

# **XTCA: Cross Town Contemporary Art symposium**

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

September 22, 2018

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**Setting a playful tone** by assuming the role of yoga instructor, Jen Delos Reyes asked attendees to stand up and morph into interpretive poses inspired by works in the XTCA exhibition. The artist and keynote speaker's icebreaker served a higher function: to underscore that public and socially engaged art is intrinsically linked to viewer interaction, allowing us to connect with ideas and people outside the conventions of the gallery and the comfort of our own experiences.

Taken into the public realm, art adopts a new kind of egalitarianism and accessibility. Traditional hierarchies in aesthetic experiences are challenged and upended. The viewer, no longer corralled through a maze of curated encounters, becomes an unpredictable collaborator, a variable in the evolving context of street and commons.

The symposium got straight to tackling deeper ethical dilemmas. Reyes introduced the concept of the artist as gentrifier, which was echoed in the panel "Community Building: Art as a Generative Force." Pasqualina Azzarello explained how she avoids the folly of the artist "parachuting in" when embarking on community-driven work: "What are the existing resources and structures? Who is not in the room, and how do we get them there?" Another panelist, Joseph Krupczynski, said to build trust as a designer, his most important role "is to listen." Pamela Matsuda-Dunn allegorically framed her own artwork, which required repairs during the course of the exhibition: "The failures in the piece, the breaking and rebuilding, become a metaphor for the process of building a community."

The symposium didn't miss much in covering the gamut of issues surrounding art in the public sphere and its place in building community. The biggest takeaway was a challenge for the future: Can we reimagine public art not as something that necessarily changes the view so much as an experience that changes the viewer?

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## **BELOW**

*Bridging Our Community*, by visual artist Pamela Matsuda-Dunn.

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