

FRESH
ART

research guide



creating connections
SPARKING ENGAGEMENT

issue 4 | april 2020



FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CREATIVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This Research Guide is a digital publication featuring conversations and themes illuminated in the **Fresh Art International podcast**. A resource for individuals, communities, and schools, the podcast combines interviews with field recordings and rich sound effects that inform and inspire each conversation. Keeping in mind both the curious and the cognoscenti, Fresh Art promotes and supports public access and awareness of the arts through a free digital archive of close to 300 episodes. Fresh Art brings you informed, balanced, and diverse stories through the lens of today's art, film and architecture. Through a podcast, public talks, workshops, residencies and educational resources, Fresh Art engages with cultural communities at the center and fringe of art scenes around the world.

Research Guide: Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement **Issue 4 | April 2020**

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introduction

How can art act as a force for good in a rapidly changing and often uncertain world? What happens when artists extend their practices out into communities to inspire and forge real-life social connections? How can curators and educators create opportunities for diverse publics to engage in relevant and meaningful ways with conceptually complex art?

In this **Fresh Art International** Research Guide, we delve into “**Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement**,” a 60-minute podcast episode originally released in 2018 that examines the work of artists, curators, and creatives from across the globe. This guide expands on the featured conversation with hyperlinks to information about people, places, events, and art terms, as well as bios of artists and institutions, a supplementary reading list, discussion questions, and activities to more deeply engage with the content.

Throughout this conversation, certain themes emerge around accessibility, transparency, labor, equity, and inclusion.

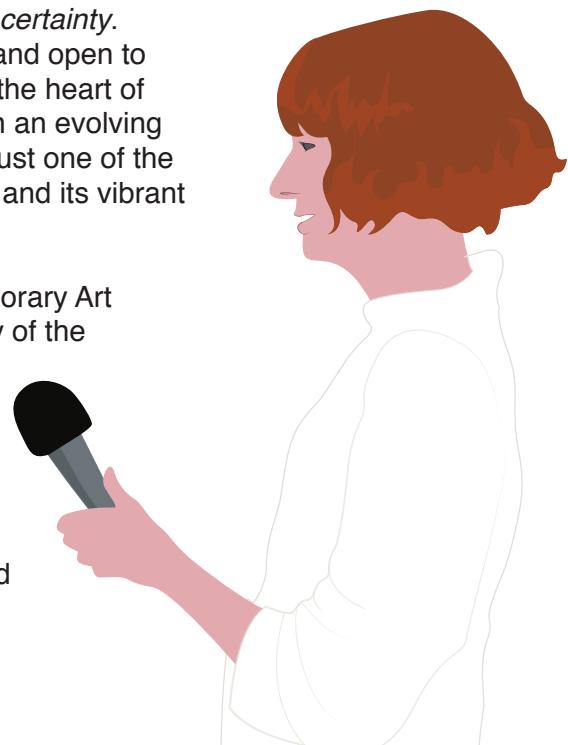
Throughout this conversation, certain themes emerge around accessibility, transparency, labor, equity, and inclusion within the art world and society at large. The projects explored also draw on the long history of socially-engaged art, building on the radical interventions of Italian Futurism, Fluxus, relational aesthetics, and New Institutionalism. Each of these movements emphasized that art was not just something for the monied and elite to enjoy in museums, but a living practice extending out onto the streets and into communities, enriching everyday life. Even though the featured projects emerge from a set of deeply held principles, their approach is less polemical than playful, inviting audiences to join in and express themselves as part of an ongoing act of creation.

Brazil is one country where we find artists and curators animating these principles. When we meet curator Jochen Volz in 2016, he talks about his approach to organizing the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, *Live Uncertainty*. The international art exhibition stands apart from many: free and open to the public, the biennial takes place in a legendary pavilion at the heart of the city’s most popular park. Artist William Pope.L leads us on an evolving dance through São Paulo in his work fittingly entitled *Baile*—just one of the artistic interventions of *Live Uncertainty* that explores the city and its vibrant neighborhoods.

Speaking to us from the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), curator Susan Cross explains how the history of the museum’s campus informs her practice. *The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility* (2011-2012) was a show that sparked social engagement at MASS MoCA as never before. James Voorhies describes what it meant to bring his Bureau of Open Culture into this context. Our dialogue with Voorhies frames curatorship as an artistic practice in its own right—powerfully mediating the interface between art and society.



Listen along with the episode.



Stephanie Smith, currently curator at Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art, joins us to talk about a project she organized at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art. *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* (2012), not only elucidated the history of this idea, but also initiated participatory events and offered meals in collaboration with local artists and communities. Theaster Gates describes a series of events that engaged his *Dorchester Projects*, and activated the history of African-American cooking in the United States. We also hear from Marinella Senatore, who contributed her participatory *Estman Radio* project to Smith's recent exhibition *Declaration* at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (2018).

These global works and exhibitions invite you to consider how artists and curators pose enduring questions about the meaning of art as a social practice. In richly varied work that involves the activities of labor unions, communal dinners, beer gardens, and political protests, they offer potent reminders of our collective capacity for change.

Our conversation is featured in **Issue 7** of the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation's 2019 online periodical *Exhibitions on the Cusp*. We're honored to be among the publication's contributors.



Click here
to read Issue 7 of
Exhibitions on the Cusp



Sarah Rovang
Publications Editor

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special COVID-19 acknowledgement

COVID-19 and the mandate for social distancing has altered the way that artists, activists, and creators from around the globe make and share their work. While it remains to be seen how these changes will affect the art world in the long run, this guide provides critical information and inspiration during this difficult time. We designed this guide for creative thinkers, makers, educators, and learners across fields who seek the challenge of complex conversations around issues and ideas, art and culture.

Acknowledging that most of the projects described in this podcast episode rely on in-person connection and direct action to spark social engagement, we aim to reinforce their shared goal. Creating welcoming, non-judgemental spaces for diverse audiences to explore complex issues is an intention that could (and should) be equally possible in the digital realm.

Produced in Spring 2020, this guide is designed to be used as part of remote curricula while in-classroom learning has been suspended in many countries across the world. All of the discussion questions and activities can be completed digitally and with no in-person interaction required. Several of these educational elements are directed explicitly toward the relationship of COVID-19 and creativity.

Get Informed

[The Coronavirus Outbreak](#), free (no paywall) coverage on *The New York Times*
[A Daily Report on How COVID-19 Is Impacting the Art World](#), Valentina Di Liscia, *Hyperallergic*

Stay Safe

[How to Practice Social Distancing](#), Isaac Chotiner, *The New Yorker*
[How to Wash Your Hands](#), *The New York Times*
[It's Time to Make Your Own Face Mask](#), Farhad Manjoo, *The New York Times*

Pitch In

[How You Can Help During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#), Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn and Laura Daily, *The Washington Post*
[Find Your Local Food Bank](#), *Feeding America*
[Coronavirus Tech Handbook](#), an open source list for makers
[Schedule Your Blood Donation with the Red Cross](#), *Red Cross*

Keep Learning

[Resource Guide to Distance Learning](#), Fresh Art International
[Art Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), Southwest Contemporary
[Teaching Art Online Under COVID-19](#), Kaitlin Pomerantz, *Hyperallergic*
[Art Education and the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), *The Art of Education University*
[Art History Teaching Resources](#)

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fresh voices

Learn about the artists, curators, and creative thinkers we meet in this podcast episode.



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take note

Become familiar with the people, places, institutions, histories, and art concepts that we introduce.



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conversation

Follow along with a transcript of our conversation in “Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement” (edited for this guide).



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reading list

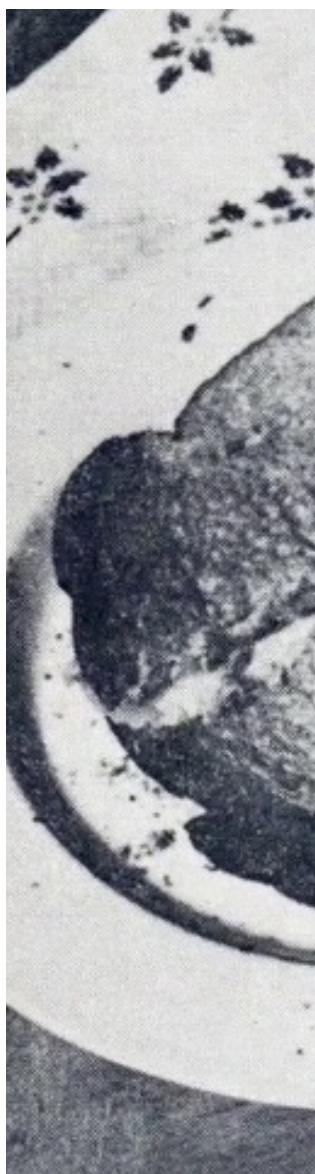
Deepen your engagement with the key concepts in this episode.



