

Which Way Portland?

by Grace Kook-Anderson

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard defines place as “the locus of desire.”¹ That locus for me has been Portland, my husband’s birthplace, ever since I was introduced to the city when we began dating fourteen years ago. It is a place I imagined raising our child, with family, grounding my feet into the mossy Northwest soil. Our move here in January 2015 was a leap of faith. Now as a relative newcomer, a curator and writer, I cannot help but compare Portland’s art community with those of my two previous West Coast homes. I left San Francisco in 2008 for Los Angeles, at the moment of the Great Recession. My husband and I were living in the “Tendernob” neighborhood, where the seedy Tenderloin District pushed up against Nob Hill. We coined our street “break-up alley” as we heard couples argue at last call under our window. Our apartment had a mild-mannered owner with no interest in raising the rent, but also equally little interest in maintaining the premises. In its rundown funkiness, our building was idyllic in our newly wedded, starting-from-scratch kind of way. On the other hand, just across from us an odd-fitting, minimalist condo was under construction, new developments were springing up all over the city, and grassroots venues for art and public culture were beginning to disappear.

The closing of a historic alternative art space, New Langton Arts, after thirty years, signaled the end of an era. In an uncanny, early articulation of this moment in San Francisco, Larry Rinder, now director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, predicted:

San Francisco in 2020 is going to become a city of presentation without creation—much on the model of what we see in a place like Washington, D.C., now, where you have really premier centers for presentation, the National Gallery, the Kennedy Center, so on and so forth, but very little in terms of vital, grassroots creative practice. In Washington because no artist would want to live there, and here because no artist will be able to afford to live here. The large-scale organizations will survive by booking only the most high-profile exhibitions and performances, and I think there will be relatively little room for experimentation or innovation.... I think you’ll see very little of the very down-and-dirty and ground-level, grassroots creativity that you need for a city to feel like an active and vital cultural center.²

Leaving the city I deeply loved was bittersweet. There are still some small and thriving arts organizations and galleries serving local artists, sustained more by will than anything close to fiscal ease, but much of the ground-level creativity has diminished. Artists are moving out of San Francisco to the East Bay for more affordable housing; lately, however, even the East Bay is becoming less affordable for artists. The scale has dramatically tipped in a city now housing a grander San Francisco Museum of Modern Art after its \$305-million expansion, and with the latest Gagosian outpost now lodged conveniently around the corner from the museum. Wealth is everywhere evident, but intangible for artists edged out by the city’s elite creative economy.

A similar dynamic is at play in Los Angeles, with a new \$140-million Broad museum on Grand Avenue, but at the moment, the scene seems to be thriving due to a greater ethnic and economic diversity. In February, *The New York Times* described a flourishing art world, with twenty-four new galleries having opened in downtown L.A. during the past two years:

Influential galleries from New York and London, including Venus Over Los Angeles, Maccarone and Ibid, have set up outposts alongside local galleries with fancy pedigrees like the Box (run by the artist Paul McCarthy's daughter, Mara McCarthy) and Wilding Cran (owned by Anthony Cran and Naomi deLuce Wilding, the granddaughter of Elizabeth Taylor).

On the scrapper end of the spectrum are do-it-yourself artist spaces tucked into sunbaked strip malls, with their free-flowing beer and taco-fueled late-night ragers. High-end coffee shops and trendy restaurants have also arrived, creating a hub far removed, both geographically and philosophically, from the stranglehold of Tinseltown.³

The new hybrid blue-chip gallery/museum, Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel, is also located in the "new" downtown L.A. Their inaugural exhibition surveyed women sculptors from 1947 to the present, and they recently hosted a flash mob of over 900 women artists for a group photograph, including Helen Pashgian, Barbara T. Smith, Catherine Opie, Betye Saar, and her daughters Alison and Lezley Saar. The gathering was organized by artist Kim Schoenstadt. Even from a distance, it felt historic and uplifting, a visual display of a powerful and festive solidarity among multiple generations in the artist community of Southern California.

