



View of lauren woods's installation *Dallas Drinking Fountain #1*, 2013, in the Dallas County Records Building. Photo Nathan Hunsinger.

Civic Duty

by Michael Corris

THE INFRASTRUCTURE necessary to connect emerging artists to a sustainable, “established” future is shrinking, especially for artists producing socially engaged work. Consider lauren woods, whose public art project *Drinking Fountain #1* (2013) took just shy of a decade to realize. In 2003, a metal plate meant to obscure the traces of a “White Only” sign above a drinking fountain in the Dallas County Records Building fell off. This accidental exposure sparked woods to create an interactive public monument that eschews monumental forms. When a member of the public attempts to drink at woods’s modified fountain in the records building, the water stream is suspended for 15 seconds while newsreel footage of 1960s civil rights protests plays on a monitor built into the fountain, behind the swirl bowl. By embedding imagery from the past into the flow of everyday life, the work suggests how racial inequalities persist throughout the United States, despite the elimination of Jim Crow laws.

Woods’s project is powerful in its simplicity, which makes its overlong gestation period all the more remarkable. To realize the project, budgeted at \$50,000, woods had to navigate a complicated city bureaucracy while raising funds through a patchwork of government agencies, private philanthropists and local nonprofit organizations. Some dozen entities are credited as supporters of the piece, from the South Dallas Cultural Center to Mothers Against Police Brutality to the Dallas Historical Commission. The work garnered substantial media attention and was well received by critics. However, my impression after speaking with woods was that such an exhausting process had a chilling effect on her desire to produce additional public artworks, especially ones that raise controversial social and political issues.

Woods’s saga illustrates the difficulties faced by many Dallas artists who find themselves on the margins of the vast ocean of private largesse that underwrites the city’s art scene.

MICHAEL CORRIS is professor of art at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

If Dallas fails to support serious local artists, it could find itself languishing as a hollow destination for cultural tourists.

National and international artists who work in Dallas with the support of its premier institutions often encounter little red tape and few difficulties securing funds. In 2014, for instance, the Nasher Sculpture Center—a key component of the city’s multibillion-dollar arts district—commissioned 10 public projects to commemorate the institution’s 10th anniversary. Called Nasher XChange, the program featured major works by well-established figures, including Rachel Harrison, Ugo Rondinone and Alfredo Jaar. It can be easier to raise money for these glamorous, high-profile art events than it is to sell patrons on works that might have only local or regional visibility.

At the other end of the spectrum, public agencies that could support emerging artists in Dallas often have other priorities. The city’s cash-strapped yet hardworking Department of Cultural Affairs, for example, pursues a laudable agenda focused on community-oriented educational projects. They partner with schools and neighborhood cultural centers—spaces that don’t always provide the right context for challenging or ambiguous artistic statements. Stuck in the middle, between the money-soaked thrills of gala dinners and initiatives aimed at earnest community engagement, are contemporary artists like Woods, who have few outlets for developing projects that lack immediate commercial prospects.

MUCH INK HAS been spilled over Dallas’s rise as a cultural capital and its investments in megaprojects, such as the consolidated downtown arts district. Yet if Dallas fails to support serious local artists on a smaller scale, it could find itself languishing as a hollow destination for cultural tourists. Some important steps have been taken recently to foster a true art scene in the city, and many of these have been spearheaded by individuals who work within Dallas’s major institutions and have an eye on the long-term health of their community.

Chief among these efforts is a microgrant program administered by the Nasher. These awards are for rather paltry sums of money, but in an environment of low overall funding for individual artists \$1,000 can mean a great deal. In economic terms, such levels of funding are said to have high marginal utility relative to the individual’s available resources. A report on the most recent group of five recipients, which includes Fort Worth’s Richard Blay and the Brick Haus Collective from nearby Denton, showed that funds were used for such unglamorous yet essential expenses as purchasing a compressor for a pneumatic carving tool and renovating studio space.

Some curators in Dallas are aware of the need to be responsive to the city’s artists and develop a credible critical dialogue. Justine Ludwig of the Dallas Contemporary and Gabriel Ritter of the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) have been

keen to provide more than token support in this regard. In January 2016, the Contemporary will mount a major exhibition of work by Jeff Zilm, a local artist who creates paintings using pigment made from the emulsion of 35mm film stock. At the DMA, Ritter has been organizing exhibitions of local and international artists through the long-running “Concentrations” series. Dallas-based abstract painter Stephen Laphisophon had his first museum solo show as part of the series, which has also recently featured London-based Chosil Kil and the international collective Slavs and Tatars. Other cultural institutions in town—the Latino Cultural Center, the African American Museum and McKinney Avenue Contemporary—have been key supporters of local artists, providing both exhibition opportunities and small grants. Yet these smaller venues in outlying neighborhoods are dwarfed in scale by their downtown peers.

Certainly the Nasher, DMA and Dallas Contemporary benefit from ties and working relationships with a handful of dedicated local artists. However, assuming the sole responsibility for nurturing an art scene is unsustainable for any single institution, or even a plutocracy of endowed organizations. In one sense, the cultural infrastructure of Dallas mirrors trends in the distribution of capital (cultural and otherwise) across the country. A greater percentage is concentrated in the hands of a smaller and smaller number of institutions. At the same time, the mediating civic structures necessary for representative, democratic and long-term support of artists are underfunded and under stress.

If art is to remain a civic good—and not simply an aesthetically pleasing economic lever for real estate developers and other moneyed interests—the municipal government has to step up, at least in a coordinating role. The city of Dallas is in a position to have the broadest, most representative overview of the cultural scene. While I understand that spending more on art might be a political challenge in a conservative state, the government does have a role to play in designing a cultural development policy that benefits the citizenry overall—and not just those plugged-in individuals whose fortunes might rise with arts-driven urban development projects.

The most comprehensive effort to date to address the gaps in Dallas’s cultural infrastructure was undertaken by Creative Time. Southern Methodist University invited the New York-based public-art organization to study Dallas during a yearlong residency that began in 2010. The resulting “Master Plan for the Arts for the City of Dallas” concluded that the city would have to improve its support for artists through residency programs, affordable housing and studio space, direct financial support for emerging artists to develop their work—especially in the public realm—and higher quality critical dialogue on contemporary art sustained through publications. Some of the report’s recommended initiatives have been taken up, but only in a piecemeal fashion, by private funders with their own missions. What’s still lacking is a comprehensive policy backed by the means to put it into practice, and until that emerges, the gap between struggling local artists and flashy international projects will widen. ○

Atlas is a rotating series of columns by writers from Dallas, Moscow and Lima.