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discussion questions

Spark individual or group reflection with these questions.



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activities

Expand your understanding with creative activities that build on our conversation.



fresh voices

In the episode that informs and inspires this guide, you hear from the following artists, curators, and creative thinkers. Speakers are listed in the order that they appear.

Jochen Volz

São Paulo, Brazil

Jochen Volz (b. 1971) curates and writes about contemporary art. In this episode, Volz talks about how he curated *Live Uncertainty*, the 32nd São Paulo Biennial (2016) and how he frames art and its pivotal relationship to everyday life and culture at large. Committed to thinking critically about the curatorial practice and its role in shaping the public's interface with art, Volz currently serves as the General Director of Pinacoteca de São Paulo, a visual arts museum specializing in Brazilian art from the 19th century to present. His curation of artist Cinthia Marcelle's work at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) garnered widespread acclaim. Volz's evocative **description of that work**, as "an enigmatic environment, directed by suspension, obsession and rebellion... provok[ing] a sensation of instability" could also fittingly describe the mood evoked by *Incerteza Viva* (*Live Uncertainty*).

Related Episode: [Jochen Volz on Living Uncertainty](#)

William Pope.L

New Jersey, USA

Whether crawling along a major metropolitan thoroughfare, hauling a portable video installation, or violently deconstructing the set of a performance space, artist William Pope.L (b. 1955) provokes discussion and spurs controversy through his public interventions. He uses the platform of public performance to **address issues** such as "language, system, gender, race and community." Pope.L's embrace of incongruity deeply informs his seminal "**crawls**" (1970-2000), in which the artist called attention to homelessness by dragging himself through the streets. In the crawls, as in many of his works, bodily movement and performance become political gestures. This is certainly true of *Baile*, Pope.L's festive and politically incisive piece for the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, which we encounter in this episode.

Related Episodes: [William Pope.L on Art and Endurance, New Performance Art](#), [William Pope.L Transforms the Black Factory into a Magic Lantern Show](#)



Pia Lindman, *Nose Eyes Ears*, 32nd São Paulo Biennial, 2016. In this work, Pia Lindman (b. 1965, Finland) explores the long oral tradition of the Finnish Kalevala as a way to "rethink the conventions of behavior regarding how we feel, live, study or heal ourselves."

Susan Cross

North Adams, Massachusetts, USA

Susan Cross has served as Senior Curator of Visual Arts at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) since 2006. In this role, Cross has organized and curated numerous noteworthy exhibitions, and was named as one of Artsy's "**Most Influential Curators of 2016**." The daughter of an architect, Cross **describes herself** as "particularly interested in work that grapples with architecture and urbanism." These concerns come through clearly in the exhibitions she introduces in our conversation: in *Material World* and *The Workers*, MASS MoCA's unique post-industrial built environment sparks socially-engaged contemporary art and making.

James Voorhies

Bay Area, California, USA

James Voorhies is a curator and historian of modern and contemporary art and the founder of the Bureau for Open Culture. He collaborated with curator Susan Cross to produce dynamic, participatory programming as part of MASS MoCA's exhibition *The Workers*. Voorhies is currently Chair of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice and Professor of Fine Arts at California College of the Arts. In his 2017 book, ***Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968***, Voorhies argues that contemporary curation has become its own form of artistic practice. The works examined in the book reiterate "the continued potential of the exhibition as a critical form in a time when the differences between art and entertainment increasingly blur." Voorhies brings this same belief into his own curatorial practice, revealing curators and the institution of the museum as agents of critique, change, and activism.



Bureau for Open Culture (James Voorhies et al.), Work Site, *I am Searching for Field Character, The Workers*, MASS MoCA; North Adams, MA, USA, 2011. Continuing the history of the space as a site of production, Work Site invited freelancers to occupy and use the WiFi within this former factory space at MASS MoCA.

Stephanie Smith

Richmond, Virginia, USA

Stephanie Smith is the Chief Curator of the new Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (ICA VCU) in Richmond, Virginia. In this episode, we hear about her curation of the inaugural exhibition at ICA VCU, *Declaration* (2018), and her previous curatorial work at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. In both instances, Smith identifies non-traditional audience experiences, community engagement, and time-based media as key components of her curatorial practice. Smith traces the development of her active, participatory, and socially-engaged vision for museums back to her early work at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she encountered pioneering artists like Rick Lowe, whose Project Row Houses strengthens the interface between community-based art and urban development. For Smith, art as something that serves the community is not a new phenomenon. As she notes in **one interview**, "Many ancient artifacts that we see in museums were once used for spiritual rituals to connect people and communities. There are many moments in the long history of art that went beyond the artist creating objects."

Theaster Gates

Chicago, USA

For artist Theaster Gates (b. 1973), the built environment of communities is his medium, and the space and land on which those communities are founded is his canvas. With a rich practice that extends to sculpture and performance, Gates leverages his background in preservation and urban planning to create real change on the scale of the neighborhood. Always attentive to “**the notion of Black space as a formal exercise**,” Gates’s work raises timely and unsettling questions about race, land ownership, and societal values. In this episode, we drop in on a dinner hosted at *Dorchester Projects*, a collection of rehabilitated buildings on the South Side of Chicago. Gates’s *Soul Food Pavilion* for the Smart Museum’s exhibition *Feast* (curated by Stephanie Smith) brings together music, performance, hospitality, storytelling, and African-American foodways as part of a lively, participatory dinner series.

Related Episodes: [Theaster Gates on Meaning, Making, and Reconciliation, Black in America](#)

Marinella Senatore

Rome, Italy

Marinella Senatore (b. 1977) is a multidisciplinary artist who mixes dance, music, and activism. Dedicated to art as participatory practice, her work includes collages, performance, sculptures, photography, and video. She is the founder of *The School of Narrative Dance* (est. 2013), a free, “nomadic” school that explores the art of storytelling through choreography. Senatore’s collaborators include other icons of socially-engaged art, such as the Russian punk feminist band Pussy Riot. Her ongoing Estman Radio project has captured voices across the U.S. and Europe, hosted by a number of prestigious museums and institutions. In “Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement,” we get a taste of Estman Radio’s Richmond iteration at the ICA VCU exhibition *Declaration*.

Related Episode: [Marinella Senatore on Modern Life](#)



Theaster Gates, Dorchester Projects
(2009-present); Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2012.
One of the buildings on the South Side of Chicago that artist/urbanist Theaster Gates has transformed into community spaces for education and uplift. *Dorchester Projects* hosted the *Soul Food Pavilion* as part of *Feast* at the Smart Museum (2012).

take note

In addition to the voices you'll hear, you'll also be introduced to the following people, places, institutions, histories, and art concepts in our conversation from "Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement."

profiles

The Black Monks

The musical collaborators of artist Theaster Gates. Formerly known as The Black Monks of Mississippi, the group's artistry is rooted in Southern Black sound. The Black Monks "preach" the Word of God through their music, revealing that the Black voice is a particular and vital channel for cultural expression. In this episode, we meet them in Gates's *Soul Food Pavilion*, where their music animates participatory dinners associated with the show *Feast* (2012) at the Smart Museum.

Michael Beutler

Artist Michael Beutler (b. 1976; Berlin, Germany) takes ordinary materials and transforms them into large-scale installations. Media such as paper, plastic, cardboard, and wood are appropriated into architectural designs that become site-specific installations. His DIY style emphasizes process over result, blurring the lines between making and completed product. In this episode, curator Susan Cross references *Lightning Generation*, Beutler's piece for *Material World*, a 2010 exhibition at MASS MoCA. This work transforms the gallery back into a "work environment" to engage with the history of Sprague Electric, which previously occupied the space

Anawana Haloba

A Zambia-born artist (b. 1978; Oslo, Norway) whose work explores less recognized political and socioeconomic histories. In this episode, Cathy and Jochen Volz discuss Haloba's time-based piece *Close-Up* for the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, a commentary on the economic, cultural, and anatomical significance of salt in human history. Suspended chunks of rock salt surrounded by sound elements gradually undergo liquefaction; a poetic meditation on time and materiality in keeping with the biennial theme, *Live Uncertainty*.

Related Episode: [Anawana Haloba on Vanishing Cultures](#)



Anna Haloba, *Close-Up*, 32nd São Paulo Biennial, 2016.

Mare Liberum (The Free Seas)

A contemporary art collective in Brooklyn, New York, Mare Liberum takes their name from the Latin phrase meaning “The Free Seas.” Rooted in tales of “urban water squatters and haphazard water-craft builders,” the collective reexamines life on the water and presents it as another feasible way of life. Harnessing larger concerns about climate change and fragile ecosystems, they also aim to shed light on the ignored waterways around them. Free Seas collaborated with curator James Voorhies and the Bureau of Open Culture to produce public workshops for *The Workers* at MASS MoCA.

