

ARTFORUM

Bay Watch

By Kate Sutton
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Queens of the Castro at Southern Exposure. Photo: Kate Sutton.

From Kadist, I followed Hou and Jouanno to Southern Exposure, Laura Owen's solo at the Wattis, and openings at Minnesota Street Projects, an ingenious gallery incubator meant to help patch up the city's art community. Founded by collectors Deborah and Andy Rappaport, the converted warehouse offers steeply discounted gallery space and rotating project rooms, one of which featured a special guest-gallery appearance by Andrew Kreps and Anton Kern. Also on view—though for now, only by appointment—was David Ireland's former house—total artwork at 500 Capp Street, which had been rescued from the auction block by patroness Carlie Wilmans after tip-offs from Ann Hatch and curator Madeleine Grynstejn. "We'd love to open it as a museum, but we'd never be able to meet all the requirements," Wilmans confessed, nodding to the artist's habit of cannibalizing the house's foundations for material to make his quirkily subversive domestic interventions.

Still, its extensive restructuring has left it ripe for dinner parties, a hallmark of Ireland's practice.

That same night, across the bay, the Oakland Museum of California was drawing crowds of its own with a rowdy evening of open-mic performances and a "War Hoop Flash Mob," all part of the kickoff for this year's Open Engagement. The itinerant annual social practice conference began in 2007 as the thesis project of artist Jen Delos Reyes. Fashioned as its own kind of disruptive social technology, the weekend tackled its theme of "Power" using surprisingly similar terminology to SF MoMA's patronage drive, including the well-worn bromide of "engaging audiences."

Good intentions aside, by taking on "Power" so baldly, the conference also foregrounded some of its mechanisms. My very first event launched from the provocative hook that "Environmental Art (Social Practice) is for white people with no skin in the game," and rapidly devolved from there. Another panel ended with the white-identified presenters sharing heartfelt

stories of how they came to recognize their privilege, while their nonwhite cohort sat silently until the Q&A. At a roundtable stacked with six formidable women, the microphone was inexplicably bogarted by the sole male. Adjunct faculty from California College of the Arts staged multiple microactions to draw attention to their unlivable wage, but the unsustainable industry of art schools was left largely unchallenged. (Indeed, one UC school was there to workshop a new social-practice MFA.) The controversial introduction of an admission fee—eighty dollars, or fifty-five sans keynotes—and the oblique selection criteria for presenters (several of whom were no-shows) prompted protests, which Delos Reyes coopted by making her own "Boycott Open



Southern Exposure director Patricia Maloney with curator Laura Cassidy Rogers at Open Engagement. Photo: Kate Sutton.

Engagement” T-shirts. She said she borrowed this tactic from Beyoncé, but, like Jay-Z’s *absolution* at the end of *Lemonade*, it somewhat undermined the spirit of the project.

But there were also genuinely inspired moments, not the least of which was the experience of being in the museum itself. Under the guidance of curator René de Guzman, the OMCA is finding creative, unpretentious ways to tell the unique histories around Oakland, whose own legacy is riddled with high-profile power struggles, many of which were name-checked in the museum’s crowd-pleasing feature “Altered State: Marijuana in California” (where I watched a young father grapple with whether or not he should help his kid reach the nose-holes of the “smell-station,” with its samples of “Granddaddy Purple,” “Pennywise,” and “Sour Diesel”). Among other program highlights was “From Houdini to Snowden,” the Center for Tactical Magic’s exegesis on magic as a relationship predicated on an unequal distribution of knowledge, observing that Houdini’s most successful tricks were in escapology. (As artist Aaron Gach snarkily put it, “Now why would the masses want to see someone escape penal confines and overthrow authoritarian oppression?”) Similar themes rippled through ARTs East New York’s “Anti-Gentrification Tool-Kit,” where the crowd was all whistles and snaps as ReNewLot’s Tian Mao outlined steps he took to group-finance homes within his block of BedStuy. Those snaps turned to shudders when Mao mentioned Airbnb amid his funding strategies. (As if we weren’t all there but for the grace of guest rooms.)

Of course, the real power of the event collected around keynotes by Suzanne Lacy and Angela Davis. While Lacy kept it tight, eloquently surveying her latest projects, Davis opted for a more freeform, multimedia-driven delivery, that, quite frankly, made it hard to tell to what extent she was fucking with us.

Let me start over—she’s Angela Davis. That fact alone is enough to pack the house, and rightfully so. The meat of her argument, which centered on Marcuse, Kant, and Nelson Mandela’s idea of “softness” as “political potentiality,” touched on the paradoxical elitism of the democracy operating not only within Open Engagement, but also at the heart of all these “disruptive technologies.”

Davis took time to lament Hillary Clinton’s grievous “off the reservation” gaffe, as well as the closing notes of Kendrick Lamar’s otherwise astounding Grammy performance, criticizing his overlay of Compton and Africa. “Africa is far greater than one element of our origin story,” she snapped. “I guess here I could also talk about Beyoncé, but everyone’s talking about Beyoncé, so...” But the crowd wasn’t letting her get off that easy. “Let me repeat,” Davis began carefully. “You can enjoy something intensely and at the same time be ambivalent about it. I can appreciate the steps Beyoncé has taken, but there’s a corporate capitalist culture there that has to be critiqued.” So, who wins Davis’s seal of approval? Prince and Nina Simone, whose “Mississippi Goddam” Davis suggested was the true anthem of the civil rights movement.

The Q&A went as these things are wont, with a lot of telling of one’s truth and very little forming of one’s question. One woman announced that she had opened an organic farm, then wandered off into her conflicted feelings about her partner being white. “It’s great that you have an organic farm,” Davis intoned, weightily. “Look, there’s no two-week intensive for racism. We’re all implicated and we have to recognize that the work we are doing now might not be apparent for many generations. The frame of the world doesn’t consist of the day we are born and the day we die. This is collective work, this is community work, and it stretches across generations. We’re in community with people who have yet to be born.” Talk about power—that was the most disruptive statement all week.