

# A Social Good

by Sue Taylor

The five writers commissioned for the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology Project in 2017 had a broad mandate: to explore some aspect of art in our state. No one hesitated; each had an idea primed and ready to develop. Their topics reveal each author's unique preoccupations, yet common themes emerge. Among them is the questionable viability of an artist-centered visual arts ecology in an era of increasing income inequality, rising rents, and a diminishing stock of affordable exhibition and studio space. Both Grace Kook-Anderson and Mack McFarland worry this issue in their essays. The former wonders whether Portland will go the way of San Francisco, whose soaring real estate prices have eliminated many alternative art spaces, or Los Angeles, where diverse grassroots efforts thrive alongside major galleries and museums supported by wealthy patrons. McFarland illustrates the economically precarious existence of most artist-run initiatives with a case study, tracing the evolution of Worksound, the international art and music venue established by Senegalese-born artist Modou Dieng with Mark and Tim Janchar, which closed just as McFarland finished his essay. The experiment lasted nearly ten years in its scrappy physical instantiation on Portland's East Side until, even as Dieng himself had feared, "at some point you will go broke."

Linda Tesner's concern for the sustainability of small museums in our state informs her concept for an alternative kind of programming, premised on the pure pleasure art can provide. With her impressive knowledge of Oregon's cultural (and natural) wonders, Tesner searches for ways to promote a kind of enchanted looking at art that can bring such joy, apart from the educational apparatus that we have come to expect in museums. Intriguingly, she proposes a Museum of Wonder and even curates its hypothetical inaugural exhibition, drawn from a private collection. Her passionate appreciation of what the viewing experience can offer echoes Harvard humanities professor Stephen Greenblatt's exaltation of aesthetic understanding as "a form of wondering and admiring and knowing . . . independent of the structures of politics and the marketplace." [1] Greenblatt claimed that one of the singular achievements of Western culture is to have fashioned this special type of gaze, which arises at least in part from esteem for the *ingenia*—the ingenuity or genius—of others. It is a response, he asserted in a tacit endorsement of Tesner's museum proposal *avant la lettre*, "worth cherishing and enhancing." [2]

In Patrick Collier's essay we find admiration for the *ingenia* of a self-taught artist outside the mainstream. Collier examines inventive drawings by Kurt Fisk exhibited in a Corvallis gallery that offers opportunities for people living with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The writer's challenge in this case consists in analyzing a body of work without reference to the conventional art world's shared contexts and tendencies. As an artist himself, moreover, Collier is perhaps extra sensitive to the vexed role that biography may play in the interpretive work of a critic. Here, he withholds details of Fisk's personal story while helping readers understand what this autodidact may have in common with his mainstream counterparts, namely, a desire for recognition and a sense of relevance. Whether artmaking has therapeutic value for Fisk remains tangential to Collier's account, but such a benefit would represent an additional commonality among Fisk and artists of all stripes, self-taught or professionally trained. Unfashionable though it once was in sophisticated circles to acknowledge art's capacity, for both makers and viewers, to compensate, console, and help cope with emotional vicissitudes and frailties is tacitly affirmed in Collier's discussion—and overtly and expansively in recent titles such as *Art as Therapy* and *Art Can Help*. [3] From

a psychological perspective, even abstraction and art for art's sake have a useful dimension.

Writer Sarah Sentilles makes a rather astonishing move in finding political significance in Lynne Woods Turner's wholly abstract ink and colored-pencil drawings. With her new book about art and war at press when she visited the artist's studio,[4] Sentilles focused on the ethical power of Turner's exquisite studies to disturb viewers' visual certainty, contrasting the drawings' rich perspectival possibilities with the kind of oppressive cross-hair vision that targets others as enemies. Entirely relevant to this interpretation of Turner's project is the insight, cited by Tesner in her essay, that a reader once offered to poet Ezra Pound: "I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some new particular thing." In addition, then, to overt concerns with community and solidarity linking essays by Kook-Anderson and McFarland, we find an implicit conviction underlying the contributions of all five authors, which has to do with the expansive, potentially liberatory effects of art—abstract art, amateur art—for artists themselves and/or their audiences. Indifferent to the economic benefits so often vaunted as a justification for art in our state (a strategy that reinforces the notion that art, like everything else in a capitalist society, must be monetized or instrumentalized), these writers convey a deep-seated, shared understanding of art as an inherent personal and social good.

---

1. Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 53.

2. Ibid.

3. Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2013) and Robert Adams, *Art Can Help* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017).

4. Sarah Sentilles, *Draw Your Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2017).

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.