Alison Knowles

A New York-based artist (b. 1933) and co-founder of the Fluxus movement. In her early “book objects,” co-editing John Cage’s book of visual musical scores (1968), and events such as *Make a Salad* (first performed 1962), Knowles worked across installation, performance, and print to resist clear delineations between high art, everyday objects, and domestic habit. Her *Identical Lunch* (1969) is a performance score rooted in her personal practice of eating an identical tuna sandwich at the same time day after day—a means of exploring the ways we perform life on a daily basis. *Identical Lunch* was incorporated into the exhibition and programming of *Feast* (2012) at the Smart Museum.

Related Episode: [Inside Miami’s Sound Chamber](#)

Donna Kukama

Donna Kukama (b. 1981, South Africa) is a performance-based multimedia artist. With her work, **Kukama** “presents moments within reality that question the way in which histories are narrated, as well as how value systems are constructed.” In this episode, we spotlight Kukama’s project [for the 32nd São Paulo Biennial](#) (2016), which documents the process of making a book over the course of three chapters. These chapters, entitled *C: The Genealogy of Pain*, *A: The Anatomy of History* and *B: I, Too*, activated potent venues across the city of São Paulo, reinterpreting the book (traditionally understood as an object) as “performance, drawing, sculpture, video, text and oral history.”

Related Episode: [Donna Kukama on Unfinished Stories](#)

Rick Lowe

An American artist (b. 1961) whose practice takes the form of social outreach, most famously through Project Row Houses (PRH), and in the transformation of the Vickery Meadow neighborhood in Houston, Texas. In 2014, Lowe was named a MacArthur genius for his work with PRH, a community platform that highlights the rich intersection between culture, art, and urban landscape. In one of Houston’s oldest Black neighborhoods, Third Ward, PRH’s 39 structures show how art is a way of encouraging community development. Lowe and his work were a major inspiration to curator Stephanie Smith during her early career. For documenta 14, Lowe brought locals together to create and activate a vital community center in a largely immigrant neighborhood in Athens, Greece.

Related Episode: [Sounds of documenta 14—A Tale of Two Cities](#)

OPAVIVARÁ!

An artist collective that reappropriates elements of everyday life, such as cooking, dancing, and singing, to “short-circuit the values and protocols of the systems in which they operate, be they a city square or a museum.” For the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, the collective’s piece **Transnômades [Transnomads]** gave new purposes to traditional manpowered carts, revealing how resourcefulness and improvisation is a way of life for “nomads” around the city. Along with Donna Kukama and William Pope.L, OPAVIVARÁ! calls attention to and activates the textured urban landscape of São Paulo. Additionally, OPAVIVARÁ! is one group that joined us on a **live webstreaming radio broadcast** from the Biennial Pavilion in 2016.

Related Episode: Fresh Art INTL LIVE from São Paulo

Nate Padavick

San Francisco-based artist Nate Padavick specializes in map design and illustration. His work has been seen in magazines, posters, websites, and books. Padavick is the founder of two popular websites, **They Draw & Cook** and **They Draw & Travel**, that collect and curate the work of illustrators from across the globe. Padavick collaborates with James Voorhies on the Bureau of Open Culture. Along with Cassandra Troyan and Timothy Nazzaro, he contributed to a performative history of MASS MoCA and Sprague Electric as part of *The Workers*.

Red 76 Collective

According to artist and co-founder Samuel Gould, this collective serves as “a means to get artists—photographers, performers, architects—to show their work when there isn’t any other place to do it.” With roots in Portland, Oregon, the collective is named for the year of their revolution, 1976, and pays homage to late artists using the color red to represent blood. Red 76 collaborated with curator James Voorhies and his Bureau of Open Culture to present a market of local goods in conjunction with MASS MoCA’s *The Workers*.

Rachel Rose

Artist Rachel Rose (b. 1986; New York, USA), is known for her installations that merge environments with moving image and sound. **Her work** “explores states between real and artificial, interior and exterior, dead and alive.” At the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, Rose presented two works: *A Minute Ago* (2014) and *Everything and More* (2015). Each work combines and hybridizes multiple layers of media and meaning. In *Everything and More*, reality and image become nearly indistinguishable, as the biennial’s venue in Ibirapuera Park is folded into the installation. The disorienting experience mirrors that of an astronaut viewing the Earth from space.



OPAVIVARÁ!, Transnômades [Transnomads], 32nd São Paulo Biennial, 2016. For their contribution to the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, the artist collective OPAVIVARÁ! repurposed the ubiquitous man-powered carts used by vendors throughout the city. Here, their karaoke sound system cart in action.

Santiago Sierra

The work of artist **Santiago Sierra** (b. 1966, Spain) questions hegemonic structures of society and everyday life, often in controversial and startling ways. His transgressive interrogations into labor, exploitation, and alienation include *Person paid to have a 30 cm line tattooed on them, Regina Street # 51, Mexico City, May 1998* and *8 people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes, G&T Building. Guatemala City, August 1999*. For MASS MoCA's *The Workers* (2012), Sierra highlighted the unseen labor of U.S. military forces through a performance descriptively entitled *Veterans of Irak and Afghanistan Wars Facing the Walls [sic]*.

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Born in Argentina, and raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada, Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961) incorporates his diverse cultural identities and experiences into his art. Based out of London, Berlin, and Chiangmai, Thailand, Tiravanija's pioneering work in relational aesthetics (see below) fundamentally reshapes the relationship between visitors and the "white cube" gallery or museum. His well-known series, *pad thai* (1990), was a performance exhibition where he cooked and served Southeast Asian food to visitors at New York's Paula Allen Gallery. Like Tiravanija's more recent works, *pad thai* desanctified high art venues, transforming them into participatory—and often culinary—experiences. In this episode, James Voorhies cites Tiravanija as an influence for his work with the Bureau of Open Culture.

Cassandra Troyan

Ohio-born writer and poet Cassandra Troyan (b. 1986, based in Sweden) "explores the terror of becoming female at the intersections of gender, historical violence, sex work, and capital." They are the author of *Kill Manual* (2014) and *A Theory in Tears* (2016). Troyan is currently a Senior Lecturer and Program Coordinator for Visual Communication + Change at Linnaeus University in Sweden. They collaborated with Nate Padavick and Timothy Nazzaro on a spoken-word history of Sprague Electric for MASS MoCA's *The Workers* (2012).



Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen, Feast*, Smart Museum; Chicago, IL, USA, 2012.
Rakowitz began this ongoing cooking workshop in 2003 as a way to combat the invisibility of Iraq and Iraqi-Americans in the culture of the U.S. As the artist describes, "consuming this food opens up a new route through which Iraq can be discussed—in this case, through that most familiar of cultural staples: nourishment."

concepts

Festa de Debutantes

A Brazilian tradition also known as the *fiesta de quince años* in other Latin American countries. Similar to a Sweet Sixteen party in the U.S., the celebration traditionally marks a girl's transition to womanhood, and her readiness for marriage. Although this conservative custom has largely died out in Brazil, the tradition of having the party has remained and is often a significant event in a young girl's life. In this episode, artist William Pope.L co-opts the tradition to inspire his performance of *Baile*, fusing *festa de debutante* tropes with political activism to comment on current political affairs in Brazil.

Fluxus

A loosely organized international web of artists and composers founded in the 1960s. Co-founder George Maciunas sought to bring creatives together based on a similar mindset and attitude rather than a revolution. Influenced by experimental American musician and artist John Cage and the European avant-garde Dada movement, Fluxus was meant, in the words of Maciunas, to "promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art." Beyond Fluxus co-founder Alison Knowles' iconic *Identical Lunch*, many works in this episode owe an intellectual debt to Fluxus.

Italian Futurism

An early 20th-century cultural movement celebrating industrialization and technology. Futurist artists emphasized modernity, speed, and movement in their work. Launched in 1909 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Italian Futurism promoted "anti-culture" and rebelled against traditional art. Advocating the destruction of conventional cultural institutions such as museums and libraries, the movement's critique extended to painting, music, photography, architecture, and daily life. Often problematic, the tenets of historical Futurism were used to justify war, patriarchy, and fascism. The contemporary artists engaging with Italian Futurism in this episode have appropriated other aspects of the movement, emphasizing instead modernist ideas about cooking and hospitality.

Relational Aesthetics

A term coined by historian, curator, and artist Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 to describe: "A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." This formulation of art encompasses the spaces and practices of everyday life, rather than setting art as something separate from them. Many of the artists and projects discussed in this episode are theoretically derived from Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, and position the artist as "facilitator" of a "social circumstance" rather than as an isolated, creative genius. Theaster Gates's *Soul Food Pavilion* and James Voorhies's beer garden for MASS MoCA are just two examples we encounter in the episode.

