th anniversary of an event that questioned how social interactions are captured on film, shared and commemorated.

Lisa Sutcliffe, curator of Photography and Media Arts at the museum, says in her introductory essay that Druecke (pronounced Drew-ka) was shocked when he discovered a snapshot that he could hardly remember. “He was so startled by the disconnect between the occasion, his experience of it and his failure of memory that he became curious about how social interactions are photographed.”

Druecke then invited the public to contribute a snapshot of a “social occasion, public or private, current or historical.” No further explanation was provided. And the exhibit offers none either. That democratic impulse, Sutcliffe says, “allowed Druecke to empower his subjects to define their own relationship to the term ‘social occasion’ through their selections.”

When the project ended after ten years in 2007, it contained 731 pictures, catalogued and displayed in the order the artist received them rather than chronologically.

According to Sutcliffe, “the photographs draw our attention to universal stories and underscore cultural modes of socializing.”

Druecke’s intent was to reconsider the meaning, significance and function of vernacular photography and rescue these life-flow artifacts (now that photographs exist in digital form and are considered more as ephemera) from their lost-in-the-attic or desk drawer fate as well as having participants create a record of social behavior in late-twentieth-century America.

A *Social Event Archive*, according to Wikipedia, foreshadowed the role of social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, in blurring boundaries between the personal and the public. It is a platform in which the artist is able to explore the concept of the collective mind pictorially. To the extent that the project has a public role, Druecke



A foursome wading in the water

can be classified as a social practice artist.

I became interested in the project after learning that writer and artist David Robbins had interviewed Druecke for the *New Art Examiner's* April 2000 issue (vol.27, no.7). It is a revealing look at the project while it was ongoing and a useful supplement to the artist's process.

Now that the Archive was complete, I interviewed Druecke at the museum in June.

**Mullaney:** It seems that you were once characterized as a conceptual artist. How do you now relate to being called a social practice artist?

**Druecke:** Funny that you should ask about that. One of the leaders in the social practice movement, Jennifer Delos Reyes and I are going to be in conversation about that here on July 27th and that will be interesting.

The Social Event Archive came into being prior to that practice existing as a term. That type of content absolutely existed prior, way before then and many artists have been exploring that intersection of public and private, high and low. But the actual term came after that and has gained an awful lot of momentum over the last, I don't know, 10 years.

**NAE:** Who do you think was the figure who helped develop that concept since, as you say, there were a lot of people beforehand?

**Druecke:** I don't know that there's one. The first academic program that I learned about when I was working on a project with Harold Fletcher and Miranda July, called "Learning to Love You More," a web-based set of assignments that allowed you to contribute.

They were taking the same idea but using this new technology of the internet. And Harold was instrumental in establishing a social practice pro-

gram at Portland State University.

**NAE:** Social practice is a term that is quite contemporary but I wonder which of these artists, who blended public and private spheres, you would relate to? I'm thinking of Rauschenberg, Hans Haacke, Gordon Matta-Clark and Martin Kippenberger. Which of those do you feel touch on your practice?

**Druecke:** I'm a huge fan, and relooking over, the work of Hans Haacke in relation to this July 27th talk. The way he brings a kind of institutional critique into the work, he's very different from mine but I also think as wanting to clarify certain relationships—the relation between the artist, institution and audience.

So, works like the real estate holding project, very controversial but also just saying take a look at these relationships and you can decide what position you want to take toward these relationships. You can take whatever position you wish but it's a matter of clarity and I love that.

Another artist who I would put into this mix is Jenny Holzer. Her content and her identification with those LED signs that could go into these kinds of public spaces was a little eye-opening and jarring for many people but really effective. And I've recently started following her on Twitter and it's curious to see the evolution of her practice and I see her practice as evolving.

**NAE:** Speaking of Haacke, would you put your *Historical Markers* project and your idea about "authority" and subverting the application process and the ability of the public to play some role in the whole project?

**Druecke:** I would say that the content that one expects to find on the medium, I just feel there's so much more room for such depth and meaning and other forms of imagination. So, absolutely there is criticism in thinking how they exist in the world now. But I'd say more than that is just the realization and an interest in the potential for what they could be and there, it comes back to a certain clarity as to how they function now and how they could in other ways. Could be more poetic. For me, the markers have a certain self-awareness about what they are and how they are inserting themselves into a certain context and most of the other ones don't have that.

**NAE:** The notion of "authority" seems to be important in your work. Can you please describe what role it plays in your art?



**Druecke:** Authority and agency are related in my work—I think of them in combination as the power to act, to bring together, to intercede. The implications are political and existential, which is to say, both outward and inward looking. I am interested in the power of presence, and the poetry of conditionality. Like so many others, I am thinking about my methodologies in the light of political upheaval.

A *Social Event Archive* laid the groundwork for ongoing exploration of themes such as idiosyncrasy and concord. The Archive's structure showcases and heightens what would otherwise have been private moments. The Archive begs questions about our willingness, and capacity, to consider so many strangers' lives as significant and meaningful for public consumption.

