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Plains Art Museum explores the global phenomenon of socially engaged art



A museum-goer places a sticker on Jeff Knight's installation "Whole City Fargo-Moorhead" at the opening reception for "Living As Form". Photo by Amy Richardson, courtesy of the Plains Art Museum.

"Living As Form: the Nomadic Version"

On display through September 14

"Living As Form" programs featuring local/regional social engagement practitioners

Tuesdays, noon – 1 p.m., and Thursdays, 5 – 8 p.m., throughout the summer (except the week of June 30 – July 4)

[Complete schedule at plainsart.org](http://plainsart.org)

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A simple but unusual feature greets you when you walk into Plains Art Museum's new "Living As Form" exhibition: a circle of chairs.

Technically, the chairs aren't a work of art, or at least they aren't intended to be strictly such. These chairs instead are meant to simply host a group of people in discussion, a concept that permeates this blend of an international touring exhibition with work from local and regional artists.

At a kickoff lunch earlier this week, the museum hosted the first in a series of discussions in that circle of chairs. In the coming weeks, invited artists will discuss a variety of projects that have socially engaged practice at their core but, for the time being, many of the questions from the gathered art supporters centered around figuring out exactly what socially engaged art actually means.



Plains Art Museum Education Director Kris Bergquist collects questions during the kickoff lunch for the "Living As Form" program series. Photo by Cody Jacobson, courtesy of the Plain Arts Museum.

"Really, in an hour, we only saw the tip of the iceberg in this conversation," Museum Director Colleen Sheehy said later. "We're seeing the whole summer as a way to explore it. We want to people to get to a deeper understanding and deeper appreciation of it, but we're not going to answer every question because it's so multifarious."

Social engagement has become a central talking point in global art circles as artists of all stripes build interactive elements into their work or have their work operate around some sort of social component. Rooted in artistic traditions that blend art with activism, socially engaged art and its practitioners often deal directly with pressing social, cultural, and political issues. They might involve interactivity or an element of

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audience participation or performance, and often look to create and shape a certain, intentional experience for that audience.

There is no strict definition of socially engaged art and neither is it a completely new concept—artists in many cultures have deployed similar tactics in one way or another through history—but Sheehy says the notion of social engagement seems to have gained traction in recent years as a reaction to the frustrations felt with traditional pathways to social change.

“A lot of socially engaged art has to do with relationships between people,” Sheehy says, “I think some of (its appeal) is meant to counterbalance the increasing isolation that we have, where we are disengaged, maybe, from conventional channels of interaction like politics and, specifically, politics as an avenue for social betterment.”

Examples of this burgeoning practice can be found throughout the Fargo-Moorhead area and a few are featured in the “Living as Form” exhibition. Graphic designer Jeff Knight created a large interactive map, installed on the floor of the gallery, called “Whole City Fargo-Moorhead.” Audience members are invited to place stickers on the map where they experienced a range of significant personal events. Sheehy says it’s an example of how social practitioners seek to bring out everyday people’s experiences and knowledge with the result, in this case, being a map unlike any traditional map we’d encounter.

The traveling portion of the exhibition, co-organized by New York-based arts groups [Creative Time](#) and [Independent Curator’s International](#) (ICI), features projects with a similar focus from across the globe. A recent controversy with another iteration of the exhibition (there are 48 total in the “nomadic version”), on display at Technion University in Haifa, Israel, underscores how broadly the issue of social engagement can reach. With its appearance at the university, the exhibition violated a cultural boycott of Israel as a reaction to that country’s occupation of Palestine. [Several artist groups pulled out of the exhibition entirely](#), and Sheehy said that at the last minute the museum took down two posters originally slated for display.

Sheehy said that this could be a learning moment for those looking to see social change through art.

“I think both organizations (Creative Time and ICI) think that it’s those situations where art is even more important, to go into some questionable political situations to get to people,” she said.

[\(You can find a complete breakdown of the ongoing “Living As Form” controversy over at Hyperallergic.\)](#)

In order to further encourage interaction and discussion around these and other projects, the museum will be hosting twice-weekly opportunities for the public to meet artists in mini-residencies. Each Tuesday, a “lunch launch” will feature conversation over the noon hour and each Thursday an evening event will highlight participation. All of these activities are free and open to the public, and each of them will offer artists and audiences an opportunity to come together around ideas of social change, Sheehy says.

“A lot of artists are very idealistic. They consider themselves citizens and they want to counteract the stereotype of the isolated Western artist. They want to use their skills of creativity and different ways of thinking about problems to make an impact.”

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