Time-Based Media

Spanning sound and video art, and slide, film, and software-based works, “time-based media” adds the dimension of time to the usual physical dimensions associated with traditional media. Typically, this term refers to technology-based pieces rather than to live performance. Time-based media present specific conservation challenges as older technologies (such as VCRs, Betamax, and LaserDiscs) become outmoded and the technical knowledge of how to maintain and repair them is lost. Listen to Fresh Art’s interview with Kevin Arrow of Obsolete Media Miami in “[Staging Complex Art](#)” (original release date: October 1, 2018) to get an inside look at the way one organization is keeping time-based media technologies alive and functioning. Artist Rachel Rose’s video installations at the 32nd São Paulo Biennial are one example of time-based media that we encounter in this conversation.

White Cube

Now a nearly universal way of displaying and engaging art, the “white cube” aesthetic is an invention of the early 20th century. Through the 19th century, art was frequently hung in heavily ornamented rooms with richly-colored walls, crowded close together and stacked all the way up to the ceiling in what was called “salon style.” In contrast, the white cube is characterized by square or rectangular galleries, spare white walls, diffuse lighting from above, and art hung further apart so that each work appears as a single, isolated object. This new vision of museum and gallery design and display became gradually more popular during the 1910s and ‘20s alongside modern art and architecture, and the corresponding rise of abstraction. It became synonymous with New York’s Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s. In 1976, artist and critic Brian O’Doherty penned a three-part essay entitled “Inside the White Cube,” the first major articulation and critique of this phenomenon. Many artists in this episode are reacting to or challenging this mode of display by presenting works that disrupt the gallery space through performance or that take place far from the gallery space itself—out on the streets and with the help and participation of diverse communities.



Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates (far right) with Cathy Byrd (far left) in Washington, DC, on Election Night 2012. Theaster was the featured speaker in the second annual *Kinetic: Conversations in Contemporary Art* lecture series at American University. Students from American University, Howard University, and University of Mary Washington join the conversation.

conversation



introduction

Cathy Byrd: No matter where we live on this planet, we find ourselves sharing a sense of imbalance and uncertainty these days. Experimental art, by nature embracing risk and precarity, can seize this moment to play a vital role in empowering us. Today we take you to a place where art meets the world. We delve into projects that connect with communities and environments, introducing curators and artists whose passion is social engagement. Their experiments—in relational aesthetics, participatory performances, interactive installations, community events, and inside-outside exhibitions—invite viewers to become co-creators, to take ownership in the creative process.



Listen along
with the episode.

We'll begin with curator **Jochen Volz**. In 2016, we met to talk about his approach to organizing the 32nd **São Paulo Biennial**, titled ***Live Uncertainty***. The international art exhibition stands apart from most. Free and open to the public, the biennial takes place in a legendary pavilion at the heart of this city's most popular park.

I meet Volz inside the pavilion; we're sitting in a room with glass walls looking out onto **Ibirapuera Park**, a vast urban green space that surrounds the building. A team led by architects **Oscar Niemeyer** and **Hélio Uchôa** designed the building and the park. These days, up to 200,000 people a day gather here to immerse themselves in nature and culture. The international contemporary art exhibition welcomes a huge number of visitors, many for their first encounter with art.

“Uncertainty is a guiding principle in the arts, but it’s so little talked about elsewhere. When it’s used in other fields, it’s always linked to notions of fear or crisis.”

Jochen Volz

conversation

CB: Jochen, **you and your team** designed the layout of the 32nd Biennial to resonate with the park's spatial dynamic. I love the way you designed the biennial like a garden.



For three days in 2016, Cathy Byrd contributed her own curatorial intervention to the 32nd São Paulo Biennial: live streaming radio shows with participating artists from inside the pavilion. Click below to hear her conversations with Eduardo Navarro (Argentina), Ebony G. Patterson (Jamaica/U.S.), OPAVIVARÁ! (Brazil), artists engaged in 2016 political protests (Brazil), Pia Lindman (Finland), Vivian Cacurri (Brazil), Yvette Mutumba and Julia Grosse (Germany), Jorge Menna Barreto (Brazil).

Live Radio
from *Live Uncertainty*

Jochen Volz: Previous biennials have often been structured on a more urban principle—one with blocks and halls and paths. In urban logic, elements do compare by size. But in a garden, nobody would ever think that it's weird that you have a very big stand of bamboo and a small stone garden. A scheme in which everything has its own scale is much more interesting. What we're trying to do is to take this logic into the commissioning and development process of **an exhibition architecture** allowing for large presentations and small ones, each to their scale. Visitors can experience art making on very different scales. The logic and methodology of the garden is key.

CB: I love how healthy this biennial feels. Considering the theme, let's talk about the title for a minute.

JV: We thought about how uncertainty is a guiding principle in the arts, but it's so little talked about elsewhere. When it's used in other fields, it's always linked to notions of fear or crisis. But in the arts, the idea of uncertainty and chance and improvisation are very present. They are guiding principles. To open up an alternative idea of knowledge, to allow for contradictions, to allow for the melding of different ideas—these are things that the artists do all the time—appropriating ideas and concepts from different cultural backgrounds or from science. That is something exciting that we wanted to talk about and bring in.

CB: In a way, it's a call to action. *Live Uncertainty*, right? Let's just live it. Let's do it. Let's dive in. These artists have taken your challenge and really responded to it. I loved your description of how the light is invited into the space. In some of the pieces that idea is very transparent, like **Rachel Rose**'s, with the light from outside interacting with the video upstairs. And then **Anawana Haloba**'s piece also interacts with the outdoors. Were you intentionally seeking artists who were aware of what's outside?

JV: We looked at artists and practices that are open to other forms of information and to the outside. It became almost a kind of uncertainty. Our methodology was to work with a variety of artists who respond to the changing reality that we live in.

CB: Like the reality that we are living in Brazil right now. You've invited artists to respond to political circumstances. Today, there was a **protest interrupting** the press conference. Tell me what was happening there.

JV: The **political instability** over the last months has paralleled our project's development. Many of the biennial's themes—be it the distribution of resources, other knowledge forms, allowing for diversity, or the question of Indigenous cultures—were important in our curatorial project from the

very beginning. And they became more and more relevant. What is going on in Brazil is a parliamentary political power dispute, but behind it are questions about resources, rights, social equality, privileges, and justice for some and not for others. What happened today was a protest. It was a group of artists spontaneously organizing themselves and using the press conference to express their standpoint. It's good that the biennial can be this platform that allows for a plural space where different opinions can exist.

CB: I think so, too. A lot of times people think of art as a privileged space and art space has been a privileged space. But this biennial is free to the public and very open to these political statements.

JV: Of the world's big art events, the biennial in São Paulo probably has the largest audience having their first contact with art, which has to do with its location in a very popular park. There are a series of spontaneous projects. For example, **O PAVIVARÁ!** will be activating several times in different spots throughout the city. There's a performance by **Donna Kukama** in three different locations, in Consolação Cemetery, in the **Museu Afro Brasil**, and in the biennial pavilion. One performance is for four days non-stop by **[William] Pope.L.**

William Pope.L: It's a mixture of the gestures you see in **festas de debutante** and this current protest's actions. It switches back and forth almost from the political to the romantic. For some, the festa de debutante is an outmoded form of coming of age. This is an extreme version. This actually comes from the idea of countries having a civil function of parenting and the citizens as children acting out or simply bowing under.

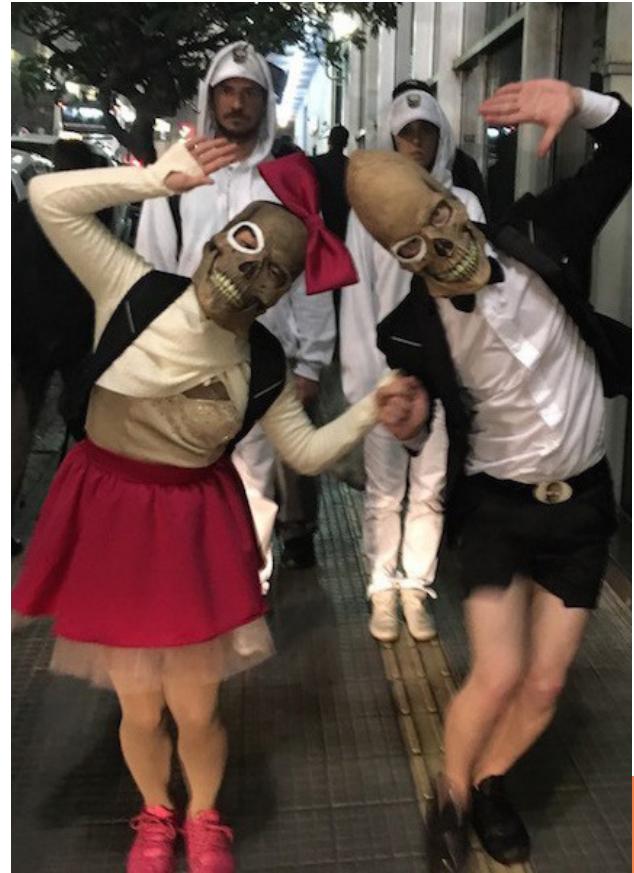
*[Sounds of vocalization and dancing from
William Pope.L, Baile, São Paulo Biennial]*

CB: The performance makes a loop inside the city, taking the same path each day.