I am interested in the inherent tensions that arise when authority, or agency, is seen through a democratic lens. One can argue that the Archive's authority hinges on participants' choices to contribute to the composite portrait. The contributors are authors and their respective decisions maintain authority even as they join forces with hundreds of co-authors. Hundreds of authors representing thousands of lives palpably embodies the aforementioned conditionality and contingency. Finally, my act of initiating the Archive short-circuits the hierarchies—institutional and scholarly—associated with traditional archives.

**NAE:** Your art also relates to the concepts of time and memory and how fallible those concepts can be. So, does your art say that our concept of history is flawed and quite relevant? You sort of make a point that it all depends on where you stand and who's writing the history.

At a mid-20th Century luncheonette



**Druecke:** I would say that, foremost for me, that is very personal and an interest in experiment for me to locate myself in this thing that feels very mysterious and also continually morphing. If I think I understand the sense of past, present and future one day, that may change the next day or the next week or the next month. So my relationship continues to change to something that, to me, feels very fluid.

**NAE:** How does Michelle Grabner's essay in the catalogue that talks of the past is never past. It's talking about the concept of the "present past" is always with us.

**Druecke:** I think that's such a beautiful way to articulate what I was just trying to get at, that sense of fluidity and semantics of how we understand these things. The words we have to explain these is one thing but then there's this whole mind/body relationship to it. Sometimes the words are trying to catch up to another intuitive understanding of what it is to be sitting here right now with such a cool, nice breeze.

I'm very interested in trying to connect my understanding of that, however temporal, to my putting something into the world in a tangible form and then that loops back to that relevant idea of what is the fact, what is the material substance that helps us track that notion of past, present and future.

**NAE:** Speaking of memory, just as you felt that digital photography has changed the whole concept of photography that exists in the archive, is the idea of memory itself changed because everybody is looking at "my memory," it's all so self-reflexive? Is memory affected by this whole internet age?

**Druecke:** I don't want to dodge that but I really feel that I don't know if I am qualified to comment on that. I don't know.

**NAE:** The Archive has no narrative and doesn't assign meaning to the project. Yet, as I went through the exhibit, people want to give some sort of meaning to the archive or individual photos. I know that you resist that. It seems man is a meaning animal, always trying to put that word onto experience. How can just the idea of viewing something or it just being there give it meaning?

**Druecke:** I guess that idea of what something means and to take meaning away is really import-

ant. For me, the layer that I would add onto that is that I just feel there's a conditionality. Everything is subject to a certain conditionality that affects the "Meaning." I understand that gets a little slippery when, all of a sudden, you go from the singular, this is what it means, to meaning philosophically. So, then well, if it's "Meaning," can any one of those be accurate or correct or it means everything is kind of relative based on the circumstances of its being encountered by people.

So, there I have to say again, that back and forth, that tension, I just find fascinating. I don't see it resolved.

**NAE:** That's what gives a work of conceptual art its edge, that it's an either/or. Can the Archive be seen as an An-archive which Simon Reynolds calls, "a barely navigable disorder of data-debris." It's a collection of over 700 photographs and you don't even know any connection. It's not like the book, "Wisconsin Death Trip" where you have a whole bunch of photos as well but which are organized around a specific theme. So, can the archive be seen as an ana-archive?



Three stylish ladies at a celebration

**Druecke:** Well, I feel that that's a great question tying two viewpoints together with the notion of conditionality. I just love how that individual photographs have to vie with one another and one has to negotiate not just five or twelve different lives, that one might understand as one would in a family context or like with "Wisconsin Death Trip", where you could organize them along certain thematic art but how they've come together (in the Archive) is so organic, it has a structure, though it's random, and you're left to confront this notion of human existence in a very structured, disorganization, which, to me, I think is one way of reflecting reality.

That's something we do all the time. We're aware of these people; we don't necessarily need to interact with them and know them. How do we think of our existence in relationship to all these other people? And you know there are, in a very subtle way, there're political implications to how one person responds to that.

**NAE:** Tell me, you said in the Afterword, that how when you were putting the Archive together, you were really looking at the photos as commodified, you saw them as having a "facile poignancy" and yet you come back to it, twenty or ten years later and you seem to look at them a little differently. Can you describe that difference?

**Druecke:** I mean I'm older and that notion of time and age and nostalgia, can affect that. But also, the whole process of doing a project with those photos builds meaning into that material over time. It's something I've been thinking about recently because I realize that it's a bit of a pattern with the historic plaques. That is a medium that I initially had no interest [in] and perhaps an aversion to; and I feel that, oftentimes unconsciously as well as consciously, I gravitate toward something I don't understand or that seems very distant to me but, in working with it, that seems that it has potential because of me being outside of it.

And again, it's really not such a conscious strategy but, as I look back over time, I did this project on top of another project, the naming of space in Milwaukee Blue Dress Park. There was an organization, named Friends of Blue Grass Park, that was adopting a board structure to consider the legacy of this gesture.

