

# Arranging the Deck Chairs

by Josephine Zarkovich

Recently I have begun to document all the steps I take to perform each task in my very eclectic curatorial position at Linfield Gallery: how to create vector graphics and have them printed as vinyl, how to write press releases, design gallery guides, install lighting, edit the Web site, and navigate the byzantine permission process to serve wine at opening events on our college campus. These are among the many invisible administrative duties that come with the position I have held for the past four years. I cannot, however, convey in a how-to guide everything I learned in my MA in Curatorial Practice program at California College of the Arts (CCA) or during the decade I've spent in the field. As a curator, I have had the privilege of creating daunting projects and seeing them to completion, applying the practical skills of gallery management as well as connecting my exhibitions to a larger art historical canon. The questions I like to ask are: "Why this exhibition? Why here? Why now?" Much of what curators do comes from a particular combination of investigative curiosity, hard-won instincts, and a willingness to explore the unknown with artists. "A curator lobbies on the behalf [of artists] and makes cases not only to the institution, but to the public on why something matters," states CCA's curatorial practice program chair, James Voorhies. "They're a mediator. They might take very complex ideas that an artist or a filmmaker is working with and they bring those ideas into the public realm responsibly so that audiences understand why a work is relevant in a contemporary context."<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Installation view of "Alterations," curated by Josephine Zarkovich, featuring Kaj-Anne Pepper and Wendy Red Star, Linfield Gallery, October 5 to November 19, 2016. (Photo: P.B. Arson)



Fig. 2. Installation view of "America Likes Me," curated by Josephine Zarkovich, featuring Demian DinéYazhi, Daniel Duford, Ká'lia Farrel Smith, Julie Green, Sidony O'Neal, and Marie Watt, Linfield Gallery, August 29 to October 5, 2018. (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

It is unclear at this moment who will take up the Linfield Gallery programming in fall of 2019, but considering the current financial troubles at the College, it is unlikely that it will be a dedicated curatorial position. Linfield, moreover, is only the most recent in a long line of regional galleries that have either been eliminated altogether or will no longer be run by specialized staff. It is a troubling trend that I believe may stagnate Oregon artists' careers as fewer opportunities become available to develop and display new work for critical consideration. And nowhere is the voice of the curator more critical than in mid-sized arts organizations. Larger museums often have multiple curatorial positions and support staff to help produce exhibitions designed for broad audiences, while the smallest organizations may be run by a single paid employee who does everything from fundraising, to accounting, to exhibition planning. But in the middle you have university galleries, discipline-specific nonprofits, and community-based spaces that have for decades clawed their way from volunteer-run efforts to nationally recognized institutions. And they all seem to be going away.

There are multiple causes for the rapid disappearance of medium-sized spaces in recent years: rising rents, declining college enrollments, a diminishing middle class. The cumulative effect is that the art scene today is significantly different from what it was a few years ago, and there is no sign that the worst of it is over. In Portland in 2016, the Museum of



*Fig. 3, left. Installation view of “Place Names,” curated by Ashley Stull Meyers, featuring manuel arturo abreu (left) and Christopher Paul Jordan (right), Art Gym, March 20 to May 20, 2018. Fig. 4, right. Mark R. Smith, Afterimage: The Night Sky (2018), detail; reclaimed textiles, plywood, metal tubing, stand-assist chair, 8 x 20 x 12 ft. overall, included in “Maria T. D. Inocencio and Mark R. Smith: Loss of Material Evidence,” curated by Linda Tesner, Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art, September 8 to December 9, 2018. (Photo: Stephen Funk)*

Contemporary Craft closed shortly after its merger with Pacific Northwest College of Art and the building was sold. Later that year, the University of Oregon announced plans to close its Old Town exhibition space, White Box, where seasoned curator Cris Moss had been director. The Newspace Center for Photography, a nonprofit studio and exhibition space in southeast Portland, closed in the summer of 2017, laying off staff including Yaelle Amir who had been hired as Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs in 2015 after a successful Kickstarter campaign funded the position. Marylhurst University was shuttered at the end of 2018, and with its closure came the end of the Art Gym, a much beloved institution that for over thirty years showcased Northwest artists, producing a robust archive of exhibition catalogues and brochures. Ashley Stull Meyers, the Art Gym’s last curator whose work has drawn national attention, was originally slated to transfer along with the Art Gym’s curatorial endowment to the Oregon College of Arts and Craft. Within months, however, OCAC announced that the entire college would be closing—including the Hoffman Gallery. In December, Lewis & Clark College revealed plans to lay off curator Linda Tesner, Director of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery for the past twenty years, instead making the gallery’s management a “faculty-led position.”<sup>2</sup> The following February, Bullseye Glass announced the closing of their downtown gallery, Bullseye Projects, which had featured work produced in their artist-in-residence program. Curator Michael Endo, who had recently left for California, will not be replaced.