WP: It's part of the cyclical nature of humanity.

CB: What environments do you cross through?

WP: A working-class neighborhood, neighborhoods that are more "rundown," gated neighborhoods, neighborhoods where people are just doing their daily business, like **Avenue Paulista**. There are certain streets here where people are elbow to elbow and there are vehicles two inches from you; you sort of weave your way through it. So there are very dense, hilly neighborhoods that you have to fight your way through. And there are some that are very spacious.



William Pope.L, *Baile*, 32nd São Paulo Biennial.



Listen along
with the episode.

CB: Pope.L wrote the lyrics for the soundtrack. Two hours-long, the track features a male voice, alternating with an atmospheric musical composition designed to transcend the big city soundscape. Pope.L worked with a team to achieve Baile, a remarkable four-day endurance project that empathizes with recent political theatrics in Brazil.

JV: There's been lots of collaborations with different groups—theater groups, musicians, embroiderers, artisans. These collaborations create a totally new network for the biennial. This huge outreach and huge first contact to art is extremely inspiring, for all the artists—to think about the role of art within society.

CB: The history of labor has inspired more than a few artists' projects at the **Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art** (MASS MoCA). The museum grew from an abandoned industrial complex just outside the city of **North Adams**. Over the span of a decade, curator **Susan Cross** has invited artists to experiment in this historically rich setting. Some of her projects have altered visitor encounters with the architectural space itself, while others have forged new social experiences with its history. After inviting seven artists to create site-specific installations for a show titled **Material World**, Cross organized a 2011 exhibition that sparked social engagement at MASS MoCA as never before. **The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility** sparked a remarkable community response, resonating with the intensifying labor issues of today's globalized economy. The time and place were a perfect fit. The **former factory and the building** that MASS MoCA now occupies

were closed in the 1980s due to intense international competition that left nearly a third of the community out of work. The decline of North Adams echoes the demise of many abandoned factory towns in the United States and abroad. Many in these communities have lost a way of life due to technological advances and the search for cheap labor.

"This huge outreach and huge first contact to art is extremely inspiring, for all the artists—to think about the role of art within society."

Jochen Volz

Susan Cross: We're located on what we call a "campus" of incredible 19th-century industrial buildings. It's a rambling place with lots of courtyards and secret little spots. I always tell people that when they are walking through, they'll often get lost. It's like being in Venice, Italy. Give yourself over to that and you can discover so many things, both in the art and also in the buildings. The building housed a textile print works in the 1800s. It was a flourishing business with a big national profile. In the early 1900s, the business was replaced by **Sprague Electric**. They made capacitors, among other things. They, too, had a very big national profile and both companies hired thousands of people from the city. When the last few workers left Sprague Electric in the 1980s, they left an economic and emotional void in the city. Through MASS MoCA, the idea was born to take over this incredible historic space and create something new out of it and use the museum as an engine for a new creative economy.

Many of the artists who come to MASS MoCA are so excited to engage with that history, which is so timely as well. We're still working through issues of

labor and changing economies. This building keeps me in mind of workers' histories and the present. So that exhibition, *The Workers*, grew out of North Adams redefining its labor force and its economy, and the very rich history. It's also related to *Material World* in that some of those pieces like **Michael Beutler**'s, were dealing with Sprague Electric history. His piece was looking at a nearby engineering marvel called the **Hoosac Tunnel**, built in the 1870s. It was a technical marvel, but took a lot of labor and people died. In fact, his ghostly rendition of the tunnel was a nod to many of the ghost hunters who come [here] because it is supposedly haunted—

CB: That could draw a whole different audience.

SC: *The Workers* did get us additional audiences. Suddenly labor unions were calling me because that topic was very personal to a lot of people who hadn't perhaps come to MASS MoCA before. That was a great way to engage others. In fact, **one of the works** in the show was a performative piece by **Santiago Sierra**, who does very emotionally and physically intense and sometimes very controversial works about labor. I've dealt with industrial labor a lot in different shows, but this piece was thinking about military workers. I recruited several soldiers to perform in this space. So that was another audience that suddenly became aware of the museum in a way that they hadn't before.

CB: It really evokes the history of the community as well as the global economy—the competition for work, the uncertain future of work, and what professions are going to be available, and who gets left behind if they're not keeping up with technology. All that must have resonated with visitors.

SC: It did, and some of the former Sprague employees work at MASS MoCA now in different capacities. We're also involved with the **Bureau for Open Culture** project. That was part of *The Workers*. I invited **James Voorhies** to come **an take over a building**. He did a **series of programs and exhibitions and activities**, one of which dealt with Sprague's history and tapped into the memories of former employees. It engaged people on so many different levels, including with a beer garden, which attracted all different constituencies in our region, but it also nodded to intellectual salons. While people were drinking their beer, there'd be artists or other thinkers talking about certain projects. It was another moment within MASS MoCA's campus that really welcomed the community.

CB: I reached out to James Voorhies to learn more about the Bureau of Open Culture, a nomadic curatorial project that amplifies how we engage with art—a great match for *The Workers* exhibition at MASS MoCA. What is the Bureau for Open Culture, exactly?

James Voorhies: It gathers a wide range of public-facing work that often connects or inhabits different institutions—to really think about how people engage with the ideas presented by artists and in exhibitions. It encapsulates my practice, which is dedicated to interrogating and expanding the behavior of an institution. It originated in **Columbus College of Art and Design** in

“Suddenly labor unions were calling me because that topic was very personal to a lot of people who hadn’t perhaps come to MASS MoCA before.”

Susan Cross

"Over the last ten years, the way institutions connect with their publics has changed drastically."

James Voorhies



Bureau for Open Culture and The Free Seas, boat building workshop, *I am Searching for Field Character, The Workers*, MASS MoCA, 2011. Notice that the sail of the boat in this image is reused advertising material from a previous MASS MoCA show curated by Stephanie Smith, *Material World!*

2007. We made gallery exhibitions, but we also were making exhibitions in empty storefront spaces as well as commissioning projects with hot air balloons in open fields in Ohio, and producing publications. Often an exhibition program is identified so strongly with a gallery—Bureau of Open Culture was the way to gather this activity conceptually and geographically under a single umbrella. “Bureau” has a sense of administration, of keeping order, of curating, and “open culture” means thinking more expansively about the different culture producers that are invited into the realm of contemporary art.

CB: You’re forging intersections among art, design, education, and consumer culture, and pushing against the way institutions address and engage audiences. But don’t you think that the way they’re engaging has just been naturally evolving with contemporary culture?

JaV: Over the last ten years, the way institutions connect with their publics has changed drastically. A lot of this comes out of the nineties, initiated by artists who are categorized under **relational aesthetics**. One might think of **Rirkrit Tiravanija**, one of the artists who were challenging what could take place in a “**white cube**,” meaning that you could actually inhabit it by consuming food together in a disorderly fashion that suppresses that pristine space. Over time, curators have picked up that activity in the white cube to push against how an institution behaves. Then increasingly more mainstream institutions are utilizing time-based activity and ways of gathering people much differently than they did fifteen years ago.

CB: Well, let’s talk about how you got involved with the concept of *The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility* at MASS MoCA with curator Susan Cross.

JaV: I was living in North Adams, teaching at **Bennington College**—art history and critical theory. It’s a small community in the arts there and Susan and I quite quickly became friends. She was talking about this exhibition, *The Workers*, and she really understood the questions that the Bureau for Open Culture was asking

about the value of cultural production, the precarity of the immaterial worker, and the constant production of content. It’s a different model from Sprague Electric where people clocked in and worked in the space; they clocked out and they left. Now, what’s interesting is that MASS MoCA is filled with content by artists and curators. It’s almost produced around the clock.

[Excerpt from *There Is Only Light (We Do Not Know What To Do With Other Worlds)* performance-reading, July 2011, MASS MoCA. Produced by Bureau for Open Culture, 00:24:48-00:26:07]

JaV: *The Workers* [exhibition] was asking overlapping questions with the Bureau of Open Culture. Susan graciously invited us to inhabit the building behind the main exhibition spaces—a small building that became our headquarters. It became a shop where an artist collective called **Red 76** sold local cultural materials. MASS MoCA became the site of constant production of culture and art and bringing people together.

CB: You created these opportunities to think about what being a “manufacturing site” looks like in contemporary life.

