

Editor's Statement

by Stephanie Snyder

To write is to send thoughts and feelings into the world—seeds that take root and blossom into emotional sustenance. To write is to travel alongside streams of associations, coasting through time and space, folding time into memory, dreams, and reflections. To write critically is to push evaluation into position, to engage history and the knotty threads of disciplinarity and account for one's ideas against an invisible congress of other critics. Every act of writing diagrams a set of critical and imaginative relations. Writing still matters, and artists are writing more than ever. That tells us something important.

At every “arts visioning” event I've attended in Portland over the past five years, attendees have called for an increase in the amount and quality of arts writing and art criticism in Portland, and by extension, the state of Oregon. Why? While there are many reasons, a few have shaped my own thinking the most. First off: publishing. Only the largest city newspapers can still afford designated arts writers. It's a shame that the arts communities of smaller cities like Portland have innovated and grown at precisely the same time as their best daily and weekly papers have dwindled to a trickle. Second: the online environment. While the Internet affords individuals and groups the opportunity to publish their ideas in “public” space, creating and maintaining even the most modest of arts-writing website takes a great deal of time to do well, and consistently. Most online endeavors begin with promise and then peter out under the weight of, to use one of Kristy Edmunds' favorite words: *administrivia*. There are already some significant online arts writing sites in the region, and we should be reading them. And that's the other issue: readership. Writers need readers, readers who are willing to enjoy, evaluate, distribute, and discuss what they read. It has to be a political and social value in our community to keep abreast of what's being written about the arts of the region—in both local and national publications—and that takes time.

Do we have the time? Do we have the commitment? At this cultural moment, reading must compete with the gossipy allure of Facebook and other social media distractions. And let's be real; most online environments do *not* engender introspective, knowledge-based conversation. They incite inflammatory reactions and unconsidered opinions. Even at their best, their content evaporates quickly within an amnesic cloud surrounded by corporate advertising. We must address these issues throughout the many overlapping communities that comprise our state; and through our work in the arts we must make change that more passionately pursues racial, LGBTQ, Native American, and socio-economic justice. Oregon and its inhabitants must support a wide diversity of arts organizations and critical voices if it is going to thrive as a state. And if any one city can work through these issues, it's Portland. This is nothing short of a crisis given our current political situation. If we do this right—inclusively, fearlessly, accountably, and generously—the rest of the country will pay attention, and we will support the ecology of our arts communities while improving the health and social capital of our state. That's what we want, right? That's certainly what we keep asking for. Are we ready to get to work?

So who better than our state arts organization—the Oregon Arts Commission—and Oregon's most vital arts funding organ—the Ford Family Foundation based in Roseburg—to partner together to address these issues by investing in regional arts writing and its dissemination. Through the Visual Arts Ecology project, initiated by

the Oregon Arts Commission and supported by The Ford Family Foundation, these two powerful partners are creating a lasting literary archive and resource for artists, curators, scholars, and the general public. It is a text and image-based space through which we may witness and engage our history while broadly searching within the present, and imaginatively seeking into the future, in order to support writing in service of our state's artistic ecology. The authors that have contributed—and will contribute—to this initiative will be artists, critics, scholars, poets, or something else entirely. Their commitment to the quality and longevity of language must catalyze us to do more, and simply to read more. I am honored to be included as one of the project's inaugural editors alongside art historian and Portland State University Professor Dr. Sue Taylor, whose scholarship, art criticism, and community engagement I admire deeply, and have turned to, consistently, as an exemplar of a life lived in the service of artists, art history, and artistic ideas.

These six essays by authors Sam Hopple, Nicholas Irvin, Melanie Flood, John Motley, Jon Raymond, and Prudence Roberts, were “writing assignments” in the least bureaucratic sense. Meagan Atiyeh, the Oregon Arts Commission's Visual Art and Public Art Coordinator, provided me and Professor Taylor with some general direction and then let us loose to work with each author on the subjects that interested them the most. In selecting the essayists, my goal was to pair recognized voices with younger, more emerging voices. I chose for the first group of essays to explore art history, arts organizations, artists, and arts activism.

In commissioning and editing these essays, I have had the great pleasure of working with Meagan Atiyeh, the Oregon Arts Commission's Visual Art and Public Art Coordinator, whose knowledge of, commitment to, and passion for Oregon's artists endlessly inspires me; and with Kandis Nunn, who brilliantly and steadfastly stewards the objectives of The Ford Family Foundation to support Oregon's artists in increasingly generous and innovative forms. Thanks to Kandis, The Ford Family Foundation, and the Ford family itself, Oregon artists and arts organizations are receiving substantial financial support for their programs, facilities, and collections; renowned curators and critics are traveling the state to conduct studio visits and deliver public lectures; and now, through this newest initiative, arts writing is receiving the critical attention it deserves. I am extremely grateful to Sam Hopple, Nicholas Irvin, Melanie Flood, John Motley, Jon Raymond, and Prudence Roberts for being part of the first group of essayists, and for their hard work and wonderful, ambitious essays.

Moving forward into the initiative's first year of continued commissioning, my editorial objective will be to broaden the types of writing published on the site, and to broaden the diversity of authors and issues addressed in the writing. Forms will include: poetry; artist-to-artist interviews; visual essays; lengthier art-historical research projects; educational perspectives; archive projects; and exhibition-based art criticism, to name a few. For the Visual Arts Ecology project to truly succeed, it has to be a city-wide effort.

In 2017, a series of essays was commissioned for the Visual Arts Ecology Project by The Ford Family Foundation and Oregon Arts Commission with Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery; and Sue Taylor, Associate Dean, College of the Arts and Professor of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.