

The Art Next Door

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



GINA MARTINEZ AND NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS AT THE SALERNO PINK HOUSE IN PAGEDALE. PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN A. ROBERTS

*You can't make it whole,
it is whole.*

That was the headline of a newspaper handed out to crowds on Cherokee Street during this year's Cinco de Mayo festival. Colin Kloecker and Shanai Matteson, Minneapolis-based artists and co-directors of the Works Progress collective, spent four days interviewing and photographing artists, aldermen, kids, social workers, historians, and arts administrators before publishing their stories in a 10-page newspaper as part of "Whole City," an exhibit at The Luminary Center for the Arts. At the reception, pages of the newspaper were pinned to the gallery wall, along with a map of St. Louis. Visitors were invited to use pens, notecards, pushpins, and string to add to the information—like an arts-and-crafts Wikipedia.

This is an example of "social practice," a buzzy term for fusing art and community, often associated with the equally buzzy phrase "creative place-making." In March, The New York Times ran a trend piece about it, with a photo of a crowded forum, Crossing the Delmar Divide, hosted at The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts. As the Times noted, many young artists are drawn to social practice in an era of Occupy, a terrible recession, and a speculative art market dominated by millionaires. While the discipline can include art objects, it also manifests as journalism, political activism, and collaborations with nonartists. And it is hard to show in museums or galleries. As the Times noted, these artists "push an old question—'Why is it art?'—as close to the breaking point as contemporary art ever has."

The article focused heavily on the Pulitzer, noting that the museum had hired social workers as part of its curatorial team a few years ago. But this phenomenon has been happening in St. Louis for years, long before the term "social practice" was ever coined.

It's 3:37 p.m. on a gorgeous day in mid-May, and the front room of this house in Pagedale is awash in kids with sketchbooks open. "Wow, that is a scary eyeball!" says Gina Martinez, the coordinator-in-residence at the Pink House, which hosts community-driven arts and cultural programs. "I'd love to hang anything up that you want, but that looks like it's in your sketchbook, so you be the judge."

Martinez arrived here about two years ago, when the building was still largely used as office space for Beyond Housing, a social agency that partners with the Rebuild Foundation, which oversees arts programming here. In that time, it's become a well-loved, heavily used space for the neighborhood.

A photojournalism major as a college undergrad (she actually took the photo for the Times article), Martinez was drawn to stories that let her connect with sources over time. Realizing her work was as much about people as art, she earned a master's degree in social work at Washington University and did her practicum at the Pulitzer. While there, Martinez worked with Lisa Harper Chang, the museum's first social worker (who's now at the Regional Arts Commission), as part of the curatorial team for the 2009 exhibit "Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark."

Matta-Clark's work was about not just buildings, but also activism. Near the end of his short life, he was purchasing buildings in the inner city and teaching kids (he called them "eco-cadets") about green rehabbing. The exhibit inspired other community-driven arts initiatives, including Perennial and Northside Workshop, both of which are going strong.

As part of the Pulitzer's ancillary programming, the museum brought in artist Theaster Gates, who'd been doing similar work on Chicago's South Side. (The same year he began working in St. Louis, Gates was featured in the prestigious Whitney Biennial.) Gates eventually acquired several buildings here for the Rebuild Foundation. One of those projects is Art House in Hyde Park. Another is this house on Salerno Drive.

The first Pink House event was a barbecue in fall 2011. "The Pulitzer had donated this blanket-sized canvas," Martinez recalls. "I ended up spreading it out on the grass like a picnic blanket to put paints out, and it created an aesthetic curiosity." It drew one neighbor, Tabatha Pate, who later taught a crochet workshop that caught the interest of Kamshia Evans and Delliah Jackson, two young women who live in the neighborhood.

"Two weeks later, I saw them out there again," Evans says. "I just wanted to know what was going on." Now she attends creative-writing classes and assists artist Stan Chisholm with his mixed-media classes.

Though Pink House is just a few years old, St. Louis has a nearly 20-year history with social practice—though the terminology is up for debate.

"To come in and say you're a 'creative place-maker,' what does that say to the people who are already in that place?" says Jill McGuire, RAC's executive director. (As a rule, RAC prefers the term "community arts.")

"There's a joke: 'When you're ready to not practice on me, come back and be a part of my community,'" Roseann Weiss adds dryly. She directs RAC's community art program and public art initiatives.

Weiss also oversees the Community Arts Training Institute, the oldest program of its kind in the U.S. and a national model for community arts. Every year, the institute trains 16 people—not just artists, but also statisticians, aldermen, engineers, teachers, and activists—about community arts. "The thing that I think makes CAT successful and vital is that it's cross-sector," Weiss says.