JaV: It speaks to many post-industrial towns today that have these amazing physical reminders of historical labor. The consumption of culture and art transforms these places into destinations and also creates economic sustenance. From the point of view of the role of artists and culture-makers in these places, they’re almost the new workers.

CB: It’s interesting how you built this space for public conversations, performances, installations, workshops, the little shop, spaces for visiting artists, writers, designers, and thinkers to work... and **a beer garden!**

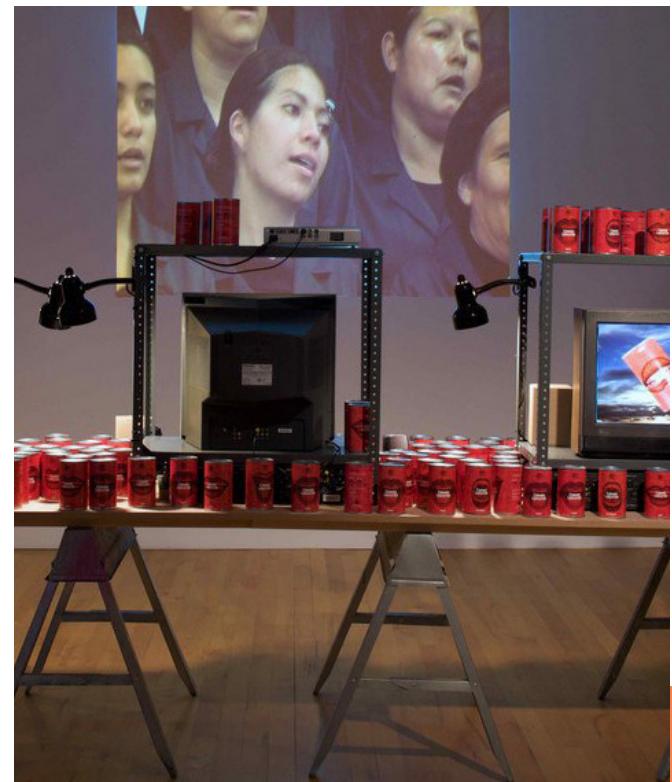
JaV: That was really important. People come to the **Berkshires** because it’s such a lovely place. How nice would it be to sit at picnic tables along the river in the evenings? In terms of consumer culture, I like to think about how familiar forms, like a beer garden or a bookshop, are ways to unify people from very different backgrounds. People come and they’ll see different advertisements for other events, such as a walk through Berkshires learning about the different **histories of the environment and the river** that was changed by the **Army Corps of Engineers**. The beer garden or a bookshop is a “net” to help art reach people who may not understand at first that that’s what they’re engaging with.

CB: It became a wayfinding device and a social space. Susan tells me that the space has been **claimed by another artist** who is using that beer garden [space] again.

JaV: It’s so rewarding that we initiated something that other artists and the institution continues to build on. It was such an unforgettable experience—a combination of the personalities of the artists and the time and attention we have to give to something, and the undivided support from the institution. But that support sometimes came in the form of challenges—MASS MoCA and

“MASS MoCA became the site of constant production of culture and art and bringing people together.”

James Voorhies



Yoshua Okon (b. 1970, Mexico City), *Canned Laughter*, 2009. Eight-channel video installation: projectors, monitors, two racks with uniforms, table, shelves, cans, lamps. On display in Building #4 the exhibition *The Workers*, MASS MoCA, 2011-12.

Susan were really engaged with how to make the work better by asking lots of questions. I love that kind of working relationship.

CB: The exhibition unfolded in modules. In one image that Susan shared with me, we see a sailboat made of foraged materials and the sail looks like a banner.

JaV: That was done by **Dylan Gauthier** and **Kendra Sullivan**. There was a series of boat-building workshops by a collective called **Free Seas**, based in Brooklyn. They came up over a period of weeks and thought about what kind of projects they would like to do to engage with the ecology of the area. We had to galvanize the community so that people would keep coming to their events. We held informal workshops with local people and then concluded the summer with a **public boat-building workshop**. This involved looking at the materials at hand—bamboo and other recycled materials. We built the boats, then we went up to North Pond and spent the remainder of the afternoon on the lake.

All the models had particular themes guided by artists and then the community helped produce them. For me, that's the responsibility of a curator or of an institution: to see what the artist wants to do, understand how to communicate it to a public, and then round that public up over time so that they feel as if they have something at stake in what you're doing.

CB: Finally, I wanted to ask you about the reading performance using quotes from original interviews with former employees of Sprague Electric.

JaV: That was a really special project. **Cassandra Troyan**, **Nate Padavick**, and the photographer and artist **Timothy Nazzaro** did this history of MASS MoCA and Sprague Electric. We wanted to hear more from the employees, so we recorded informal interviews with them. They reflected on their time at Sprague Electric, as well as on how the area transitioned from factory town to post-industrial cultural production. We interwove those recordings with transcripts from public meetings in Massachusetts in the 1970s when so many factories were closing and a lot of the work was being sent overseas.

[Excerpt from *There Is Only Light (We Do Not Know What To Do With Other Worlds)* performance-reading, July 2011, MASS MoCA. Produced by Bureau for Open Culture, 00:33:51-00:34:18]

CB: In what ways did your involvement with *The Workers* and your engagement with the communities there influence your practice moving forward?

JaV: It reinforced for me how something really complex and impenetrable within the realm of contemporary art can be successful. How can you make an artist's idea about ecology or history mean something to a greater number of people without sacrificing the quality of the work? It's a fine balance that a lot of institutions are facing today. Before coming here, I was the Director of the **Carpenter Center for Visual Arts** at Harvard. We opened a bookshop with a Berlin-based bookseller called **Motto Books**. I learned a lot from MASS MoCA that helped me prepare for this project: looking around the Boston area and thinking about what institutions and which people we wanted to involve by having something at stake in it, by presenting their

books, or creating an open forum that they could contribute to. It was such a great learning experience.

CB: In 2012, **curator Stephanie Smith** traced the historical roots of hospitality as conceptual art practice with an exhibition at the **University of Chicago's Smart Museum** of Art. ***Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*** not only displayed the history of this idea, but also initiated participatory events and offered meals in collaboration with local artists and communities. Smith continues to expand on her interest in socially-engaged art as a curator at the new **Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) at Virginia Commonwealth University**.

Stephanie Smith: I started working in contemporary art institutions when I was in college during internships—the late eighties, early nineties. There have been a lot of changes in the field during that time and it's been exciting to see the ways that institutions are finding new ways to support artists. We always follow where artists lead us. I was fortunate to be working at the **Contemporary Arts Museum** in Houston as a curatorial assistant at the same time that **Project Row Houses** was just starting. It is a truly extraordinary example of a community-based strategic creative practice, where the institution understood that part of its function was to be working in steady, evolving relation with the community.

CB: **Rick Lowe**, the founder of Project Row Houses, really understood what it meant to embed himself as part of a community and to create a space that responds to that population and stimulates them and invites others to share it. I think he's amazing.

SS: Absolutely. And other people who have worked with Rick have also thought carefully about what role the institution could play within the particular arts ecology in Houston, in relation to the needs and desires of their neighbors, and internationally. They've remained relevant because they understand their overlapping roles within each of those spheres of activity and influence. It was a great model for me and something that I continue to think about. Institutions are increasingly supporting participatory forms of art-making as well as performative work.

There's a new recognition that in addition to creating quiet moments of contemplation around static works of art—moments with depth and heart and meaning—it's also really exciting to activate new kinds of energy by bringing time-based and participatory projects into institutional spaces. In the latter case, there are interesting negotiations as institutions figure out how to be good hosts for those projects, especially when they are both participatory and socially engaged. The institutions are really mindful of their work's ethical implications and how they're positioning these relationships, so the work is not just catnip for millennials who are seeking participation and those sorts of clichés, but actually substantive engagement.

CB: That exhibition you presented at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art in 2012 called ***Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*** encompasses both of those elements of participatory and time-based engagement.



Listen along
with the episode.

SS: On the one hand, it created an opportunity for people to encounter static objects including sculptures, paintings, and artifacts. It allowed us to see a kind of long historical range of participatory practice. One key point of origin for artists orchestrating meals and convivial experiences was when the **Italian Futurists**—a group of radical artists working from the late 1910s forward—created a “**Manifesto of Futurist Cooking**.” Looking from that point forward, we traced a long thread of activity within a range of contemporary art practices. We used the capacity of the museum to make that argument, and let it unfold through a sequence of galleries where you would encounter text and objects, but also experience a mood and atmosphere. We also staged participatory events inside the museum and throughout the city that gave people opportunities to encounter the work in a full sensory way, because *Feast* wouldn’t have made sense if it were only to be looked at—it had to also be something that could be smelled and tasted and consumed. What happened in the museum provided historical ballast, and what happened out in the world (or in the museum in a time-based way) provided life and energy and vitality.

