



# Off Site in Seattle: Art Experiences Without a Price Tag, Courtesy Seattle Art Fair

August 9, 2016

by Amber Cortes

It was a fine day for a tour of earth culture. Our intrepid guide, Timothy “Speed” Levitch, shuffled his legs awkwardly and swayed from side to side as he meandered through Hing Hay Park in Seattle’s International District. After all, he was just starting to get used to gravity. Levitch pointed to a group of “human respirators” doing morning exercises and meditating nearby.

“The greatest landmarks,” Levitch said, “have heartbeats.”

This off-site tour at the Seattle Art Fair was performed by Levitch in Martian English, a language developed by conceptual artist [Glenn Kaino](#) for his mytho-geographic piece *Aspiration*. Other tours were delivered in Lunar French; both dialects were developed to accommodate an imagined future where humans relocate to outer space.

Inside the fair, Levitch’s tour took the group past the booths through the innards of the event center to the stadium’s field, as he explained how earth civilization came to an end, and how a pack of thieves stole these very artworks we see now to preserve “the best thinking of a creative, but tragically binary epoch.” Passers-by and tour eavesdroppers looked both amused and bewildered.

“People are, certainly at the very least, curious,” Levitch said later of the art fair crowd.

Though [Levitch is well-known](#) for his avant-garde, free-form tours of New York and other cities, this was his first tour for an art fair – a “total maiden voyage” for him, as he put it.

“I think it’s a perfect place to incubate something like this...whatever this is,” he said. “I suppose it’s kind of like an art installation in motion. I think of it as another ring going on of many rings in this circus, under this circus tent. It’s...like having its own fair within a fair,” he joked.”



Tour Guide Speed Levitch at the ‘portal to future: Seattle’. Photo by Amber Cortes.

Some of the most engaging art at the second year of the [Seattle Art Fair](#) was just that: tempting

you to go off-site or peek around the periphery of the art-decked booths at Century Link Field, leaving visual art behind for dive into the experiential components of dance, conceptual art, video and sound.

This year, when independent, LA-based curator [Laura Fried](#) (previously at the contemporary art museum in St. Louis and [Mass MOCA](#)) got the call to become the artistic director of the Seattle Art Fair, she jumped at the opportunity.

“It was really exciting to me,” she explained, “because a core mission of this fair is to produce a true public-facing program.”

Fried took this excitement and ran with it, helping curate large-scale installations including Mono-ha legend [Kishio Suga](#)’s *Correspondence*; [Roxy Paine](#)’s *Experiment*, a vertigo-inducing diorama of a CIA monitoring station that punctuated the grid of booths at the intersections of the fair aisles and [Dawn Kaspar](#)’s *Star Formation*, an interactive cymbal-clanging installation. There was even a giant animated digital aquarium by the artist collective teamLab helping to create a friendly space for kids inside the fair to run, draw, and play.

Fried said she sought to take advantage of the rich arts community of the region by commissioning new works by Pacific Northwest artists [Jeffrey Mitchell](#) and Wynne Greenwood. She also invited [Henry Art Gallery](#) of Seattle to join with [Public Fiction](#) of LA to co-curate a rigorous, historical archive exhibition of early broadcast television artists experimenting with the medium of public access television, which, Fried says, “lives in an experimental way inside the fair.” A pair of exhibitions exploring the theme were installed both inside Seattle Art Fair and at Henry Art Gallery.

“A Witness and A Weapon: Middle Grays, Color Bars, and the comma in between” is an exhibition inside the art fair that functions as part archive and part contemporary survey of video art. Early artists including [Laurie Anderson](#), Merce Cunningham, and Charles Atlas used public access video as a political and aesthetic tool to transmit information and image back to the public in a way that was immediate and accessible – and not meant to be monetized.

“Public Fiction is a very non-commercial project, so I decided to do video, in a way to really separate it out from the rest of the typical fair practices or the kind of object-based presentation you would see at a fair,” explained curator and Public Fiction founder Lauren Mackler.

