

Defining Audience: An Interview with Artist and Curator Olivia Chow

“In a compelling and scary form, modern capitalist society finally has an art that aligns with the audience, with the social elites that finance it, and with the academic industry that serves as its fellow traveller. In this sense art has become literally *contemporary*, thanks to its exorcism of aesthetic alienation and the growing integration of art into culture. When a number of cultural industries grow up around the former citadel of negativity, fine art is replaced by something that already occupies an intermediacy region between elite entertainment and mass culture”.

—Cuauhtémoc Medina, ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses’

The theme of accessibility continues to inform most of your practice, do you see yourself creating an audience other than that of the art world?

I think recently lots of artists are making work that are informing the broader public. It’s moving away from creating a product and instead reaching to people that aren’t usually exposed to art and that’s why there’s this participatory aspect to it. I’m more interested in engaging the general public because, ultimately, I think that art should be able to affect almost everyone.

How do your experiences in curating to different audiences vary?

Gastrosophy, really opened up a conversation because it was about ways of living — a very broad topic. It brought in a lot of people that I didn’t know. They heard about it through word of mouth. There is such a huge food culture right now and a lot of people were interested in the idea of an exhibit about food.

How do you think your BFA education affected how you think about audiences for contemporary vs public art?

Being contemporary I automatically think of conceptual. “Conceptual” has this idea of not being very accessible because it’s something that’s very intellectual and may not be easily understood by the public. The academic research might not come through in a conceptual body of work which is really unfortunate.

Do you see any solutions to bridging that gap between coming out of school with this theoretical knowledge and then being able to make work for a public audience? To make it more accessible, do you just throw it all away or what do you do with all of that?

Don’t throw it away. Working in places like Nina Haggerty that work with the society members really gives you a step back to what art is about and how it affects people. In school you create a body of work trying to impress people from school and that comes back to audience again.

There's factors that limit how artists define their audiences *like grants or institutional backgrounds — all these different factors that affect how artists influence who they are making work for. I've wondered what you have noticed in Edmonton, as a community, what types of factors help artists define audience.*

I hate to say this but I think that the instructors from their institutions really affect these students who come out of MacEwan or the U of A. It really changes how they see what an arts community is to begin with. I think that when recent graduates finish school they slowly realize that what they've been working towards — it really goes out the window because your audience is completely different. Getting an A at school means nothing when you apply for shows. And who gives you the A? The instructor that thinks your work is successful? That's one out of the rest of the world, sadly. Instructors really need to keep that in mind, I think, because that really screws up how students see the art world.

Do you think the encroachment of the commercial art world in MFA programs hinders creativity in any way?

Depends on the person's view of art. I see art as something very social, a focus on engagement and effectively using art to influence people. Can you buy that experience? Can you buy that engagement? I don't think you can. I think the artist has to produce it every time. But that is my way of seeing art. A lot of other people don't see art like that.

Keeping audience in mind, how do you think artists can confuse financial success with artistic success?

Someone discovers this one thing and everyone thinks it's hot shit. But it's important to reflect on that. Once you understand what makes it popular — doesn't make it good. What makes it popular, people buying into it, that's the audience's choice. But everyone needs to think for themselves. When someone approaches me afterwards and talks with me about my work at a show and there's a discussion behind it, someone comes and tells me their view on it whether it's bad or not — that's how I know if the work is successful or not. And unfortunately that doesn't come in dollar value. (laughs) But It gives me the motivation to make art and create more discussion.

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