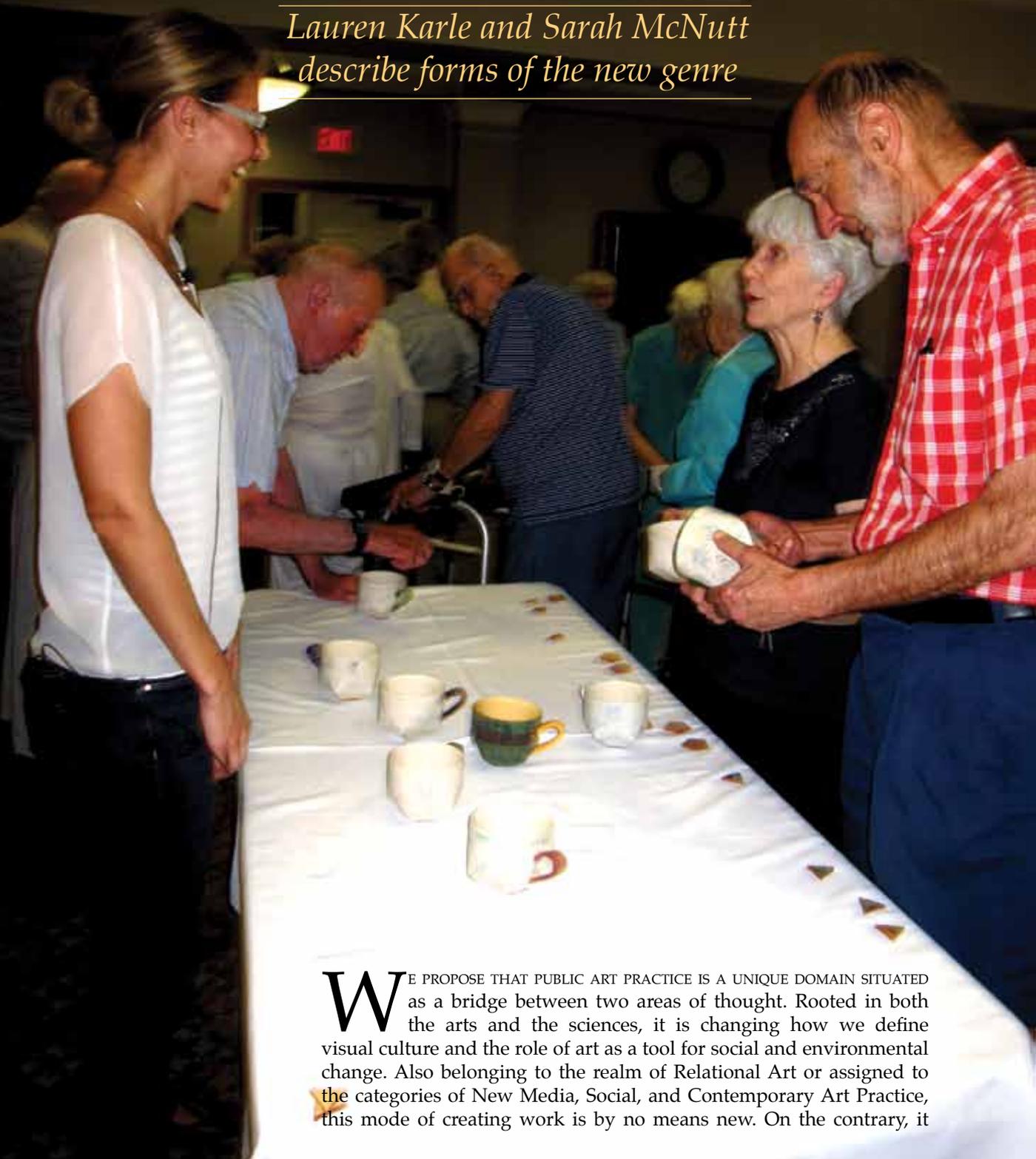


Public Art Practice

*Lauren Karle and Sarah McNutt
describe forms of the new genre*



WE PROPOSE THAT PUBLIC ART PRACTICE IS A UNIQUE DOMAIN SITUATED as a bridge between two areas of thought. Rooted in both the arts and the sciences, it is changing how we define visual culture and the role of art as a tool for social and environmental change. Also belonging to the realm of Relational Art or assigned to the categories of New Media, Social, and Contemporary Art Practice, this mode of creating work is by no means new. On the contrary, it



was first recognised as an art genre in the late 1990s and has grown exponentially in popularity in recent years in both academia and the larger art world. It has even begun to have a presence in contemporary ceramics practice.

