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Deep in the Art of Texas

by Carol Strickland

Rachel Harrison: *Moore to the point*, 2013, in progress at City Hall Plaza. Photo Allison V. Smith.



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Everything sprawls in Dallas, and the Nasher Sculpture Center's 10th-anniversary exhibition, "Nasher XChange," is even livelier and more capacious than a rodeo. The show is scattered over the length and breadth of the city among all socio-economic and ethnic enclaves (through Feb. 16, 2014).

Nasher director Jeremy Strick cited "the explosion" of artists' interventions in public space as inspiration for commissioning 10 artists to create site-specific works that respond to the demographics and concerns of the city. It's a bold attempt to engage the whole, multi-ethnic community (which, in 2010, was 42% Hispanic and 27% foreign-born).

Rachel Harrison's 25-foot-tall, hot pink arrow pointing to a pre-existing public sculpture, *Moore to the Point*, sums up the initiative. When the New York-based artist toured Dallas, she saw Henry Moore's bronze *The Dallas Piece* in front of I.M. Pei's City Hall, surrounded by barricades. The barriers (since removed) thwarted entrance into the space between the three vertebrae-like forms of Moore's work. "Instead of closing off access to art," chief curator Jed Morse explained during a press tour, "Harrison wants to enhance the experience of it."

Nasher officials tout the \$3-million endeavor as the first citywide, museum-organized public art exhibition in the U.S. As Morse said, it's an experiment inspired by Joseph Beuys's concept of "social sculpture," socially-engaged practices that involve the community in creating and activating a work of art.

The work of Houston artist Rick Lowe embodies this trend. After his *Project Row Houses* (1993-present) rehabilitated what was a high-crime, impoverished block of Houston shotgun houses into a mecca of galleries, workshops, and artist residences, Lowe became the poster child for the transformative power of activist art. In Dallas he tackled a daunting task: unifying Vickery Meadow, the most diverse three-square-mile area in the city.

Its 30,000 residents—immigrants and refugees from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia—speak 27 languages and are segregated in apartment buildings housing specific ethnicities. After convening community members to discuss how an artistic

intervention could better their lives, Lowe organized workshops where residents collaborated with artists and mentors to learn craft skills and produce handmade products. At monthly pop-up markets, participants will mingle, display and sell their creations.

Resembling a block party and garage sale more than an artist's installation, the first market, on Oct. 19, featured residents' wares ranging from knitted beanies and bottle-cap necklaces to hand-made jewelry inspired by Frida Kahlo paintings.

The Chilean-born, New York-based artist Alfredo Jaar is up-front about his intentions for the translucent glass pavilion he created on the grounds of the Nasher. Called *Music (Everything I know I learned the day my son was born)*, the work "is the most political gesture I've ever made," Jaar said at the opening. "I hope to change the demographics of the museum, inviting people on the margins to come in with their families."

Inside the pavilion, visitors hear recordings of the first cries of newborn babies at three Dallas hospitals, including one hospital that primarily serves the poor. Each child who was recorded wins a lifetime membership to the museum. Jaar hopes the parents and children will come to the museum "as performers, as artists themselves."

The Los Angeles-based artist Charles Long situated his work *Fountainhead* amid the splendor of the upscale NorthPark shopping center but, he said, the work turned this palace of consumerism "into something about giving." The vaguely head-shaped sculpture inverts the title of Ayn Rand's novel, which defends no-holds-barred capitalism, by becoming a virtual font of charity. "How can I use the public to sculpt?" Long said he asked himself. "I depend on people as part of the medium, not just as witnesses, but as active parts of the work." He projected images of dollar bills streaming like water down a fountain. At three kiosks with iPads, shoppers can swipe a credit card to donate to local charities.

A world away from the material wealth of the mall is the former site of an illegal dump selected by Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa for his sculpture, *Flock in Space*. Now converted into the Trinity River Audubon Center, the spot is on the migratory path of millions of birds. Consisting of one hundred galvanized steel poles in eccentric, curvilinear shapes that suggest flight paths, "Flock in Space" also hints at a larger

aspiration held by Dallas arts institutions: to be an essential stop for migrating art lovers. "To be the great city we want to be," Mayor Mike Rawlings said at a dinner to celebrate the Nasher's tenth anniversary, "we've got to be a great arts city."

Thirty years ago, the city began carving out a nearly 70-block urban arts district near downtown. It's now home to a symphony, opera and dance companies and three art museums. All the same, Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) director Maxwell Anderson admitted in an interview, "We have local and regional tourism here, but not national yet. That's what the arts district is meant to cure."

Anderson started a free entry program at the DMA last January. Around 50,000 have now signed on as "friends" (for free admission) and "partners" (those who donate at least \$100 to cover costs of free membership for others).

Anderson anticipates that mining the data generated by visitors' activities in the museum will create a people-centered, not turnstile-driven, model for engaging the audience and fostering repeat visits. "Our museum is for everyone," according to associate director of external affairs Anne Bergeron, who pointed out in an interview that 94% of the new "friends" had never visited the museum before.

After more than \$1 billion in public investment in the arts district, Dallasites are hoping "if you build it, they will come." The Nasher XChange projects are right in synch with this new civic ethos: a socially-engaged vision of art that involves the community in the creation and activation of art.