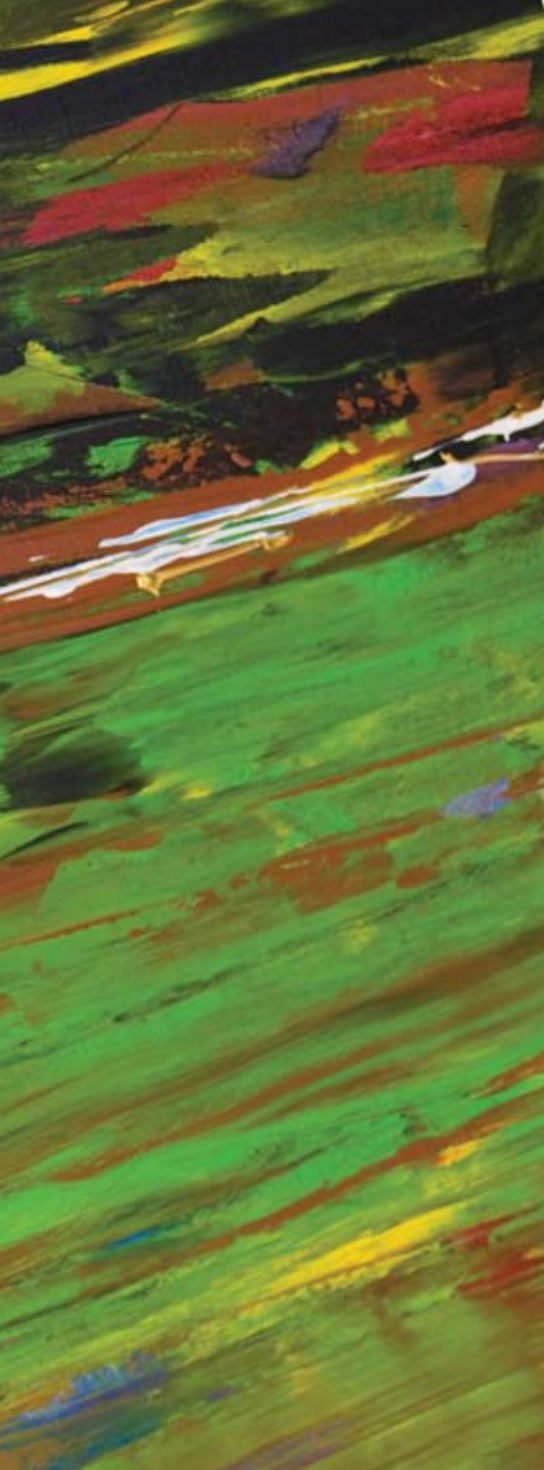




Beauty Ours for the sharing

by James Housefield

What happens when PBS calls and asks you to film a television series? As an art historian, I'd always wondered what it would be like to be one of the lucky scholars — like Simon Schama or Sir Kenneth Clark — who, taking cameras around the world, offer audiences a virtual experience of glorious art and architecture. Could my passion for art and its history survive a transfer from classroom to television screen?



Amidst final exams in early December 2006, an e-mail arrived that tapped into this fantasy. Would I, in my role as National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor, collaborate on a segment of the *State of Tomorrow* series?

A few minutes into conversation with producer Cile Spelce Elley, I realized how much I had prepared while awaiting this opportunity. *State of Tomorrow*, she explained, would investigate the voices of public universities in preparing society for the challenges of this new century. Their

team would profile those who sought to cure cancer and those who contemplated the impact of natural resource depletion. How might the arts figure into the state of tomorrow? Will art matter less or more? What roles will the arts play in the 21st

What if we awakened, tomorrow, to find all traces of art removed from our lives?

century? All of these questions related to my research as curator and historian of modern and contemporary art. They were tied closely to my mission as the NEH Professor. Within a few minutes' time, we had mapped out the ideas that would drive the episode.

Creative Capital

Our title would honor the Creative Capital Foundation that finances experimentation and innovation in contemporary art. Ultimately, the title also recalled the notion of a "creative class" as conceived by economist Richard Florida. In the new

economies of our day, Florida believes, the true wealth of communities is best measured by the creativity their citizens generate and the degree to which this "creative class" is nurtured.

Following this logic, the Austin-San Marcos-San Antonio metroplex can best measure its richness in terms of the creativity that it fosters in music, the visual and performing arts and the sciences. Universities often become incubators of such creative output, especially when the cultural life outside them encourages new ways of approaching old problems. With innovation and expertise stretching from the activities of world-class mariachi and jazz musicians to those of renowned poets, artists and scholars, Texas State embodies the potential for "creative capital" to enrich our region.