'Public art practice', not to be confused with the larger category of public art, could be described as a genre that addresses social needs through the vehicle of visual arts. Combining aspects of research, social interaction, performance and aesthetics, public art practice generates projects that create sustainable social changes. Many times, the unique ways in which artists pursue ideas make contributions applicable to other fields. Stephen Wilson, in his book *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*, describes ways in which these projects and their research have blurred the lines between the three. Wilson provides descriptions in his text of multiple projects that are arguably in each of the categories. One such case is artist Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, which is described as a project that "has been a pioneer in the field of 'green remediation', the use of plants to remove toxic, heavy metals from the soil". In examples such as Chin, we are solely dependent on the creator to define him or herself as artist or scientist, as his project is both aesthetically represented and scientifically advanced for its time.

A handful of artists have already brought this idea of belonging to the disciplines of art, science and technology to fruition through the medium of clay. As public art practice is defined by its projects, in this article we will discuss the ways in which these projects are executed, and will assess their successes as well as their struggles.

Michael Strand, an artist and professor at North Dakota State University, US created the project *Ex.change* as a form of alternative economy. In this ongoing project, Strand challenges conventional modes of acquisition where community members volunteer their time and skills in an effort to improve their town. Key to the project is what Strand calls Exchange Currency, or EC. This currency is backed by units of time rather than gold or some other material standard. During a kick-off event participants pledge the amount of community service they are going to do by filling in a blank check. The check becomes an artefact of the art and a record for the participants. For every hour of community service pledged, volunteers earn 15 EC then spend their time volunteering until the 'loan' is paid off. As a way to exchange their time for his, Strand custom-designs dishware for EC. Volunteers can spend their currency by sending Strand an image of their favourite drink in a cup that they currently own along with the appropriate payment in EC and a paragraph explaining what they envision as the perfect new cup. Strand responds with a variety of ideas and makes a version of whatever is selected. To round out the allusions to an economy, he summarises the project in the language of advertising: "Tired of the predictable selection of cups at Boutique du Target, or your local kitchen store? Have you been wondering how you



Facing page: Lauren Karle talking with the participants as they chose their mugs. 2013. Photo by Amanda Rall.
 Top left: Michael Strand. In exchange for dinnerware this family put in 100 hours of work to create a series of gardens at the local school.
 Top right and above: Michael Strand. Volunteers worked to build a house at Habitat for Humanity in exchange for EC.



Top left: *The mugs in Karle's studio after bisque in the process of glazing.* 2013. Photo by Lauren Karle.

Top right: *Shorty, an independent resident, met Norma who is an assisted living resident. They shared a story about a time when they lost an object that was meaningful to them.* 2013. Photo by Amanda Rall.

Above: Lauren Karle. **Connecting cups.** Earthenware, slip, deflocculated slip, Mason stain wash, underglaze, handbuilt and fired to cone 03.

3.25 x 5.5 x 4 in/each.
Photo by Lauren Karle.

could have the perfect glass for the fruit / vegetable smoothie you enjoy on Saturday mornings? *Voila.* This is your chance."

Participants in *Ex.change* are asked to document their experiences through photography and short written reflections. Participants' memories are directly connected to the objects and how they were acquired. When drinking from the cups (or eating from the dinnerware sets, or smelling fresh flowers in the *tulipieres* that Strand also offers in exchange for EC), the objects forever evoke the memory of community work done in exchange for the objects. Strand describes how an object's history has a direct effect on the importance it holds in someone's life: "The patina of memory will embellish this work as much as the patina of a copper rich ceramic glaze." His ongoing project has currently generated more than 450 hours of community building in the Fargo, North Dakota, US area, utilised a variety of skills and benefited a wide range of community members.

Lauren Karle is another artist whose goal is to facilitate meaningful human connection. While teaching a volunteer workshop at Meadowlark Hills, a retirement community in Manhattan, Kansas, US she was informed by the independent living residents that people on other levels of care would also enjoy more interaction and events. Participants told



her that, although they did not always acknowledge it, new residents often arrived depressed after living in isolation in their homes. Special invitations were sent to new residents in order to reach out to them, since they were not as likely to get involved on their own. After talking with cultural anthropologists at Kansas State University who were studying the dynamics of the community, Karle became aware that a stigma was attached to assisted living. The next phase after independent living is not something easily faced, but friends can make that transition easier. Designed by Karle to meet the needs of each group in the community, *Coffee Corner Connections* used 25 pairs of handmade mugs to match independent-living residents with their assisted-living counterparts or with new residents. As participants entered the community room they chose a patterned mug and drank their coffee while conversing with the person who had selected the matching mug. After a half hour participants switched partners, this time with the person whose handle had a matching colour. The goal of this activity was to help the residents connect with people with whom they might not otherwise talk, bridging the levels of care and finding commonalities to overcome their differences.

