

Where art meets activism

Don't be scared off by the big words in this exhibition—Extra-curricular is accessible and inspiring

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Between designing Grammy-winning album covers, Stefan Sagmeister, the media darling of the graphic design world, teaches at the School of Visual Arts. The course spends an entire semester exploring the parameters of the question, "Is it possible to touch someone's heart with design?" The pursuit, Sagmeister says, has yielded extraordinary results. One student realized that sanitary engineers were not revered the way firefighters or police officers were, and designed a character—the Supergarbage man—in honour of the often neglected profession. She then embroidered a design onto the gloves used by employees of the Department of Sanitation, and went one step further in imprinting the names of workers of her district onto the individual gloves. The Supergarbagemen were touched.

It is this sense of civic activism and creative force that the workshop "Extra-curricular: between art and pedagogy" explores. The second installment of a two-part series, "Extra-curricular" studies the space that goes "behind institutions". Billed as a curatorial project that maps out the relationship between art, education, activism, and the role of an audience, "Extra-curricular" ambitiously sets sail on a week-long journey into addressing the issue of what it means to anchor oneself as an artist and an activist in this tumultuous world.

Annette Krauss (artist-in-residence at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery) opened the workshop last Monday with a thought-provoking lecture that

weighed in on the word "and" that binds ideas (the example given is the "and" found in the phrase 'between art and education and activism'). Within this contained space, Krauss suggests the possibility for civic liberty and societal reform. More esoteric discussions follow under scary-sounding titles such as "between autonomy and heteronomy", and "feminist pedagogy as artistic intervention".

But fear not—the workshop challenges the very assumption that pedagogy is boring with its more than colourful lineup (though frankly, it could use a bit more hoopla). The conference has a truly exceptional cast, including the Centre for Urban Pedagogy from New York—a brilliant after-school programme that promotes access to creative curricula—and the colourschool, a collective from Vancouver dedicated to the study of five colours: black, white, brown, yellow, and red.

Not to mention the Pinky Show, a project by Honolulu-based educational non-profit Associated Animals that produces super low-tech, cheap-cost, and effortlessly educational shows for posting on YouTube. And then there is the proudly left-leaning HIV/AIDS advocacy group Ultra-red from London, whose work is reminiscent of General Idea (a group of Canadian artists who remixed Robert Indiana's iconic sculpture "Love" to read "AIDS").

These collectives bill themselves as halfway between art, activism, and urban design. In all, many represent a hybrid form of art not as a museum relic, but an active agent in promoting a cause, sustaining a dialogue, and rallying up a crowd.

To a society that has been taught to uphold art as that object behind ropes, glass, and do-not-touch signs, "Extra-curricular" is a riot. In a world that keeps art—in all its incarnations—just outside the reach of the public, "Extra-curricular" is exhilarating in its drive to urge participants into engaging their local communities. Here, art serves as the catalyst for cultivating social relations, where the outcome of such encounters is a public affair. It's nice to get to mingle, to wrestle, to get a little bit messy with art for a change.

Take, for example, the "model for a public space [knot]" installation by Adrian Blackwell, assistant professor of architecture at U of T. On display in the Reading Room of Hart House, this plywood construction was inspired entirely by a single experience: Blackwell wanted to recreate his impressions of participating in an unconventional meeting where consensus drove the debate and where hierarchical structures were rendered meaningless. Blackwell destabilizes the ubiquitous hierarchy by building the bleachers so that when sitting at the top, you are in fact sitting on the periphery, and once in the centre, you are ensconced by the crowd that surrounds you. The asymmetrical line-up also means that the participants will find themselves in a more intimate setting where shoulders may brush. In such human encounters, an ideal for public space begins to take shape.

Extra-curricular continues through Friday at Hart House. For more information visit extra-curricular.info.