I mean, there again, there were 10 or 12 people sitting around a table, going over the minutest little details of something, seemed so absolutely boring to me but fascinating because so much of contemporary culture gets filtered through that board structure.

**NAE:** Do you feel some kind of sorrow that photography is now a past media?

**Druecke:** No. I'm not. I think what it is now and what it will be in 5 years that's interesting and exciting to me. ■

The exhibition is on view through August 6, 2017.

TOM MULLANEY is Senior Editor of the New Art Examiner.

# The Changing World of Alternative Art Spaces in Chicago

By Michel Ségard

Chicago has had a long history of alternative art spaces. But not much has been written about them in recent years. Patrick Putze wrote a piece about them in 2013, published in “Arts & Culture.” Since then many of the spaces he featured have closed and new ones have emerged. It is time to take a fresh look at this community and how it is doing.

Putze used Lynne Warren’s definition of an alternative space from her 1984 book “Alternative Spaces: A History in Chicago.” She defined them as any “not-for-profit or noncommercial organization originated by and for artists (and assuring them a primary role in policy development and programming) that primarily shows Chicago-area artists, has a fixed location and operates on a continuous basis.” This definition needs a little updating.

“Alternative” today is less of an art political position than an acknowledgement of the limited opportunities offered by the traditional, established galleries. It is still, however, a recognition that most traditional galleries are too bound up in the museum-curator-gallery network to offer much opportunity for the emerging or lesser known artist.

Today, alternative spaces are to be found in many parts of the city, primarily in Andersonville, Belmont Central, East Garfield Park, Heart of Chicago, Humboldt Park, Pilsen, Ukrainian Village, and Winnemac. Many of these locations are in “less affluent” neighborhoods and are considered marginally safe. But the rent is affordable for individuals or small groups who are supporting the space with their own funds. Yet they are often hard to reach for those dependent on public transportation.

Many of these spaces are supported by individuals’ private funds, so their hours are limited because the founders must have “regular” jobs to support the space. The most common times for them to be open are Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons. A few are open on Sundays.

## Chicago Alternative Art Spaces Directory

### 65Grand

3252 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60647  
(312) 719 4325  
Thurs 6–9 pm, Fri & Sat 12–6 pm  
[www.65grand.com](http://www.65grand.com)



### Boyfriends

3311 W. Carroll St., Chicago, IL 60612  
Sundays 1–4 pm or by appointment  
[boyfriendschicago@gmail.com](mailto:boyfriendschicago@gmail.com)  
[boyfriendschicago.com](http://boyfriendschicago.com)



### Defibrillator

1463 W. Chicago Ave.,  
Chicago, IL 60642  
(773) 609 1137  
[dfb18r.org](http://dfb18r.org)



### Devening Projects + Editions

3039 W. Carroll Ave., Chicago, IL 60612  
(312) 420 4720  
Saturdays 12–5 pm or by appointment  
[deveningprojects.com](http://deveningprojects.com)



### Filter Space (Filter Photo)

1821 W. Hubbard St. #207,  
Chicago, IL 60622  
(312) 282 6818  
Mon–Sat 11 am–5 pm  
[info@filterfestival.com](mailto:info@filterfestival.com)  
[filterfestival.com/filter-space/](http://filterfestival.com/filter-space/)



### Firecat Projects

2124 N. Damen Ave.,  
Chicago, IL 60647  
(207) 249 9486  
Mon–Sat 10 am–4 pm and by  
appointment  
[firecatprojects@gmail.com](mailto:firecatprojects@gmail.com)  
[firecatprojects.org](http://firecatprojects.org)





**Julius Caesar**

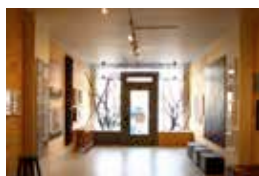
3311 W. Carroll Ave.,  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Sundays 1–4 pm  
[juliuscaesarchicago.org](http://juliuscaesarchicago.org)

**Lawrence & Clark**

4755 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640  
(773) 459 0586  
Saturday 1–5pm and by appointment  
[jason@jnidesign.com](mailto:jason@jnidesign.com)  
[lawrenceandclark.com](http://lawrenceandclark.com)

**Las Manos Gallery**

1515 W. Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60653  
(773) 728 8910  
Wed–Sun 12–5 pm or by appointment  
[lasmanosgallery.com](http://lasmanosgallery.com)

**Linda Warren Projects**

327 N. Aberdeen St., Chicago IL 60607  
(312) 432 9500  
Tues–Sat 11 am–5 pm or by  
appointment  
[lindawarrenprojects.com](http://lindawarrenprojects.com)

**Martha Mae Art Supplies & Beautiful Things**

5407 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640  
(872) 806 0988  
Weds–Sun 12–6 pm  
[marthamae.info](http://marthamae.info)

**New Capital**

3114 W. Carroll Ave., Chicago, IL 60612  
By appointment  
[info@newcapitalprojects.com](mailto:info@newcapitalprojects.com)  
[newcapitalprojects.com](http://newcapitalprojects.com)