Mathew Garcia, Professor of New Media at Kansas State University, formed his community initiative group *Desert:ARTlab* while a graduate student at Arizona State University. The group's goal is to bring attention to issues of community, culture and ecology through ongoing public art projects in the Southwest. Garcia describes his projects as ways "to engage the urban Phoenix community and call the community to action utilising the traditional artists tools and the techniques of public art practice". One such project, *Mobile ECO-STUDIO*, was created to revitalise 'dead zones', the unfortunate results of clearing plots for construction projects that were never finished. The objective was to replenish these urban eyesores with native plants that are sustainable without any human assistance. A mobile lab (essentially an altered bicycle), brings the small workshops to different neighbourhoods where the community creates 'seed confetti', a mixture of native seeds embedded in terracotta that, once simply tossed into the targeted areas, essentially plants and sustains itself. During this process the

Top left: Artist Matthew Garcia riding the Mobile Eco-Studio in the community. Photo by desertArtLab. Top right: Garcia working with the communities in Arizona from the Mobile Eco-Studio. Photo by desertArtLab.

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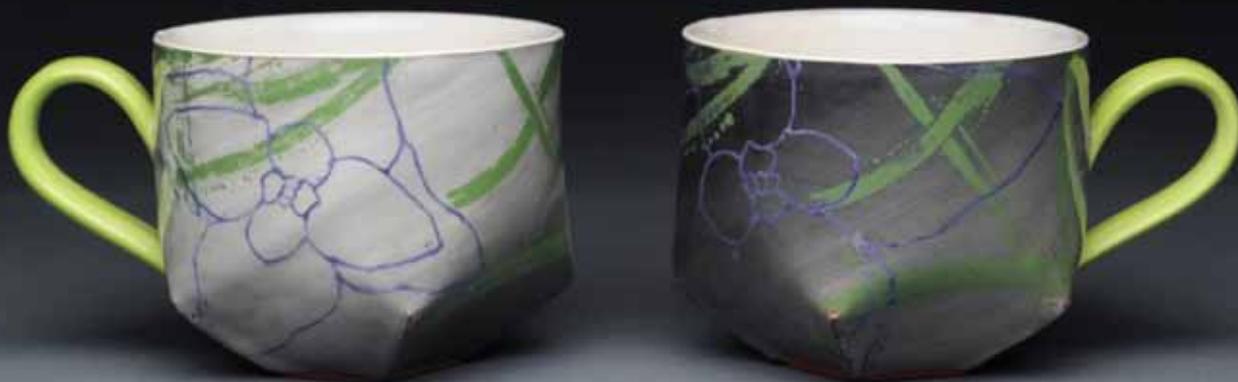
Garcia riding the Mobile Eco-Studio in Arizona. Photo by desertArtLab.

community members access and contribute their stories about the ways they connect to the native environment (such as through traditional dishes derived from local flora) and improve the appearance of their environments. These stories are compiled and the events documented in such a way that they can be presented effectively in social media, in the classroom and gallery.

Many have wondered how this field can exist in academia, how it can be taught and how students might respond to it. Garcia currently teaches a class based on public art practice, New Media+Community, which prepares art students to create their own public art projects. Choosing from topics ranging from transportation, language barriers and prairies to memory, each student identifies a need and designs methods to satisfy it. Successful projects have addressed such topics as social interactions (which the community has embraced as a way to direct the projects), public access through the media and sustainability. Attention to aesthetic presentation is often interjected during the outreach, documentation, or social engagement phases, helping to engage a wider audience. Effective public art projects include concerns about accessibility and sensitivity for the world in which they exist and they affect a diverse spectrum of local and global communities. By embracing contemporary methods and addressing contemporary issues students unleash the power of art (and themselves) to elicit change.

Public art practice is relatively new in academia, reaching across many disciplines and confronting a diversity of challenges. Public art inherently involves communities as well as artists. Since these actions or projects are considered 'research' by the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University, some of Garcia's students are being asked to

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go through the International Review Board (IRB) process. The IRB was set up to protect human subjects during scientific research. In writing an IRB proposal the researcher is forced to structure his or her entire research, which in the case of public art practice is outlining an entire event. This does not allow for interactions to evolve organically, and an IRB can hinder the art that happens in conversation. It could even be viewed as infringing on freedom of expression. At the same time, artists often try to compare themselves to scientists, arguing that what they do is research. The research an artist does contributes to the world just like a scientist does, however the practical application and modes of demonstrating this research are different. An artist's creative activity demands a certain amount of freedom from the restrictions of IRBs. This leaves us stuck between the desire for equality with the sciences and the need to break from the restrictions of the scientific process of human research.

Public art practice is unfortunately still misunderstood, but has been asserted as an effective model for engaging the community with art. It does not have a defined place, but this gives it the flexibility to be embraced by academic, virtual, gallery and community environments. Ultimately, its category is inconsequential, since the change it is making in the world is real and powerful.

Lauren Karle earned her MFA at Kansas State University and is living in New Mexico while continuing her public art practice (www.laurenkarle.com).

Sarah McNutt is a recent MFA graduate from Kansas State University. She currently works as a studio technician in San Diego State University's Ceramics Department and is an art teacher in the Solana Beach School District.

*Lauren Karle. Connecting cups.
Earthenware, slip, deflocculated slip,
Mason stain wash, underglaze, handbuilt
and fired to cone 03. 3.25 x 5.5 x 4 in/each.
Photo by Lauren Karle.*

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~ Michael Strand*