The arts community is depleted in San Francisco but thriving in Southern California, where galleries serving an exclusive wealthy clientele are growing at the same time that diverse institutions serving local artists and communities are sustaining. Where is Portland in relation to these differently thriving environments? Somewhere in between. As a physical location, Portland is not such an insular gem as San Francisco nor a dense sprawl like Los Angeles. While the Portland Art Museum and a number of commercial galleries serve as important artworld anchors, a characteristic of this place I admire is a grassroots, DIY spirit defined by artists. A notable example was the citywide exhibition *Core Sample* that took place in October of 2003. Admirable in scope, the project was, as Matthew Stadler wrote at the time, "an experiment in institutional destabilization. It acknowledged the value of raising the barn, but endeavored to make that edifice lighter, portable and more easily dismantled."⁴ Portland has a history of such artist initiatives, with organizations such as the Portland Center for the Visual Arts (PCVA), founded in 1971 by Jay Backstrand, Mel Katz, and Michele Russo; Yale Union, opened in 2011 by Curtis Knapp and Aaron Flint Jamison on the model of PCVA; Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), which emerged from a backyard meeting held by Kristy Edmunds in 1995 and continues to gain national attention; and Disjecta, established in 2000 by Bryan Suereth, offering a platform for local and visiting curators and hosting the Portland Biennial since 2010.

Newer spaces and programs are also fulfilling artists' needs and deepening communities. Ash Street Project took organizational shape in 2012, the brainchild of ceramists Thomas Orr and Joanna Bloom. The following year, artist Jane Schiffhauer started Rainmaker Artist Residency to offer working space and professional development. In St. Johns, Shir Ly Camin Grisanti founded c3:initiative to connect communities with the arts through residency programs, exhibitions, public events, and support for emerging creative businesses. Ryan Woodring and Alexis Roberto established Artist Incubator Prequel, a program to help artists further their careers by matching them

with mentors, in 2015. That year turned out to be a great one for Oregon. According to *Bloomberg View*, “The 27th-largest state, with almost 4 million people, had the best-performing economy in the nation measured by employment, home prices, personal income, tax revenues, mortgage delinquency, and the publicly traded equity of its companies.”⁵

However, income gaps seem to grow with a larger number of the unemployed entering Oregon’s job market. In the same *Bloomberg View* article, governor Kate Brown described an influx of “what we call young innovators, entrepreneurs, creatives . . . moving here because they want to live here, and then come here and maybe find jobs.” The word *maybe* stands out. As Portland continues to draw creative individuals, institutions are required that can absorb and assimilate them. I can’t help wonder what the city would look like if these individuals were further integrated into broader possibilities yet maintained their independence?

Portland artists have responded to current conditions out of necessity, vision, and community building, creating the potential to push past traditional models of patronage through alternative artist-driven methods of production and presentation. What Ursula Le Guin anticipates for writers in the future can easily apply to visual artists: “Hard times are coming,” she predicts, “when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope.”⁶ I hope Portland will embrace even greater capacities for artist-led efforts that offer different ways of seeing and being in a place.

1. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 4.

2. Larry Rinder, “Introduction,” in Rebecca Solnit, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2000), 106-7.

3. Julia Chaplin, “Art Scene Heats Up in Downtown Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, 12 February 2016.

4. Matthew Stadler, “Introduction,” *Core Sample* (Astoria: Clear Cut Press, 2004), 19.

5. Matthew A. Winkler, “Oregon Is the Picture of Economic Health,” *Bloomberg View*, 9 February 2016.

6. “Ursula K. Le Guin Accepts the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the 65th National Book Awards,” 19 November 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALk> (accessed 18 September 2016).

Grace Kook-Anderson was recently appointed the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art at the Portland Art Museum. Her previous curatorial projects have included The Land Mark Show at the Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, looking at ecological perspectives by artists located in the Western United States, and Yesterday’s Future at the Orange County Great Park Gallery, examining the City of Irvine’s idealized master plan of a university and city encapsulated in architect William Pereira’s design of UCI’s campus. During her tenure as Curator of Contemporary Art at the Laguna Art Museum, her projects included a site-specific commission, An Elongated Now by Lita Albuquerque, for the museum’s second Art and Nature festival. Kook-Anderson curated Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California, 1964-1971 in conjunction with the Getty Museum’s Pacific Standard Time initiative and produced the accompanying award-winning catalogue. Beginning in summer 2012, she created a serial contemporary art program, ex.pose, focusing on solo exhibitions of emerging and mid-career artists. Kook-Anderson received a dual BA in art history and art practice from the University of California, Berkeley, and received her MA in Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco

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