Before the deal was sealed, I was adamant about one detail: This episode was motivated by my work, but it was not about me. To that end, I asked the production team to include many artworks of their choice in filming "Creative Capital." I urged them to look at the exceptional art made by my Texas State colleagues and students. Although I supplied sample lists of public art they might film, the production team's inspiration was central to the episode's success. The Austin Museum of Art, where I serve as adjunct curator, invited the PBS team to film the opening party celebrating our latest exhibition. We scheduled an interview on campus, to be held during the annual faculty art exhibit in the Joann Cole

Mitte Galleries. I invited the team to sit in on my classes, in hopes that our students would have a voice in the episode.

Light, cameras!

On-campus filming filled half a day early in the spring semester. Producer/Director George Sledge and his crew set up cameras in the gallery, encouraging me to talk in a way that would later be edited into a distinct monologue for the segment. Some aspects of the filming that seemed strange – as, for instance, when I danced atop a bench in front of the Joann Cole Mitte Building’s multi-story windows – I later understood were a part of the filmmakers’ vision.

From the gallery to the classroom, we looked at the merger of art and life in myriad ways during filming. Cameras focused on students in my Mitte Honors Seminar (“Sonic Visions: Art and Music Intersect”) as we discussed a stirring question: “*What if*

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we awakened, tomorrow, to find all traces of art removed from our lives?” This was a new way of approaching the questions that my NEH professorship would unravel, and our discussion was enriched by the participation of Jeff Gordon, professor of philosophy and my predecessor as NEH Professor. Bright lights and cameras, though hard to ignore,

didn’t seem out of place in these classes. To my “History of Modern Art” classroom, packed with some 200 students, I delivered a lecture tailored to the cameras’ presence. Following one of the major ideas of our semester’s study — that of the manifesto in which artists proclaimed their goals — I offered my own modest manifesto for my students and our guests.

Afterword

When the first episode of *State of Tomorrow* aired, highlighting the work of Texas State faculty to protect water resources, it was clear that this would be an interesting and important series. As I watched the 13 episodes of the series unfold, I felt a certain solidarity with the others who had been profiled when I saw what they had been asked to do for the cameras. Two or three segments came together to form each episode. Despite the wide range of topics addressed, an even-handedness



Housefield prepares for a filming session for the PBS series *State of Tomorrow*. Photo courtesy Julia Deal.



President Denise Trauth presents Piper Professor Award to Housefield, the 16th Texas State faculty member to receive the award. Texas State is second only to the University of Texas at Austin in the number of Pipers awarded to faculty.

and a unified vision seemed to dominate the segments and the view of their subjects. By the time my segment aired, I wondered how many of my students across the state might forgo other summer evening activities and tune in.

Less than a year into the NEH-sponsored project that would consider the interconnectedness of modern art and life, I had come to understand several key elements of that research in new ways. Amidst the potential alienation fostered by modern society, artists increasingly demanded that art and life connect. By the late 20th century, art was as likely to be an intangible experience as it was to be a painting to hang on the wall.

Ours is an era in which we have the choice to incorporate beauty and thoughtful design into every aspect of our lives. Art's challenge for the new century is this: Will we seize this opportunity and design our world anew? Beauty is ours for the sharing. ★

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An Art & Life Manifesto

What art will define this new century? In the spirit of the great political and artistic manifestoes of the past, this is my own call for the art of tomorrow. I include here a version of my manifesto written in the spirit of those artists of the past who called out in support of a new place for the arts in modern life.

I. Back to basics? Back to Tolstoy

"Art is not ... the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty," Tolstoy wrote in 1896. "It is a means of union among people, joining them together ... [it is] indispensable for the progress toward the well-being of humanity." Let's work together for an art of the future; it matters not whether we return to ideas of the past or create new ones wholesale.

II. We need to talk!

Art is a vehicle for communication. Bring it on! If art matters, it will inspire conversations. We each will decide whether those lead to agreement. What counts most is the conversation art inspires.

III. The hard questions

Let's support challenging art, art that takes chances. Why? Because artists can pose the difficult questions that are sometimes impossible for other sectors of society to ask safely. When Eduardo Kac collaborated with biologists to create Alba, a genetically modified rabbit that glows green under certain light rays, he opened the door for society to pose questions about genetic engineering that were too challenging for other areas to raise. What seemed pure ethics before Kac became real when separate experiments led to the development of similarly fluorescent fish for the pet industry. Art, like all the humanities, can ask the questions the sciences miss.

IV. Art and the everyday environment

Art makes our everyday lives richer, whether it be the artful design of objects we use or the influx of creative capital into our communities. We, as a society, need to welcome more art into our lives and demand more thoughtful design.

V. Play!

Children do it. Animals do it. Adults can learn how to do it. Art can authorize us to play, and thereby broaden our capacity for problem solving and our joy for life. More play!

VI. Cause to pause

Amidst our fast-paced lives, art gives us necessary opportunities to pause and take note of the world around us anew. It matters not that we may shake our heads in disbelief sometimes. What matters is that we pause to reflect, taking time for ourselves and our loved ones in unique ways.

VII. Widen the circle — with you!

Art today needs you, and your active involvement: Just do it! It matters not whether you are trained as an artist or whether you would even accept the title if it were thrust upon you. Get out there and make something happen!