CB: Tell me about the context—being in a university museum. How did that influence the way the concept was developed and presented?

SS: University art institutions are one of the great platforms in the U.S. for experimental interdisciplinary work. They both spur and support exhibition-making that is intentionally experimental and boundary-crossing, and that brings together people who have a rich range of knowledge, experience, and perspectives.

CB: I wanted to talk about a few of the artists you invited to participate. Let’s start with **Theaster Gates**. He is a huge influence in Chicago through **Dorchester Projects** and **all that he’s done on the South Side**, developing projects that integrate that community with the rest of the city.

SS: For *Feast*, we conceptualized a project that took two different forms—those that could be well-supported within the gallery setting and those that would be best held onsite at *Dorchester Projects*, a group of houses on Chicago’s South Side relatively near the University of Chicago and the Smart Museum. These are houses that Theaster has been purchasing over a number of years and turning into a site for different creative and community-based activities. Soul food and cooking and meals have all been ways that he’s activated that site. At *Dorchester Projects* we arranged to have **a series of dinners** that Theaster orchestrated and hosted in one of the houses: a very warm space with all this beautiful reclaimed wood and a long, skinny table that brought people close together. These dinners were beautiful! They were sequenced with a real sense of ritual.

[Sounds of a crowd, laughter, and singing from Theaster Gates, Feast, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago]

Theaster Gates: The **Soul Food Pavilion** is an opportunity to make a space, convert a space, transform a space into one where amazing food interactions can happen around the foods of Black people. The history of foods in America for African-Americans is a really complicated story.

[Excerpt from Theaster Gates, Feast]

Chow-chow kept coming up, which is this collaboration of many vegetables. And this pickled essence allows many dishes to really take on a character that is familiar in the real deep heart of the South.

TG: These foods represented a kind of inferior relationship to a really dark past. The dinners give me an opportunity to leverage ritual, to ask hard questions, maybe in ways that people don't normally talk about in Chicago, and with groups of people who don't normally get together.

SS: Theaster punctuated the dinners with different moments of musical performance with his collaborators, **The Black Monks of Mississippi**. They would have sermons where he would invite colleagues, friends, neighbors, and other creative practitioners to speak in whatever way made sense to them. He was working with a great set of chefs who were really committed to soul food, connected to a Chicago restaurant called **mk**. The folks who prepared different aspects of the meal also explained the dishes. In between, there were conversations digging into the history of soul food, the way that art functions in society, what was going on on the block—a set of topics that felt joyful and sorrowful and urgent and real.

“The dinners give me an opportunity to leverage ritual, to ask hard questions... with groups of people who don’t normally get together.”

Theaster Gates



Theaster Gates, *Soul Food Kitchen*, Dorchester Projects, *Feast*, Smart Museum, 2012.



Alison Knowles, *Identical Lunch*, film still, *Feast*, Smart Museum, 2012.

"There's great enthusiasm and appetite on the part of audiences right now to engage with projects like *Feast* that dig into social issues, touch on topics percolating within society, and open up surprising new ways to connect with art and with other people."

Stephanie Smith

CB: I also loved how you brought in the relationship with the **Fluxus** movement by inviting **Alison Knowles** and her ***Identical Lunch*** into the conversation.

SS: That was really a special part of the project. We focused on her *Identical Lunch* project, which involved eating the same tuna fish sandwich over an extended period and creating a focused ritual of that practice. At the **Smart we did two things**: we had the lunch out on view in the gallery and we had it on the menu in our café. You could eat that particular tuna fish sandwich prepared according to Alison Knowles's specifications and participate in her conceptual artwork.

CB: I was reading the story of *The Identical Lunch* and learned that Knowles herself was in the habit of ordering the one thing she thought was edible at a certain diner, and she would just order the same thing because it was safe. And then it became a performance.

SS: Yeah, it's beautiful. The genius of Fluxus is that it focused attention on small aspects of everyday experience that can be transformed into something extraordinary through that precise care and the reframing of its potential.

CB: Just by nature, this exhibition engaged with viewers on so many levels.

SS: It was fun to watch people engaging with the show and it was also really exciting when the exhibition traveled. We were able to collaborate with several other institutions to send *Feast* across the country [**Blaffer Art Museum**, **SITE Santa Fe**, **Gund Gallery**, **Weisman Art Museum**]. In each venue, the institutions hosted some of the projects that had been part of the Smart Museum's original presentation and hosted new events. They also customized and brought in new projects that were relevant to their audiences and institutions.

CB: What did you take away from the *Feast* experience that has influenced your projects since then?

SS: There's great enthusiasm and appetite on the part of audiences right now to engage with projects like *Feast* that dig into social issues, touch on topics percolating within society, and open up surprising new ways to connect with art and with other people.

CB: That leads me to your current work with *Declaration* at the ICA. You've interpreted that philosophy in a big way in this inaugural exhibition.

SS: We just opened our doors to the public for the very first time as a brand new non-collecting contemporary art institution at **Virginia Commonwealth University**. The response so far has been very positive both in the press and public engagement. Richmond hasn't had an institution of this scale solely dedicated to contemporary art. So many people came to our opening events—it was the most diverse crowd I've ever been with in a visual arts institution in the United States. Diversity can really engage crowds of people looking at art and connecting with each other. They responded not only to the more traditional works, but also really engaged with the participatory and collaboratively produced works.

CB: There's art for looking, for listening, for participating. And you also have projects that collaborate with Richmonders.

SS: It felt very important to declare our intention as an institution to be at the edge of the new. We also wanted to create projects that reflect how art is functioning now. That includes painting and photography, but also sound works, media works, participatory works, performance—things that are inside the institution and also extending out into the world. We wanted to declare our commitment to the socially transformative power of art and artists. All of those aspirations are manifested in the show.

Marinella Senatore has developed *Estman Radio: Richmond*, which is the first U.S. presentation of her ongoing project, *Estman Radio*. It's essentially an installation; it has a very particular design, look, and function. It's a recording space that occupies one of our galleries and during public hours, visitors can drop in and use this recording setup to make their own declaration. People are leaving their recordings, which are then uploaded by Marinella's team onto the *Estman Radio* podcast site. That happens on an ongoing basis during the exhibition and will remain as an archive after the show closes.

Marinella Senatore: Since 2006, I've worked within the field of contemporary art, making participatory and socially-engaged projects involving entire communities. For the exhibition *Declaration* at ICA, I present a project called *Estman Radio* that I started some years ago. It's free radio that everybody can contribute to. What you see when you enter our room is a mini radio station and displays where you can also listen to previous contributions. You can record anything from music to debate or dialogue. The theme of *Declaration* can be a starting point or just a suggestion, but you are absolutely free to do what you want.



Listen along
with the episode.



Steven Holl Architects, Institute for Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University; Richmond, Virginia, USA, 2018.

"The theme of Declaration can be a starting point or just a suggestion, but you are absolutely free to do what you want."

Marinella Senatore



Marinella Senatore, Estman Radio, Recording studio details, Installation view at Kunst Halle St. Gallen; Switzerland, 2014. Photo Gunnar Meier. Source: FreshArtINTL/Marinella Senatore. Another of the incarnations of Senatore's Estman Radio project.

“Whether it takes the form of an encounter with a painting in the gallery or a performance out in the city, we want to be sure that we’re providing a rich range of opportunities for people to connect with art and each other in ways that matter here and now.”

Stephanie Smith

CB: I love how she creates these opportunities for you to be creative.

SS: Absolutely, and we’re partnering with a local community-organized radio station that will be doing a kind of “best of” compilation.

[**Voice from Estman Radio: Richmond:** These were the true Black people images. When I walked into the first gallery of the *Posing Beauty* show, I thought, there’s so much familiar here [...] I wanted to mind-test, to memory-test each one for authenticity—authentic beauty, inner beauty, social beauty, defensive beauty, beauty as tool, as weapon—captured, held, immortalized, institutionalized, mainstreamed, bought, collected, interpreted.]

SS: We’re also inviting several local colleagues who will be hosting sessions over the run of the exhibition as well. There’ll be some curated conversations in addition to more casual and completely public discussions.

CB: Congratulations on this project. It takes you up to a whole other level of viewer engagement. There’s so many dimensions to this.

SS: We really wanted to start with this primary declaration of the ICA as an institution: that we believe in the socially transformative power of art and artists. Whether that takes the form of an encounter with a painting in the gallery or a performance out in the city, we want to be sure that we’re providing a rich range of opportunities for people to connect with art and each other in ways that matter here and now.