**Produce Model**

1007 W. 19th St., Chicago, IL 60608  
(646) 872 7692  
Fri–Sat 12–5 pm  
[producemodel.gallery@gmail.com](mailto:producemodel.gallery@gmail.com)  
[produce-model.com](http://produce-model.com)

**Prospectus Art Gallery**

1210 W. 18th St., Chicago, IL 60608  
(312) 733 6132  
Wed–Sun 12–5 pm, Mon & Tues by  
appointment  
[prospectusartgallery.wordpress.com](http://prospectusartgallery.wordpress.com)



Chicago has a large number of these “standard” alternative spaces, i.e., small galleries supported by one or two artists, usually housed in a storefront or a warehouse space in obscure parts of town. Notable galleries in this category include Boyfriends, Julius Caesar, and New Capital, all located in East Garfield Park, a not-yet-emerging part of town. The area contains a large number of old warehouses and factories and now houses hundreds of artists’ studios, according to Ben Foch who runs Boyfriends and New Capital.

Slow, a storefront gallery in the Heart of Chicago neighborhood just west of Pilsen, is another notable example. Run by Paul Hopkin, the space is well maintained and very well curated. Produce Model, in Pilsen, is another well designed storefront space showing competent work. Oddly, the windows are covered so you cannot see anything from the sidewalk. (And the people who run it have not seen fit to put up a sign; I walked by it twice before finding the space.)

Regards, a gallery in Ukrainian Village, is notable for its highly sophisticated installations. It is also a very well curated space. A more community oriented space is Public Access. It is a multi-use project space located in Humboldt Park. Their website asserts their desire to “generate non-commercial content positioned toward rarified and cult values.” Not surprisingly, this space is more ad hoc in look and feel. As is Triumph, also located in the Heart of Chicago neighborhood. This space considers itself a project space, and it is instituting The Triumph School, a community outreach program, whose website says it “seeks to become a multi-disciplinary residency and an expanded learning environment.”

But not all alternative spaces these days are not-for-profit. Some are clearly commercial, following the standard gallery model but located in obscure parts of the city. A prime example of this kind of space is 65 Grand, run by Bill Gross. He is clearly committed to selling work, but the space is located in Humboldt Park, an “emerging neighborhood” at best. And the gallery is only open on Thursday evenings and Friday and Saturday afternoons.

Then there is Sidewinder on North Clark Street, in the Winnemac neighborhood and two doors away from an infamous towing company. Brett Siegel, the owner, operates a traditional gallery and is gambling on the neighborhood gentrifying

in the near future. Its location is what makes it an alternative space.

Nearby, is Lawrence and Clark. The owner, Jason Pickleman, operates this tiny store-front gallery in Sheridan Park to display and update his own private collection. It is only open on Saturday afternoons and functions as a gathering place for people to come and discuss what is going on in the art world.

Martha Mae Art Supplies & Beautiful Things, located in the heart of Andersonville, blends the showing and sale of owner Jean Cate's art with the sale of high-end art supplies. The shop is named after her beloved cavalier King Charles spaniel who is there most days and adds a certain familial charm to the establishment.

Also in Andersonville is Las Manos, run by Michelle Peterson-Albandoz and Michael McGuire, both practicing artists. The gallery primarily features their work with occasional work by other artists. They will also sometimes host special events.

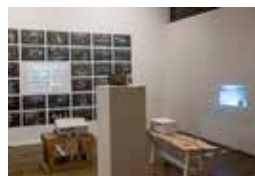
What makes some galleries "alternative" is their specialization. Pilsen's Prospectus Art Gallery is a traditional gallery that has been in existence since 1991. It specializes in Mexican and Latin American art and shows work by mature artists. Defibrillator Gallery (spelled DFBRL8R on their website) is devoted exclusively to performance art. It is a not-for-profit 501c3 tax exempt arts organization located in the West Town neighborhood. And Filter Space, also located in West Town, is a space operated by Filter Photo, another not-for-profit 501c3 tax exempt organization, that sponsors exhibitions, workshops, and lectures related to photography.

Not all of today's alternative spaces operate on a continuous basis. Warren's definition does not encompass the relatively new phenomenon of the pop-up gallery, the annual show of work by a particular group of artists, or a studio's one-night "rent party" opening. Dock 6 Collective in the Belmont Central neighborhood, puts on an annual one-day exhibition of their furniture design members' works, along with artwork by invited individual artists. Attending this event had a comfortable, casual feel and expanded the boundaries of contemporary aesthetics beyond the traditional media of "high art."

