

ANTELOPE VALLEY

The Outpost Project brings an ambitious program of social practice art to California's Antelope Valley.

Located in the desert an hour north of Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley has the unfortunate reputation of being a wasteland of Joshua trees, meth labs, and feral dogs. The truth is nothing like this, yet stories persist. In "The Right Stuff," Tom Wolfe excoriated everything about it, and even David Hockney's photocollage *Pearblossom Highway* implies that local highway crews cannot spell the word "Ahead" correctly.

A new NEA-funded project hopes to help correct that view. Titled Antelope Valley Art Outpost, phase 1 (spring 2015) centers on "Open Conversations" hosted at the Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, with visiting artists who have a special interest in social practice art. The list includes Lauren Woods (Placekeeping Strategies), Susan Leibovitz Steinman (Art + Community Gardens), Las Cafeteras (Youth Development), Kim Stringfellow (Natural Environment), Metabolic Studio IOU Theatre (Environment + Oral Stories), and Rick Lowe (Economic Development). Each artist will hold a museum-based forum and a separate community outreach event. The insights that arise will guide both the selection of two artists-in-residence and the art made by them, and will contribute to regional planning documents.

The selection of artists-in-residence initiates phase 2 (summer and fall 2015), which will see the two artists connected with the hamlets of Sun Village and Littlerock. These adjacent but unincorporated townships have slightly different populations; Littlerock is more visibly Hispanic, while Sun Village is perceived as being more African American. The artists will be expected to develop their projects in dialogue and partnership with the communities; in that sense, the artists are being "embedded" rather than being given a private, away-from-it-all place in which to do solo work.

Overseen by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission (LACAC), the project's full list of sponsors reveals how art gets made these days. Initial funding comes from the National Endowment for the Arts and the California Arts Council with support from Metabolic Studio. From there, partners include the Otis College's MFA in Public Practice, the Lancaster Museum of Art and History (MOAH), the Greater Antelope Valley Economic Alliance, the Department of Regional Planning, and the Office of Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, or in this case, a village and some very talented case managers.

One such manager is the public engagement liaison at MOAH, Monica Mahoney, who orchestrates Outpost with Erin Harkey, project manager at LACAC. "The most important thing," Mahoney says, "is that it develops from the inside out, not from the outside in." How does Outpost benefit the communities it touches? Mahoney says that "We deserve to live with art every day; everybody deserves art as an everyday experience. It's important to start with the art and cultural assets that exist inside the community, then build from there."

Otis students involved so far have been having an interesting time in the high desert. The scale of the landscape is one adjustment. Another may be translating theory into practical action. "The students learn more than making art," Suzanne Lacy, founding department chair of the Otis MFA in Public Practice program, says. "They learn to listen to people who live in specific places—their concerns, their interests, their disagreements, their hopes—and to co-construct with them artworks and actions that address these themes." Is it working? Jeanette Degollado came from Houston to study at Otis. "When we work with people to uncover their hidden strengths, it goes both ways. As artists we have our strengths, but also must face our weaknesses." So far, all seems to be going as planned. Mahoney is pleased with "the passion and the



AV OUTPOST: SUSAN STEINMAN AND SUZANNE LACY AT MOAH

interest. In the discussions, when the room's tempo changes—when the decibels increase—you know that something electric is happening."

Having its origins in a combination of feminism, social activism, and performance art, social practice art implies political orientation. Thinking about interconnectedness, Susan Steinman said at one forum, "Everything upstream effects everything downstream, and we're all downstream sooner or later." Lacy agrees. "For me, they are intertwined, these issues of art, imagination, and social activism. Now, what makes it art and what makes it activism, those are very complicated questions." Trying to answer the question may be as important as any particular answer. Among other things, this means that social practice art usually doesn't create objects that show up in galleries, but it might help a community plan a garden under a freeway or create art centers in a deeply impoverished neighborhood. "One of the remarkable things about social practice is that its value is not determined by the art market, [but] rather by encounter, experience, and social change," notes Andi Campognone, MOAH's museum manager.

Yet how does a critic—or recipient—know if the art is "good" or not? While the good/bad hierarchy may not easily apply, the general consensus is that this is a case of the journey counting more than the destination. Otis student Jenny Kane says that intentions and boundaries matter. "I don't believe that social practice art, or any type of community development for that matter, works unless it comes from a deeper ecological understanding of people and place. But what is so wonderful about this work is that we can allow the information, or the content, to dictate the form." Campognone agrees, observing: "It's not about aesthetics in the traditional sense of looking at an object, it's about the aesthetic experience of being a maker, not a consumer, of art."

That is not to say social practice lacks aesthetic guidelines. Asked about public art built from tiles painted by community members, Susan Steinman was very clear. "Sure, lots of community murals can look bad. It's the artist's job to make sure the projects cohere visually." How one blends the political with the aesthetic may not be obvious yet, even to the main participants—it is all too new. Mahoney adds, "there is always an element of risk with new projects. We've just started phase 1, and like a healthy ecosystem, it's adapting to change." She suggests that Outpost is "setting a precedent locally, regionally, and nationally," further noting that "most communities are developed by city planners and urban designers; here, residents, artists and students are the ones forming the identity and future of the Antelope Valley."

—CHARLES HOOD