CB: In today’s conversation about art that sparks social engagement, we introduce curators and artists who consistently seek ways to connect with individuals and communities in the world outside the art scene. We share their personal philosophies about social experiences and how they work alongside the infrastructure of museums and art biennials. We invite you to think about how these artists and curators pose enduring questions about the meaning of art. In work that translates the diverse activities of labor unions, communal dinners, beer gardens, and political protests, they offer potent reminders of our collective capacity for creative and meaningful exchange.

investigate



reading list

biennials

Brown, Kate & Javier Pes. "Biennials Are Proliferating Worldwide. There's Just One Problem: Nobody Wants to Pay For Them." *ArtNet*, March 21, 2019. [Read](#)

The Biennial Condition (a special edition entirely devoted to biennials). *Liverpool Biennial, Stages #6*; Liverpool, April 2017. [Read](#)

fluxus

Kedmey, Karen. "What is Fluxus?" *Artsy*, January 14, 2017. [Read](#)

"Experimental Women in Flux: Selective Reading in the Silverman Reference Library." *MoMA.org*, 2010. (See bottom of page for an additional bibliography of book and article sources.) [Read](#)

italian futurism

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. "The Futurist Manifesto." 1909. [Read](#)

Martinique, Elena. "The Progressive Spirit of Italian Futurism." *Widewalls*, November 13, 2016. [Read](#)

Eveleth, Rose. "When Futurism Led to Fascism—and Why It Could Happen Again." *WIRED*, April 18, 2019. [Read](#)

relational aesthetics

Chayka, Kate. "WTF is...Relational Aesthetics?" *Hyperallergic*, February 8, 2011. [Read](#)

Russeth, Andrew. "The Fall of Relational Aesthetics." *Observer*, September 15, 2011. [Read](#)

"Relational Aesthetics" (tagged works and artists) on *Artsy*. [Read](#)

socially engaged art

"Socially Engaged Practice — Art Term." *Tate Modern*. [Read](#)

Lee, Patina. "Who Are the Key Figures in Socially Engaged Art Today?" *Widewalls*, April 3, 2016. [Read](#)

"What is Socially Engaged Art?" *ArtMakingChange.org*. [Read](#)

time-based art

Dover, Caitlin. "What Is 'Time-Based Media'?: A Q&A with Guggenheim Conservator Joanna Phillips." *Guggenheim Blog*, March 4, 2014. [Read](#)

new institutionalism

Kolb Lucie and Gabriel Flückiger. "New Institutionalism Revisited." *OnCurating*, Issue 21: (New) Institution(alism), December 2013. [Read](#)

Voorhies, James. *What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?* Berlin, Cambridge: Sternberg Press; Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2016. [Read](#)

discussion questions

1. In each of the projects described in this episode, artists and curators are working with specific places and particular communities to spark social engagement. How does understanding the history of a community help each of these culture-makers to create projects that audiences really engage with and respond to? What broader themes or lessons can you draw from these projects that might apply to other community-based art-making or to grassroots culture production more generally?
2. Based on what you've heard and read through the hyperlinked materials within the transcript, which of the projects in this episode did you find the most inspiring? Why? What aspects of that project could you envision translating to your own creative practice?
3. Many of the projects featured in this episode involve some form of “**time-based media**,” performance, or live event. Can you think of examples (either in this episode or in your own experience) of art that inspires social engagement, through traditional static media, such as painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, or photography?
4. In this episode, curator James Voorhies talks about undermining the “white cube”—**a model of gallery or museum space** defined by art hung sparingly on white walls usually in a minimalist/modernist architectural interior. First popularized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, this mode of curating and experiencing museums has risen to global dominance over the last century. You can read more about the “white cube” in the Take Note! Section and here:

Cain, Abigail. “**How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World.**” *Artsy*, January 23, 2017.

Sheikh, Simon. “**Positively White Cube Revisited.**” *e-flux* 3, February 2009.

Why might the “white cube” model be seen as exclusionary or not particularly welcoming to certain audiences? Can you recall a time that an arts institution made you feel less than welcome? How did the gallery or museum space and its architecture affect your experience? How do the installations, exhibitions, and performances in this episode react to the “white cube” model of displaying art?

5. Most the projects featured in this episode rely on face-to-face interactions between artists, curators, and public audiences—including large group events, outdoor performances, and hands-on collaborations. At the time of publication (Spring 2020), many people across the globe are working from home and avoiding group gatherings as part of an effort to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Is it possible for art to spark social engagement without in-person events? How could that be achieved virtually? Can you imagine an artistic project or exhibition concept that inspires widespread participation, but doesn’t need large gatherings, or is social distancing fundamentally at odds with community-building?

activities

activity #1 digitally curate your own *Declaration*

Curator Stephanie Smith describes Declaration (2018), the opening exhibition at VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art, as a manifestation of the Institute's ongoing goals and mission:

We believe in the socially transformative power of art and artists.

We declare that this power can be unleashed through many kinds of artistic practices and the deliberate inclusion of many voices.

We commit to activating the ICA as an inclusive platform to research, support and share art's transformative power.

part 1

What drives you as a creative person? Begin this activity by crafting a three point personal mission statement following the model of the ICU above:

1. I believe _____.
2. I declare _____.
3. I commit _____.

part 2

Use your “declaration” above to inspire a digital exhibition of contemporary and/or historical art. Which artists made or make art that aligns with the principles you’ve outlined?

1. Choose 20 works that you would want to spotlight in your own Declaration exhibition. Many museums are currently making their collections available online, and several art websites feature roundups of particularly useful and interesting digital collections, such as [this one](#).
2. From those 20 pieces, choose 5 that you wish to spotlight as key works. For each of those 5 works, write a wall label explaining the significance of that piece within your personal “declaration.” Use page 16 of the [Getty’s Guide to Adult Audience Interpretive Materials](#) for explanation on writing a wall label and what descriptive information to include.

activity #2 propose your own artwork to spark community engagement

part 1 individual reflection

Each student responds in short, informal answers to the following questions:

1. What is an example of a contemporary artwork that inspired you to engage with your local community? Ideally, this would be a work that you either experienced directly, but it could also be one that you read about or viewed online or in print.
2. Describe the work:
 - Who is/are the artist(s)? When was it made? Where was it shown or (if an event) where did it take place?
 - Describe the components of the piece. What was involved?
 - Describe how the piece engaged your senses. Think back to examples like Feast from the episode, which used all five senses. How can you describe that experience in a way that makes the artwork seem alive and real?
 - If you are new to analyzing art in this way, it might be helpful to refer to the Student Art Guide's "[How to Analyze an Artwork: A Step-by-Step Guide](#)."
3. Describe your response to the work:
 - How did the work make you feel? Keep in mind that some art inspires action by making audiences feel inspired and uplifted, while others might spark a response by playing to feelings of anger, injustice, or even revulsion.
 - Why did the work make you feel more engaged in global issues or connected with your local community? Did you act on that feeling? If so, how?

part 2 partner discussion

In pairs, discuss your chosen works. If working in a digital forum, these responses can be shared and documented through video chat, as messages, or via email. Compare the artworks that you and your partner have chosen based on your responses to the previous set of questions. Are there commonalities or shared themes in your answers?

part 3 team project proposal

Based on your discussion with your partner, work together to plan your own hypothetical creative project that engages a particular community. Keep in mind that there are many ways to understand the notion of community—this might include geographic, municipal, ethnic, cultural, or digital communities. Your plan should have the following components:

1. **A proposed title.**
2. **A statement of purpose.** What does your work hope to accomplish? What current issues does it address in your community (local, national, global)? Who is the audience of the work (i.e. is it oriented towards members of the community or people outside that community)?
3. **A description of the inspiration.** How did your chosen examples from Parts 1 and 2 inform what you are proposing as a team?
4. **A description of the concept and how you will realize it.** What media will you engage? What key elements will spark public engagement? Will the project be a one-time event, a recurring activity, or a permanent installation? Where will the work be experienced? How will you create a sense of community around your project?
5. **A “sketch” of the piece.** Both you and your partner will create a visual representation that helps those reading your proposal understand your intention. Your sketch might take the form of an abstract diagram, a digital collage, a physical sketch, a 3D model, or even a digital animation. If your sketch is not already digital, document it so that it can be shared digitally with the rest of your class.

From here, it's up to you and your class to decide how you will share your proposals. Depending on the situation, you might choose one of the proposed projects and bring it to life as a team. Or, you might mount a digital "exhibition" with a catalog of the proposed works along with supporting text and audio/visual material. You could even hold a "digital charette" where guest critics and reviewers get a chance to comment on your endeavor!



Marinella Senatore, Readers at La Sucrière, The Word Community Feels Good, 13th Lyon Biennial; Lyon, France, 2015.

FRESH ART

Explore these questions in *Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement*:



How can art act as a force for good in a rapidly changing and often uncertain world?



What happens when artists extend their practices out into communities to inspire and forge real-life social connections?



How can curators and educators create opportunities for diverse publics to engage in relevant and meaningful ways with conceptually complex art?