Humboldt Park artist Jason Brammer holds an annual open house at his studio, which he

#### Public Access

3306 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL  
Sat 12–6 pm or by appointment  
[info@publicaccess.biz](mailto:info@publicaccess.biz)  
[publicaccess.biz](http://publicaccess.biz)



#### Regards

2216 W. Chicago Ave.,  
Chicago, IL 60622  
(773) 661 2578  
Thurs–Sat 12–6 pm or by appointment  
[hello@regardsgallery.com](mailto:hello@regardsgallery.com)  
[regardsgallery.com](http://regardsgallery.com)



#### Roots & Culture

1034 N. Milwaukee Ave.,  
Chicago, IL 60642  
(773) 580 0102  
Thurs–Fri 4–7 pm, Sat 12–6 pm or by  
appointment  
[rootsandc@gmail.com](mailto:rootsandc@gmail.com)  
[rootsandculturecac.org](http://rootsandculturecac.org)



#### Sidewinder Gallery

4880 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640  
(773) 961 8022  
Weds–Sat 1–7 pm, Sunday 2–6 pm  
[sidewindergallery@gmail.com](mailto:sidewindergallery@gmail.com)  
[sidewindergallery.com](http://sidewindergallery.com)



#### Slow

2153 W. 21st St., Chicago, IL 60608  
(773) 645 8803  
Sat 12–5 pm or by appointment  
[paul-is-slow.info](mailto:paul-is-slow.info)



#### Space 900

1042 Wesley Ave., Evanston, IL 60202  
(773) 895 4484  
hours vary with exhibition  
[space900gallery@gmail.com](mailto:space900gallery@gmail.com)  
[Space900.org](http://Space900.org)



#### Triumph

2055 W. Cermak Rd.,  
Chicago, IL 60608  
(845) 553 0053  
[triumph.gallery.chicago@gmail.com](mailto:triumph.gallery.chicago@gmail.com)  
[triumphchicago.com](http://triumphchicago.com)



shares with two other artists. It is very much a rent party type affair with music and drinks and a lot of socializing. Maybe within all the party atmosphere, a piece might get sold. Space 900 in Evanston held a pop-up exhibit as a benefit that lasted only a few days. Admittedly these events are hard to track because of their ephemeral nature, but they are becoming an increasingly popular means of showing art, especially for the emerging artist that are closely tied to a particular social group.

“Project” galleries have emerged as another venue for showing. A few are a variation of publishing’s vanity press, offering exhibition opportunities for artists who have the means to help support the cost of mounting the show. Others solicit proposals from artists for shows rather than maintain a “stable” of gallery artists. Their presence in today’s art market must be acknowledged.

The most notable examples in Chicago are Firecat Projects, Linda Warren Projects, and Devening Projects. Roots & Culture, a 15 year old not-for-profit gallery with 501c3 tax exempt status, is one of the longest lasting alternative galleries in Chicago. It functions like a project gallery. Proposals are submitted for approval by a review panel. But unlike other galleries, accepted artists receive a \$500 stipend.

What most of these spaces do not succeed in doing is to reach out to the emerging collector. Why should that be important? After all most of today’s alternative spaces are organized to show the work of artists in a particular social group and to act as a forum for dialogue—not as a sales venue. But artworks cost money to produce and spaces cost money to maintain.

One of the main reasons that alternative spaces close is that the organizers can no longer afford to underwrite them. So cash flow issues play a major role in the survival of these spaces. And developing a buying audience of emerging col-

lectors is one way to maintain cash flow. Yet the sales aspect of the gallery business conflicts with the open dialogue facet of the alternative space. As a result, the cultivation of a buying clientele tends to get ignored.

On the other hand, having a forum for dialogue that is not dictated by financial necessities is critical to the development and evolution of an artist’s aesthetic. A few alternative spaces have gone the route of being formal not-for-profit organizations. There is a rich history of such organizations in Chicago. The 1970s saw the emergence of the not-for-profit co-operative galleries N.A.M.E., Arc, and Artemisia. They formed a very lively art scene for more than a decade in the Hubbard Street area just west of State Street. But the burden of being co-ops (with membership recruiting being a very time consuming activity) exacerbated the taxing bureaucratic duties of boards, grant writing, and organizational administration. Eventually most of these organizations became overwhelmed by these duties and were forced to close.

Alternative art spaces have existed and will continue to exist and evolve because the traditional art gallery model cannot provide adequate facilities to view the work of emerging artists. Nor is the traditional gallery well-equipped to be a forum for dialogue and discussion. The business of being for-profit restricts the resources, and the necessity for sales promotion inhibits open critical discussion.

So, to see emerging art and have open discussions about “what is on the wall,” put on your walking shoes and go visit these out-of-the-way spaces. You will be surprised and stimulated by what you see. And you will realize that Chicago’s art community is not confined to River North, the West Loop or Fulton Market. ■

Michel Ségard is the Editor-in-Chief of the *New Art Examiner*.



## Jim Dine, “Looking at the Present”

By Bruce Thorn

Richard Gray Gallery opened their new Chicago warehouse gallery space April 28, 2017 with a very ambitious Jim Dine exhibition consisting mostly of large-scale figurative abstractions. There were nine paintings, all completed in 2016, one polychromed sculpture cast in 2004 and a poem scrawled graffiti style on an outdoor concrete wall. This warehouse space is now the most impressive commercial gallery space in Chicago, beating out even Kavi Gupta’s Elizabeth Street space and Shane Campbell’s bow-truss garage on South Wabash. The most remarkable architectural features of the gallery are the high timbered roof and skylight that have been refurbished and sandblasted.

