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## Report from the 2015 Public Art Network Preconference

Posted By *Anna Renken* On June 26, 2015 @ 4:09 PM In Public Art Review, Shop Talk | [No Comments](#)

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Chicago, Ill. – The Public Art Network (PAN), a program of Americans for the Arts (AFTA), holds its annual gathering each June. One of several preconferences held before AFTA’s annual conference, the PAN preconference focuses exclusively on public art.

The main themes that emerged at the PAN preconference on June 10-12, 2015, centered on the rapid shifts in our field and what we need to do to keep pace with those changes. Speakers discussed the need to further diversify the pool of administrators and artists, realities about the increasing number of projects that employ social practice artists and/or technology, and how to better tell the stories about the impact of public art projects on our communities.

The event opened with a [discussion](#) by James Kass, ED of Youth Speaks, Angelique Power of the Joyce Foundation, artist Norie Sato, and Jason Tseng from Fractured Atlas—four cross-sector leaders talking about what transformation looks like, who is being marginalized, and how we can increase opportunities and access. The topic of change was addressed throughout the preconference. In his talk “Managing Change in Public Art: Programs, Leadership, and Trends,” Jack Becker of Forecast Public Art described this transition as a “shift from art *in* public to art *by, for, and about* the public.”

The PAN [Year in Review](#), a perennial favorite of conference goers that identifies notable public art projects of the year, evidenced these shifts in the field of public art through the selections of Peggy Kenderlien, Public Art Program Director at the Regional Arts & Cultural Council, artist Laurie Jo Reynolds, and Ernest C. Wong, Principal & President, site design group, ltd.

Reynolds said the judges saw a large number of submissions that showed how new technologies are transforming collected data into an installation or experience. Sometimes, she acknowledged, this transformation seemed a bit arbitrary. Other times, however, it seemed rich and meaningful, as in the piece *Congregation* by Kit Monkman and Tom Wexler, commissioned by the Pittsburg Downtown Partnership for Market Square. In *Congregation*, digitally manipulated light projections encourage community interaction as this playful work reacts to movement and sound from its participatory audience.

These main themes of transformation, marginalization, and increased access were perfect segues into another annual highlight of the preconference: the Public Art Tours. "Rebuild Foundation: Community Revitalization as Public Art" took participants to a number of Theaster Gates' cultural spaces on Chicago's South Side. The tour began at the Stony Island Bank, where the smell of sawdust and wet plaster from active construction on the building perfumed the air with the optimism of new construction. Work on refurbishing a mammoth old Chicago bar was underway in what will soon be an elegant main hall surrounded by gallery space and a two story library. *Stony Island* will open this October in time for the Chicago Architecture Biennial.

The tour then drove past the *Listening and Archive Houses*. Once a candy store that Gates renovated and turned into his home and studio, the space now houses an artist residency as well as the collections of Dr. Wax Records, a former Hyde Park record store. At a stop at the *Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative (DA+HC)*, attendees learned how Gates took a 1950's housing complex that was slated for demolition and turned it into a mid-century gem of rehabbed mixed-income housing and cultural space.

Finally, the group was taken to the Black Cinema House which hosts screenings and other events. All these spaces are operated by the Rebuild Foundation that Gates started in 2010 to serve as the nonprofit organization programming and funding the spaces he reinvigorates. Rebuild Foundation's stated mission is to "rebuild the cultural foundations of underinvested neighborhoods and incite movements of community revitalization that are culture based, artist led, and neighborhood driven."

And speaking of changes, social practice installation artwork, like that of Theaster Gates, whose projects were highlighted during the preconference, were prominently featured throughout the AFTA conference. In fact, Theaster Gates' address at the opening plenary session made many in the audience swoon as Gates powerfully reminded the audience of the immense power of the arts and artists.

The conference included several lesser known artists working in social practice as well, people like Sara Daleiden of MKE LAX, whose work on [Creational Trails](#) in Milwaukee, a space that creates a connective third space between segregated Milwaukee neighborhoods, creates new pathways that encourage cultural exchange.

The work that people like Gates and others are doing tied perfectly to the preconference opening themes of growth and change. Established programs are grappling with new leadership and increasing maintenance issues. Both new and existing programs are watching as demographic shifts and increasing inequality continue to both drive changes in

programming and increase new opportunities for artists and administrators to diversify, better tell the story of art as an agent of change, and bridge the cultural gap in ways other fields cannot.

So many amazing things are happening in the midst of these almost revolutionary changes, perhaps the most significant lesson to draw from all of this is the increasingly critical need to tell the story of art as an agent not only of placemaking, neighborhood revival, and economic development, but also as one of actual social change.

*Joan Vorderbruggen*, the Cultural District Arts Coordinator for Hennepin Theatre Trust in Minneapolis, shared five of her favorite quotes from Theaster Gates' keynote:

"It was my instinct to make myself more than an individual."

"I keep asking, 'How can we be both inside and outside of our institutions?'"

"Artists are more powerful than we remember."

"What I love about artistic power is that even in its naiveté it's changing the world."

"My neighbors know what their problems are, they just need a mic."

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