

Modou Dieng and the Worksound Moment

by Mack McFarland



Image courtesy of Worksound International

What makes an art scene? To start, a group of artists, like-minded about aesthetic and moral issues, spend time together, experiencing things they and others create and digesting those experiences together. Next, an audience of musicians and poets, doctors and lawyers, shows up to events; they dive into the art and the conversation around it, sometimes purchase work, and come the following month with a friend or two. We have seen such convergences in The Factory, the L.A. Woman's Building, Vancouver's Western Front, Fort Thunder in Providence, and Brooklyn's Issue Project Room, to name a few. In Oregon, Ditch Projects in Springfield and Artworks Gallery in Corvallis come to mind, and Portland of course has had its share. Of these, one space stands out

for bringing together artists and audiences from multiple scenes—Worksound. Over the past decade, Worksound has become the hub of a dynamic and diverse community of cultural producers, presenting over fifty exhibitions; providing practice space for bands as well as an office for a record label; involving some twelve hundred artists, musicians, filmmakers, and poets. Month after month, the unpaid organizers of Worksound have attracted audiences of all ages with original art and new live music, trending in the footsteps of Portland's X-Ray Café in the 1990s and the various events staged in the artist-occupied Oak Street Building.

The experiment began with the chance meeting in 2006 of Tim Janchar and Modou Dieng at a Barry McGee exhibition at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco. Janchar, an artist and emergency-room physician, was in the city from Portland that weekend visiting a friend who, like Dieng, was finishing an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. Along with his brother, Mark, Janchar was issuing recordings on their Hovercraft label and running a gallery in the Everett Street Lofts of the same name. Dieng was making paintings inspired by his experience as a Gen-Xer in Senegal, his assemblages of vinyl records, neckties, glitter, and spray paint evoking the kaleidoscopic nightlife of Dakar. Janchar was excited by the work; he had been thinking about how to mix audiences for music and visual art. When he invited Dieng to exhibit at Hovercraft, the artist was hesitant, later explaining, "I didn't even know where Oregon was."¹

Dieng spent a week in Portland that summer. These were boom times for the United States economy, the Great Recession was still two years away, and the city's art scene was abuzz. The Everett Street Lofts were humming with activity: along with Hovercraft, there was Tilt, co-founded by Jenene Nagy and Josh Smith, Genuine Imitation, Rake, Sugar, Vorpall Space, Ogle, and Sequential Gallery which continues to this day. Nearby was Motel, started

by Jennifer Armbrust. Some work sold, but the galleries' more important function was at the heart of First Thursdays' experimental art scene. On First Fridays, the East Side was still blossoming with Ruth Ann Brown's New American Art Union, Laurel Gitlen's Small A Projects, and Newspace Center for Photography. Music venues flourished too: Backspace and Holocene were three years old, Slabtown was going strong, The Know was about to get a liquor license and The Artistry and Dekum Manor were the house venues not to be missed. Commercial galleries were expanding. The DeSoto Building renovation project was underway, soon to house four of the region's long-running art spaces, Augen, Froelick, and Blue Sky galleries, and the Museum of Contemporary Craft. Elizabeth Leach Gallery, PDX Contemporary, and Pulliam Deffenbaugh had relocated around Northwest 9th Avenue and Flanders Street. Although Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's founder, Kristy Edmunds, left for Melbourne, the Portland Art Museum, having just added the Jubitz Center for Modern and Contemporary Art, was about to hire a new director, Brian Ferriso. Tom Potter was mayor, no one spoke yet of a housing crisis, rents were still cheap enough, and one could find a studio without too much trouble.

It was this last opportunity that brought Dieng back to Portland. He was living in New York but wanted to return to the West Coast. "I was looking for . . . a scene to be a part of," he recalls, "and a studio to make work in, and my time in Portland . . . kept coming back to me, so I called Tim to see if he would want to start a space with me." Janchar agreed, as long as Dieng would take the lead. They opened Worksound at 820 SE Alder Street, in a former manufacturing facility, announcing their intention "to cultivate experimental and innovative contemporary art . . . collaborate with artists, writers, musicians in the production of new work that challenges boundaries of conventional practices, while encouraging broad public appreciation and access to arts and contemporary culture."² Worksound would be a place "where different disciplines and audiences converge and cross-pollinate, through curatorial innovation and depth of programming in diverse media." Dieng was attempting to create something he experienced in Africa, "where everyone," he recalls, "under the capital A of artist, all the artists can get together."

To a large extent this is what happened. Worksound, as they hoped the name would imply, blended a visual art and music venue. The Janchar brothers' Hovercraft Records operated out of Worksound for two years while only about half the 3,000 square-foot space was open to the public. The other half was renovated as money became available, functioning in the interim as studio space for Dieng and others. By 2009, 95 percent of the facility was in use for art and music shows; the rest consisted of an office and two rehearsal spaces for bands. The garage-rock sensation The Hunches were one of the first to practice at Worksound, followed by the psychedelic pop-infused Nurses as well as the drum-heavy Explode into Colors, voted best new band of 2009 by Willamette Week. Musical curation by Worksound was strong, starting with the avant-noise group Smegma, whose sometime vocalist, rock critic Richard Meltzer, was on stage in 2009. Other highlights included the L.A. noise duo No Age, Portland legend Pierced Arrows, and Vancouver punk band White Lung.