“A lot of these pieces were and still are resistant to commercial systems” added Emily Zimmerman, Associate Curator of Programs at the Henry Art Gallery, “for years there wasn’t really a market for video works and they existed within a different kind of economy than the rest of the art world.”



Public Fiction’s exhibition, “A Witness and A Weapon: Middle Grays, Color Bars, and the comma in between” installed at Seattle Art Fair. Photo by Amber Cortes.

Talks at the fair weren't from your usual suspects but had a twist through cross-references with actors and musicians. Indy rocker Kim Gordon from Sonic Youth spoke to art historian Branden W. Joseph about her cross-disciplinary practice in film, music, and the visual arts. Carrie Brownstein, guitarist from Sleater-Kinney and producer of the show Portlandia, and actor Kyle MacLachlan—both Washington born and bred—discussed the quirks and sensibilities of Pacific Northwesterners that inspired them creatively.

"What the public program can do," explained Fried, "is diversify the kinds of experience you can have and also broaden the audience too. Of not just fairgoers who are going to come to the art fair itself, but people who will come in for a Kyle and Carrie talk, who are interested in dance, or video art, and then these are access points that I think that can lead you to having an experience that you may not have otherwise had."



Kyle MacLachlan and Carrie Brownstein Photo by Chris Day

Like one of deep peace and meditation, for instance. Nearby historic Union Station, usually bustling with travellers, was made into a completely silent temple of movement as soft afternoon light filled the bright, expansive marble walls to the slow, trance like movements of dancers Flora Wiegmann and Rebecca Bruno for the new work, "Halo of Consciousness," choreographed by Wiegmann.

During the performance, only the dancers heard the soundtrack, which was played to the audience before and after the dance. Not many stuck around after to experience the music without the dancers, but they should have: the music gave a melancholy, ghostly feeling to the beautiful space and invoked the presence of the dance and the dancers in the wake of their absence.



"Halo of Consciousness" performed by Flora Wiegmann and Rebecca Bruno at Union Station. Photo by Amber Cortes.



"Halo of Consciousness" performed by Flora Wiegmann and Rebecca Bruno at Union Station. Photo by Amber Cortes.

In the Good Arts building a few blocks away from the fair, sound artist Brendan Fowler gathered

together a group of strangers and local artists to help read lyrics for a sound art piece created with a Roland SO404 Sampler. The vocal samples of the group, layered over the 3 sound compositions, crash into each other in and out of sync, creating a layered effect not unlike the works of John Cage. The piece was one part of a two stages of a new durational performance Fowler that debuted at the fair.



Brendan Fowler performs at the Good Arts Bulding in Pioneer Square. Photo by Amber Cortes.



Brendan Fowlers with local ad hoc performers at Good Arts Building in Pioneer Square. Photo by Amber Cortes.

Fowler is an artist who has had many experiences at art fairs: “And I can say some of them can certainly be dehumanizing, and some of them are rad,” he explains, “Paul McCarthy said the thing about, you know, an artist going to an art fair is like watching their parents have sex. Which is to say, it’s kind of gnarly.”

As a performance and sound-oriented artist who creates non-sellable work, Fowler appreciates artistic director Laura Fried’s attempts to include a broad variety of work within the public programs. “I think her approach is super generous. She comes from museums, so I think she took that approach to the art fair thing, and is focused on bringing more experiential works to the Seattle Art Fair.”

Fried acknowledges that to her, the best art is art that can be experienced as well as seen; encountered as well as consumed.

“I think there are a lot of people here that may not buy a painting valued at a million dollars, but they’re having a really amazing condensed experience of all kinds of work and that’s really exciting,” she said. “Because art should be available to everyone.”

---

**BASIC FACTS:** Seattle Art Fair held its second edition from August 4 – 7, 2016 at CenturyLink Field Event Center in Seattle. For art fair coverage, click [here](#).

---