Jim Dine (B 1935) is clearly at the top of his game in his old age and benefits from wisdom and experience while maintaining a rigorous practice and sustained energy level that would be remarkable even in someone a quarter his age. Gone are the kitschy hooks of his earlier Hallmark Cards-worthy heart series and the matter-of-factness of the tools series that the Dine cartel once flooded galleries with. The hearts were the equivalent of fast food: just because people buy it, that doesn’t mean that they’re good. Honestly, after the heart series I never wanted to look at the man’s work again, though surely millions loved those hearts.

“Looking at the Present” is an excellent and memorable exhibition. Not only is the work heroic in scale and visually strong, but Dine is also taking big risks simply by proclaiming the importance, power and relevance of abstract painting in a world of balloon dogs and technological advances. Academics have been preaching that the medium is dead since Duchamp’s earlier questionings. How is it that a contemporary artist fully knowledgeable of the brevity of his

remaining years chose to pour so much time and energy into what could, at his age, be a swan song, and do it in such an obsolete language as abstract painting? This kind of commitment seems unheard of in today’s art world.

Dine currently lives and works in Paris and has spent many years since 1966 living in the UK and Europe. What he has found enticing about life in the UK and Europe, in his own words, is a “respect for conversation.” Dine is well traveled, well read and personally connected to many iconic figures of 20th century art. He is obviously more aware of art history than newly minted art school wunderkinds could hope to be. There are plenty of reminders of Dubuffet and de Kooning; the influence of Robert Rauschenberg is strong. Dine wants to be taken seriously as an artist and works like he’s in a hurry.

The new work is simultaneously introspective and esoteric. Instead of the smugness of Pop Art, there is enough anxiety and uncertainty in these pieces to satisfy Egon Schiele, Hieronymus

*The Funny Pleasures of War*, 2015-16. Courtesy Richard Gray Gallery and the artist, Image by Tom Van Eynde





*Coming from the Darkness, I Hear Your Laugh*, 2016. Courtesy Richard Gray Gallery the artist. Image by Tom Van Eynde

Bosch or even Woody Allen. Dine has been visiting shrinks since 1962 and uses these visits as subject matter for his artwork. This came about as a practicality. He admits to being agoraphobic and to having constant anxiety attacks. There was a time that he didn't go outside for a year and a half. Clinical consultations became the subject matter of his life. It must have been difficult for Dine to deal with the huge crowd at his opening reception in Chicago. His appearance was consummately professional but he looked suffocated by an ocean of people and, like Mayor Emanuel, who was also at the reception, anxious to escape.

This is the age of selfies and Jim Dine has been at it making self-referential art for a long time. If there is anything esoteric about this body of Dine's work it is that he deconstructs the self to a nonspecific, more cosmic place closer to the collective unconscious. His work is always autobiographical, from using images of tools as references to the family hardware store, to his repetitive use of his own facial silhouette with protruding ears. *Four Ears* (2016) was an easy match to the artist himself standing under the track lights on opening night.

Dine's colors are pretty much straight out of the can or tube (he works with oils and acrylics) with little or no modulation. Dine is not the astute colorist that DeKooning was, but he does have the full box of crayons left over from his Pop Art years. His intended childlike lack of sophistication in use of color does not help a painting like

*The Funny Pleasures of War*. This picture seems to lack any appropriate sense of gravitas. In black and white, or more subdued tones, it might more successfully lie somewhere between George Grosz and Jean-Michel Basquiat, but the choice of cheerful colors seem to trivialize the title.

There is an almost mystical, manic use of extreme texture, sand, sign painters' smalt, scraping and all kinds of physical manipulations. The paintings are big and the gestures are human scale. Dine's work involves a lot of physical labor, moving around large quantities of paint; you can almost smell the sweat. As Dine says in the catalogue interview with Hamza Walker: "My whole life all I ever really wanted to do was be a workman, was work and have the luxury of working. I love working with my hands." (Spoken like a real Midwesterner.) Later, in the same interview, Dine says: "I remember once in the summer of '63 I was painting in an apartment we had on West End Avenue. I saw Jasper [Johns] and I said, "What do you think of this painting" and he said, "Well, you have to understand something: you are going to be punished forever for being so handmade."

The kind of gestural abstraction that Dine has recently adapted is interesting because in his case, like de Kooning, it is being practiced by an artist who long ago proved his expertise in draftsmanship. The pleasures in this new body of work derive more from loose painterly marks, happenstance and poetic metaphor than from planning, drawing and narrative. The works are filled with exciting, unexpected details. In *Coming from the Darkness, I Hear You Laugh*, 2016, Dine surrenders sublimely to the act of painting as if surrendering to a lover's laugh. ■



Detail from *A Constant Reminder of Age and Gender*, 2016

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor to the New Art Examiner and a contributing writer to Neoteric Art.