That is a great deal fewer curators than were practicing within institutional roles just three years ago, and for an art scene as small as this one, the ramifications are hard felt. While not all of these physical spaces have disappeared, their attendant professional in-house curatorial positions have. Gone are those vital individuals who support artists’ professional advancement through research and writing, seeking funding opportunities, and staging exhibitions. This is specialized work that more and more frequently requires an expensive secondary degree to capture competitive positions with salaries hardly in proportion to rising tuition costs. The trend is not isolated to our region; gallery closures and staff layoffs are increasingly lamented in San Francisco, New York, London, and Berlin. I’m not an economist, and I don’t want to make too many overarching statements about a complex art-world system that must contend simultaneously with a speculative market, changing academic models, and philanthropy from individual donors, foundations, and corporations. But I will say that, except for The Ford Family Foundation, there are few avenues for arts funding in this region, which gives support from educational institutions a particularly outsized role here. Portland doesn’t have the art market of Los Angeles or New York, the old-money philanthropists of New England, or, despite the modest Portland Arts Tax, the enlightened government arts funding of Europe or Canada or even Minnesota. In Oregon, when colleges and universities are in trouble so are the arts.

The true cost to our region goes well beyond the professional fortunes of our steadily growing class of rōnin-esque itinerant curators. With the disappearance of our curatorially staffed middle-sized organizations, Portland’s emerging artists confront a career ladder that is missing rungs. Our community of alternative and artist-run spaces is one of the best in the nation, but for every artist who has a well received solo exhibition in a basement, or a live-work loft, or the back of a 1991 Ford Bronco, there are fewer and fewer next steps that don’t involve leaving the Northwest or giving it all up to focus on paying gigs.

So here we are, facing the unfortunate reality that our art scene is in decline. I know I said I wasn't an economist, but I do believe the core issue here is one of money. We need people, especially the very rich, to pay their fair share of taxes. Our top-bracket tax rate has dropped from 70% in the 1970s to 37% today. At the same time, the U.S. currently spends more on our military than any other nation, more than China and Russia combined, more annually (adjusted) than at the height of the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup> Is it any wonder that programs like the National Endowment for the Arts are little more than a rounding error in the federal budget? After decades of investing over \$300 - \$450 million on the arts per year (in today's dollars), the NEA's budget was drastically reduced in the 1980s and then again in the mid-1990s and remains less than a third of what it was at its peak.<sup>4</sup> What's worse, arts funding is an ever shrinking percentage of the budget, representing less than .004% of federal outlays. That means that if all federal spending were a hundred dollar bill, NEA funding would still be less than half a penny. Our leaders have clearly chosen other priorities while our arts institutions continue to function using systems that no longer reflect today's financial reality.

In response to these reductions, some have looked to the creative power of grassroots innovation. Having seen under-resourced arts workers step up time and again to punch above their weight class and perform miracles of duct tape and bailing wire, I can understand this impulse, but I cannot get behind this call as a long term solution. Beyond the question of effectiveness, it's unfair to try to keep afloat an entire cultural enterprise on the backs of struggling artists and arts workers who often labor piecemeal without basic benefits such as retirement and healthcare insurance. Self-organized groups will continue to be a force for creative projects in their communities, but truly successful exhibition spaces will require bold financial support on a national and sustained level. For this situation to change, those at the top of the economic ladder must simultaneously work to dismantle the systems that enable and perpetuate historical inequity and also invest heavily in the arts and educational institutions we have today.

Art is not a hobby. It's not just something young people do for a few years after they get out of school before getting a real job. The best artists in our community deserve to have their work recognized through professionally installed, well considered exhibitions with curators that understand their work and are dedicated to creating meaningful connections with an engaged audience. And they deserve honoraria that, even when falling short of truly compensating them for their efforts, acknowledge their time and labor. If we want that opportunity for artists, we need mid-sized arts organizations and the curators that animate them. Without them, we will never be a truly great art city. We will hardly be a city at all.

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1. James Voorhies, quoted in Sarah Hotchkiss, "What Happens When All the Curators Are Gone?" *KQED*, 23 October 2018, [www.kqed.org/arts/13841205/curatorial-crisis-bay-area-art-institutions](http://www.kqed.org/arts/13841205/curatorial-crisis-bay-area-art-institutions) (accessed 4 April 2019).

2. "Lewis & Clark College Dismisses Curator of Campus Gallery," *OPB*, 7 December 2018, [www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-lewis-and-clark-hoffman-gallery-curator-laid-off/](http://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-lewis-and-clark-hoffman-gallery-curator-laid-off/) (accessed 4 April 2019).

3. Dave Gilson, "Why Trump's Military Budget Doesn't Add Up" *Mother Jones*, 1 March 2017, [www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/trump-pentagon-military-budget-spending-charts/](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/trump-pentagon-military-budget-spending-charts/) (accessed 4 April 2019).

4. Scott M. Stringer, "Culture Shock: The Importance of National Arts Funding to New York City's Cultural Landscape," *New York City Comptroller*, 9 March 2017, [comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/culture-shock-the-importance-of-national-arts-funding-to-new-york-city-cultural-landscape/](http://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/culture-shock-the-importance-of-national-arts-funding-to-new-york-city-cultural-landscape/) (accessed 4 April 2019), and in the next sentence, *ibid*.

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