Left to right: Tim Janchar, Modou Dieng, Mark Janchar, Portland, 10 December 2016 (photo: Alex Bissonnette)

Few other artist-run alternative spaces in those years engaged as much with national and international artists while at the same time showcasing local talent. As Dieng put it, “We worked within a global agenda, although 70 percent of the shows were regional artists and directed to a local audience.”³ This emphasis, coupled with the music programming, placed Worksound in a unique position in the city’s art scene, providing audiences with new art, and artists with an opportunity to expand their networks. One example was the 2008 exhibition *Reverse Reality*, Worksound’s collaboration with curator Selina Ho, which provided a one-month residency for four emerging Hong Kong artists to create and show new work informed by their experiences in Portland. Also included in their exhibition were drawings by Portland-based Samantha Wall. Three years later, the exhibition *You’ll never walk alone*, curated by Belgian artist Vanessa Van Obberghen, featured works by European and African artists: the duo Carla Arocha and Stephane Schraenen, Kris Fierens, David Gheron Tretiakoff, Moshekwa Langa, Alassane Babylas Ndiaye, Roberto Dewulf-Ortega, and David Wauters. Six of the artists came to Portland for the exhibition, visiting classrooms and studios across the city, and three of them have returned to Portland to exhibit again. *Spatial Personality* opened in July 2012, co-curated by Dieng and San Francisco-based designer Jesse Siegel, featuring four artists from the Bay Area and four from Portland. Dieng’s strategy—partnering with a curator deeply involved in a certain subsection of another city’s art scene—foregrounds similarities in method and thinking among artists in different localities, always with the hope that some lasting connection can be forged with artists and curators in proximity to one and other.



Image courtesy of Worksound International

rehearsal rooms for bands. Rents remain among the cheapest in Portland, at a time (2015-2016) when studio rents rose 19 percent and housing rents 13 percent, with a slim stock whose vacancy rate hovers at about 3.5 percent.⁴ These are the conditions in what some term “The New Portland,” the city to which Dieng’s co-curator on *Spatial Personality* relocated in 2014.

Like Dieng, Siegel grew up outside the United States, in his case Mexico. In San Francisco, he had co-founded the *Basement*, a collective of artists, designers, and an art-book publisher, *Colpa Press*, which occupied a subdivided basement space. He and Dieng together set out to make use of their growing international connections and the notable influx to the Northwest of artists from abroad. Thus began Worksound International (WI), whose programs are intended “to enable diverse international practices [and] to create social engagement between international artists and local communities.”⁵ Since 2014, WI has organized fourteen exhibitions in the newly

Following the close of *Spatial Personality*, the space at 820 SE Alder was transformed into Worksound Studios. Several factors played into this shift: Dieng had spent five years concentrating on Worksound while teaching full time at Pacific Northwest College of Art; he needed to focus on his studio practice. Moreover, the realities of funding these sorts of projects, which tend to fall outside regional governmental and private foundation support, had to be considered. As Dieng phrased it, “The dilemma of creating a space is that you’re going to put your money into it, and then at some point you will go broke.” Worksound Studios has housed several artists’ studios as well as two

built-out Worksound space of 150 square feet, the rest still devoted to art and music studios which help fund the project. Other WI exhibitions, in Frankfurt and Mexico City, have presented Oregon artists in an international context. Additionally, WI-produced videos pair exhibiting artists with local artists for conversation around their work, process, and respective art communities.

As I readied this essay for publication, the owner of the property at 820 SE Alder was seeking a buyer, and Worksound announced its closing on 13 December 2016. The warehouse will join the growing list of art spaces torn down. Dieng is developing a roving model, with plans for pop-ups in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Antwerp. This is the destiny of many artist-run projects and should not be lamented as inherently bad; however, if the fate of small galleries or studio complexes is again and again determined by real-estate market forces, then we need to ask how we support a living art scene in the face of an economic system that allows these spaces of extraordinary experimentation and community to exist just long enough to gentrify the neighborhood—then price themselves out. Surely a question for another time, yet it is the question of our time.

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1. All quotes from Modou Dieng are from a personal interview with the author, Portland, Oregon, 12 September, 2016.
 2. Modou Dieng, Mark Janchar, and Tim Janchar, quoted in Lisa Radon, “820 SE Alder,” *Untitled*, 24 October 2016, <http://untitled.pnca.edu/articles/show/6006>, accessed 23 December 2016, and in the next sentence, *ibid*.
 3. Dieng quoted in *ibid*.
 4. Fiona McCann, “Can Portland Artists Survive the City’s New Gilded Age?,” *Portland Monthly*, 1 March 2016; Luke Hammill, “New Report: Rents Rose 13 Percent Annually, But New Supply Slowed Price Growth,” *The Oregonian*, 26 April 2016.
 5. Worksound International, <http://www.worksoundinternational.com/visit/>, accessed 23 December 2016.

Artist Mack McFarland is Director of the Center for Contemporary Art & Culture at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, where he has worked as curator since 2006. Past projects have included commissioned new works from tactical media practitioners Critical Art Ensemble, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Disorientalism. Among exhibitions he has curated for PNCA are Luc Tuymans: Graphic Works—Kristalnacht to Technicolor; a group exhibition marking John Cage’s centennial, Happy Birthday: A Celebration of Chance and Listening; and a comprehensive look at the process of comics journalist Joe Sacco. Currently McFarland is working on exchange exhibitions between Portland and other cities to create dialogue among cultural producers. One such project, Costumes, Reverence, and Forms: A Philadelphia/Portland Mixer at Vox Populi in Philadelphia (6 January through 19 February 2017), includes work by Portland artists Avantika Bawa, Tabitha Nicolai, Jess Perlitz, and Ralph Puga.

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