## "Robert Frank: Photos" at the Art Institute of Chicago

By Amanda Lancour



Robert Frank. *Hold Still, Keep Going*, December 1987. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Robert Frank. © Robert Frank. Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

**T**he Americans,” Robert Frank’s iconic suite of photos taken on a 1957 cross-country road trip is a landmark in the history of photography. A critic for the *Guardian* called it “perhaps the most influential photography book of the 20th century.” However, that is not the reception Frank received when he first showed his revolutionary images.

Frank was roundly panned by other photographers and critics. Popular Photography dismissed his “warped images of hate” and called his photos “meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures and general sloppiness.” Within a decade, the reaction changed completely.

“The Americans” is a fascinating photographic study by an outsider (Frank was born in Switzerland) into American culture that casts a stark look at life in the 1950s—segregated, isolated, anxious and lonely; disturbing images that were contrary to the happy-go-lucky, prosperity-filled families pushed by glossy magazines full of Madison Avenue ads and TV sitcoms like “Ozzie and Harriet” and “Leave it to Beaver.”

Frank is considered the inventor of street photography. His images broke with the period’s photo rules: he shot from a moving car, sitting in

a bar, hiding out of sight and on the fly. He shot more than 27,000 images on the trip, each shot just one frame, and only saw the results once he got home to New York City. Frank chose 83 images to print for the book.

“The Americans” has traveled the world since its publication in 1959 with a glowing introduction by Jack Kerouac. Yet, it was Hugh Edwards, then curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, who gave Frank his first museum show in 1961 and bought 30 photographs from the series for the museum’s permanent collection. It seems fitting that this show marks the return to its first home nearly a half-century later.

The show is organized in three parts. First are 23 chosen images from “The Americans,” displayed gallery style and printed on strips of photographic paper, along with several accompanying contact sheets that show Frank’s selection process.

Technically, the American series is expertly exposed and printed. In *The Courthouse Square*, Frank chose the aperture and shutter speed settings to get all the detail of the black in the bark of the wood yet placed the focus on a man with an interesting face speaking to another man, unaware of Frank. The result: a quiet, shared moment isolating the two men as a young girl looks directly at the photographer. Frank’s subjects are both aware and unaware of his presence, going through motions of everyday life.

Frank wanted no part of his new-found success and celebrity. He turned away from still photography for a decade in favor of underground filmmaking (“Pull My Daisy” and “Me and My Brother”) and books. He left New York and moved to Mabou, Nova Scotia in 1971 in search of a simpler life. (Unfortunately, a pop-up exhibit of his film and book output was on display for only two weeks in May then dismantled and unavailable for review).

The next section, “Partida,” is a series of snaps akin to a visual memoir of his life. Images are drawn from a series of five books, termed “visual diaries” that Frank published between 2010 and 2016.



The more primitive snapshots in “Partida” are of Frank himself or friends and family. The images are unfocused befitting amateur snaps. They are not unlike what might be viewed as the “B-roll” on one’s iPhone, the lesser composed images we wouldn’t see on someone’s social media.

Stunning and quiet moments occur. There’s an intimate shot of his personal assistant, A-Chan, in very simple lighting juxtaposed next to what appears to be an upside-down caster, a simple object with very dramatic lighting. Another is of two white-glazed doughnuts side by side on a plate in an extremely drab, down-at-the-heels donut shop. Yet, Frank’s trained eye elevates the everyday mundane.

A final wall contains four of the 38 photos that Frank gave to the Art Institute in 2000 in appreciation of its early support. These are a mix of fine art imagery and glimmering thoughts, reflecting dream-like states of mind, autobiographical less in fact than in feeling.

One, *Was ist Das* (1996) is a dreamy silver gelatin print. Another *Mabou—8 o’clock*, (1987) speaks perfectly to memory and the passage of time; where reality becomes more how you remember it or what you want to remember it as having been.

*Hold Still, Keep Going* December 1987 can possibly be interpreted as being present and moving forward at the same time.

“Robert Frank: Photos” is more of a concise gallery retrospective covering his work as a whole over the past six decades as well as a glimpse into this renowned photographer’s mind. It is a visual diary interpreting life as a combination of



Robert Frank.  
*Untitled*,  
2005/14. The  
Art Institute of  
Chicago, © Rob-  
ert Frank, from  
the book *Partida*.  
Courtesy of Pace/  
MacGill Gallery,  
New York.

fine art, photojournalism, and a loose documentary-style memoir. In this, I thought it succeeded.

One is able to see into the artist’s mind as he visually speaks in the same medium yet different photographic genres. The snaps act akin to the practice of a drawer making a ‘quick sketch,’ a 30-second impression in a figure drawing class, or someone standing on a street corner. I do wish, however, that a small room had been set aside to view his films or the ‘pop up’ gallery portion for review.

The show offers a fascinating glimpse at both Frank’s more famous photos, as well as the evolving ideas over the years of a master photographer, still making art at age 91. ■

“Robert Frank: Photos” is at the Art Institute of Chicago through August 20.

Amanda Lancour is a Chicago/ NYC photographer. She has worked in fashion, commercial and fine art photography. Upon completing a triple major in Fine Art Photography, Drawing, and Painting, she has worked for many years with some of the best New York and Midwest photographers.