"St. Louis was a pioneer," says Bill Cleveland, who helped RAC build the program in 1997. He is director of the Washington-based Center for the Study of Art & Community and is on the faculty of the Creative Community Leadership Institute in Minneapolis, where Kloecker and Matteson trained. "RAC understood early on that St. Louis was a place where this idea of art and community was happening naturally," Cleveland says.

He points out the need for community arts in light of funding patterns. He cites a 2011 study by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, *Fusing Art Culture and Social Change*, which found that 2 percent of arts and culture nonprofits with budgets of \$5 million or more receive more than half of all funding.

He says Pink House is a good example of how artists can be accountable to a community over time. “You’ll see there are kids who are really excited—these are kids who deserve to be excited and deserve to have that excitement fed for their whole lives,” he says. “If it comes one summer and then goes away, that’s the difference between a community of means and a community that’s struggling. Good stuff doesn’t stay.”

Weiss agrees. “Community Arts is not an internship,” she says. “I’m going to say it over and over again, because a lot of the universities are getting into it: How you enter and exit a community is incredibly important. If you don’t have a plan for that, then you are doing the people you’re working with a big disservice.”

There are some in the arts community who would argue this type of work does not qualify as art at all. Some dismiss social work as “artists who aren’t very good, who decide they’re going to go paint murals with kids, or something,” explains Cleveland.

Sam Korman, assistant director of White Flag Projects, studied as an undergrad at Portland State University, which has one of the country’s flagship social-practice programs. In college, he attended both social-practice and traditional gallery events. “I almost never saw those communities communicating with one another,” he says. “On the one hand, social-practice artists think the normal, object-based art world is elitist and capitalist and that those people are sellouts. The other side thinks the social-practice people are hippies on their high horse, who have no taste or standards.”

And how one sees it depends on one’s filter. While Cleveland traces it from the social side (from the Works Progress Administration to programs like the Community Arts Training Institute), Korman talks about it from an art-history perspective (from Dada to Fluxus to body art to relational aesthetics).

Though both acknowledge the rift between social practice and studio art, Korman believes the divide is slowly disappearing: “Now our practice is so nebulous, I see a ton of overlap between those two worlds.”

Last year, the Pink House hosted the Regional Arts Commission’s first-ever Place-Based Community Arts Training Institute. Martinez had just graduated from the institute and helped lead the future CATs through the six-month training, which kicked off in June and ran through September. They all lived, worked, and went to church in the neighborhood. “It’s changed people’s lives in a way that was unanticipated,” Weiss says. One woman, who Weiss describes as “a neighborhood elder” and does pyrography, or wood burning, has taken a more formal arts-related role in the community. After the institute ended, her husband bought her a tablet, explaining it’s for her “new life.” She recently received a commission for her art, and she advocates for her neighborhood at community meetings, collaborating with one of her fellow participants, a builder and an engineer.

“She went from someone who didn’t think of herself that much as an artist to becoming someone who may have a public art piece,” says Weiss. “And she still has this advocacy piece, engaging people’s thoughts about what they want to see happen in their own neighborhood.”

That empowerment ripples down to the kids. On page 5 of the Whole City newspaper, Works Progress—which built its list of interviewees, including Martinez and the kids at the Pink House, with guidance from Weiss—ran a photo essay by Patrick Fuller, a young man who lives on Salerno Street and serves as the Pink House’s photographer-in-residence. One of his photos showed a list taped to a wall, the result of an “ideas meeting” that six kids organized on their own:

You can touch the art.

You can feel the art.

We can We can
build the art.

You can do activities

You can speak your mind.

In October, the Pink House was invited to march in Pagedale’s Red Ribbon Parade, an annual rally against drugs and violence. When Martinez asked the kids for input, they suggested building a float. “We didn’t have a truck to haul it around, so we needed to work with someone who could make something light enough that we could carry,” Martinez says. Chisholm and the children built a tiny replica of the Pink House, painting it the same dusty-salmon color. There were slots for wooden poles, so the kids could hoist

the house on their shoulders, caravan-style, and carry it down the street. Now it's in the Pink House's basement, and the kids use it as a playhouse.

For those who don't consider this process to be art, it's difficult to call it traditional social work, either—it's too collaborative. It's not about fixing anything, or parachuting in to try to make anything whole. The idea is that the community is whole; it's already a made place, bubbling over with creativity.

"Pink House is an interesting model for embedding arts—I call it 'the art next door,'" Weiss says. "It always starts with the kids because they're curious, and then you meet their parents. It's the pebble-in-the-pond idea.

"People want things to happen like this," she says, snapping her fingers. "It doesn't happen like that: It's time-based, relationship-based. And that isn't something you learn in school."

For more information: Rebuild Foundation (rebuild-foundation.org), Regional Arts Commission's Community Arts Initiative (art-stl.com/cat), Center for the Study of Art and Community (artandcommunity.com) and Works Progress (worksprogress.org).