Three portraits from Robert Frank’s classic work, “The Americans.” Photo credit by Amanda Lancour.



## Arlene Shechet "In the Meantime"

at Corbett vs. Dempsey

By Bruce Thorn

"In the Meantime" is Arlene Shechet's first solo exhibition in Chicago. Corbett vs. Dempsey presents ten sculptures made primarily with glazed ceramics, wood, concrete and steel. Shechet works with a fondness for process and material qualities; things do not disguise themselves, there are no pretensions: clay forms behave as clay forms, glazes look like glazes, wood looks like wood and steel doesn't pretend to be anything but steel. But on a different level, the artist works at making sure that the forms offered are indefinable, unknowable open questions and mysteries. Shechet's formal and poetic inspirations come from interests in architecture, nature and Buddhism. There's something that feels very human about her work and that is the sense of imperfection, precariousness and of things being off kilter, or perhaps ready to collapse from their own weight or fall over and break, possibly even hurt somebody.

Shechet is in her mid-sixties and from New York. She divides her time between NYC and

a second studio upstate. Her resume includes events going back to the mid-eighties, but the art world's gatekeepers have been slow to open up. "I was always making work in the studio while teaching and having babies, but I didn't have time for studio visits and self-promotion during those years," says Shechet. A breakthrough show at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in 2007 started a flow of well-deserved exhibition opportunities.

One of the most notable games going on in this show involves balance and vertigo. There's something humorous and sly about filling an art gallery with beautiful objects that look as if they might topple over if you bump into them. The notion of contrast is also important to Shechet: contrasts of materials, forms, colors and textures; organic forms meet up with architecture; cubes meet spherical forms; hardwood comeslingles with steel. Shechet mentions interests in the notion of parallel universes and contrasts like funny vs. serious, ugly vs. beautiful, life vs. death, or east vs. west.



(Left)  
*Above and Beyond*, 2015  
Glazed ceramic, painted steel, concrete and hardwood  
36.5 x 13.5 x 13.5"  
Photo courtesy  
Corbett vs. Dempsey



(Right)  
*Reverb*, 2017  
Glazed ceramic and painted hardwood  
80.5 x 22 x 19"  
Photo courtesy  
Corbett vs. Dempsey

There's subtlety and grace but no heroism or hubris when Shechet offers anthropomorphism. *Night Vision* suggests an abstract head and shoulders, nodding off or tilted to the side. While we often try to hide our blemishes, weaknesses and mistakes (social media is full of false representations of youth, glamour, strength and good looks) there is a feeling of naked honesty as Shechet offers metaphors for the human condition that suggest that one might as well appreciate some imperfections.

Shechet works concurrently on 3–4 pieces and gives each enough time and space to allow the work to suggest unplanned outcomes. One thing leads to another in a process that begins with a loose game plan or parameters that the artist makes up and changes. Shechet does not avoid the age-old sculptural dilemma imposed by the need for a pedestal; she confronts this issue and solves it by incorporating architectural supports into the more organic forms of the ceramic parts. Instead of just plunking the sculptures down onto a pedestal, she intends to join the two physically and formally as an inseparable part of each work. The plinth incorporated into *Reverb* is a walnut log painted blue, out of which grows some kind of fabulous ceramic moss or sea world hybrid spouting protrusions and orifices.

There is certainly a lot of ambiguity in art these days, as if our cultures no longer care to focus or even attempt to make sense out of anything at all. Shechet is different; she keeps chaos at bay while knowing that her subject is the poetry of unknowable and unspeakable places and languages. The titles of the pieces are also non-specific and open to interpretation. Maybe conceptually Shechet is part cubist; every change of perspective changes things, and the works do beg to be viewed from all angles. If there are mysteries in this work, they never get solved. What sets Shechet apart from the herds of ambiguous abstractionists is that she creates believable and cohesive forms and, over the time that it takes to create them, invests these



*Equal Time*, 2017, Glazed ceramic, painted hardwood, steel  
53 x 35 x 23," Photo courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey

with a glimpse into unknowingness. It seems extremely kind these days for any artist to forgo one-liner irony, banality and ego.

Shechet is very painterly and thoughtful in her applications of glaze upon layers of glaze, opulently thrilling fluxes that at times almost resemble millefiore, if millefiore were textured; she's a confident colorist. What's interesting is that these artworks don't read like polychromed sculptures; they seem more natural, as if the forms have exotic skin color growing from within, like it's something in their DNA. ■

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor to the *New Art Examiner* and a contributing writer to *Neoteric Art*.



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The Berlin Art Fair with George Care.



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John Link on how art seceded its detached authority

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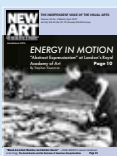
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David Lee examines Nicholas Serota's new leadership of the Arts Council



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Jorge Benitez presents the third essay "The Will to Ignorance: The Role of Academia in the Post-modern Debacle" in his trilogy "The Avant-Gard and the Delusion of American Exceptionalism."

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