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Pratt Fine Arts Fosters Open Exchange with Communities on Campus and Beyond

By Diana McClure

In a one-room art studio, young men gather around a table to make stone carvings—representations of “defense objects” used for physical, emotional, or psychological protection. Across the room, fellow creators record video portraits in front of a backdrop, their movements personifying the chiseled sculptures. The young artists are attendees of an arts workshop of Assembly, a program hosted by the Brooklyn-based nonprofit Recess that brings court-involved youth together to workshop each other’s stories, deconstructing false narratives about themselves and others and discovering pathways to new ones.

The workshop, co-facilitated by Pratt Fine Arts MFA candidate Hannah Celli and the program’s founder, artist Shaun Leonardo, is an outgrowth of Leonardo’s tenure as a Fine Arts Visiting Fellow at Pratt Institute, where he met Celli in the Social Practice course he teaches. The workshop they cocreated—now supported by the Pratt Center’s Taconic Fellowship for community development projects—is an example of how artists can apply their practice to further conversations that transform communities and culture and, with their collaboration’s origins at Pratt, how an institution can create opportunities for those dialogues as well.

Participants take part in Shaun Leonardo’s Assembly Program workshop and performance at the Portland Museum of Art (PMA) in Portland, Maine, 2018. Photo courtesy of PMA.



In the current zeitgeist, businesses, government, and educational organizations must confront the question of what it means to be an ethical, democratic institution. Pratt’s Fine Arts Department is innovating in this area as it supports faculty and student explorations in what is often termed *social practice*, an art form that prioritizes human interaction and social discourse. Works created



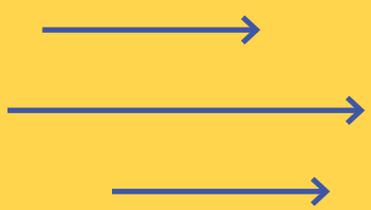
Assembly Program workshop and performance at Recess in Brooklyn, 2017. Photo by Kaz Sakuma. Courtesy of Alloy.



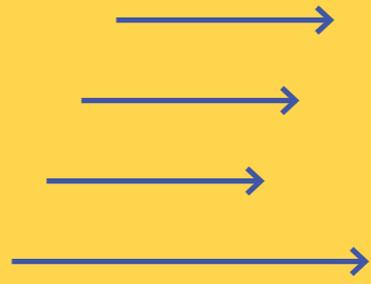
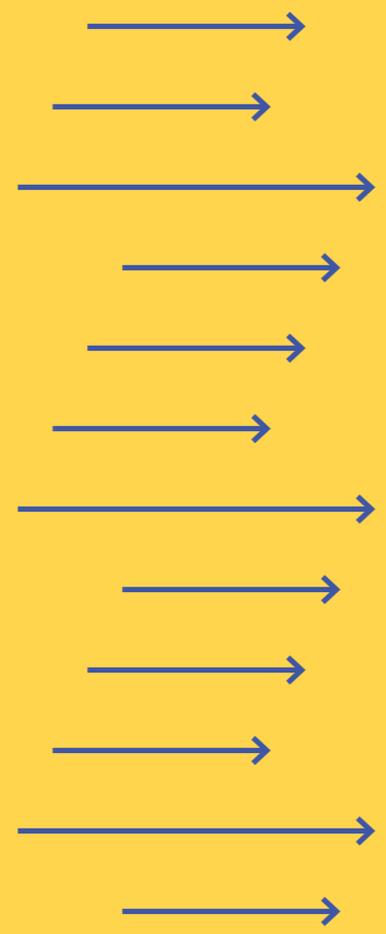
in this mode take shape through collaboration or participation by people, who act as the authors of the work, if not its very medium. Fine Arts Chair Jane South and Leonardo have worked together over the last two years on a vision of social practice at Pratt that intersects with one of the pillars of the Institute’s strategic plan, civic

engagement, and reflects a larger movement in the art world and in academia—one of increasing urgency today but with decades of precedent.

Careful to note the nuanced fluidity of the term *social practice*, Leonardo is mindful of the numerous versions that have preceded it—*social sculpture* or *cooperative art*, for example—and a current parallel term, *socially engaged art*, his preference. “Social practice can involve anything from mural making to design, architecture, or collaborative practices,” he says. “But when you start to really think about and define socially engaged work, it calls up the ways in which a reciprocal exchange is necessary. By placing ‘engagement’ in the framework, it calls into question [an artist’s] responsibility and accountability to a community.” This could mean facilitating dialogue around issues affecting a community, or organizing community members toward a goal that would improve their experience.



During his first semester at Pratt, Leonardo produced *Long Table*, which generated a diverse dialogue around the prompt “safety,” with participants from across the Institute—Pratt students, faculty, staff, and President Frances Bronet. It used a durational performance format developed by artist Lois Weaver, a “dinner party” structure to foster inclusive, non-hierarchical



Pratt community members have an open dialogue on safety during Shaun Leonardo’s *Long Table*.

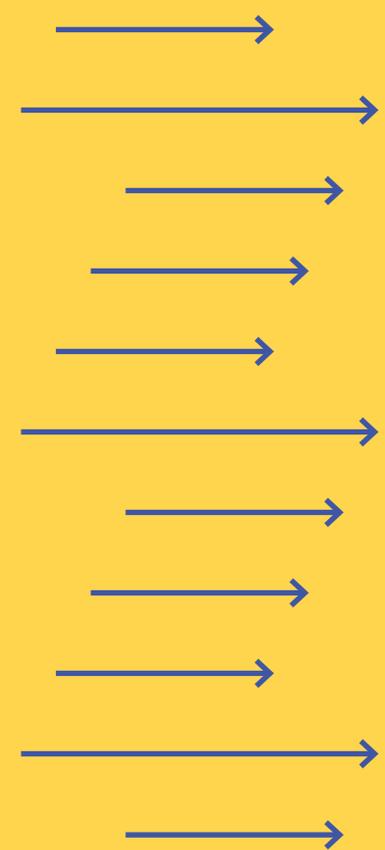


conversation. Organized around a central table with a tablecloth for note taking, anyone standing could tap a seated participant and ask to take their place at the table. Participants reflected on the question “what do we mean when we talk about safety?”—bodily, public, legal—revealing complex points of connection among different community members.

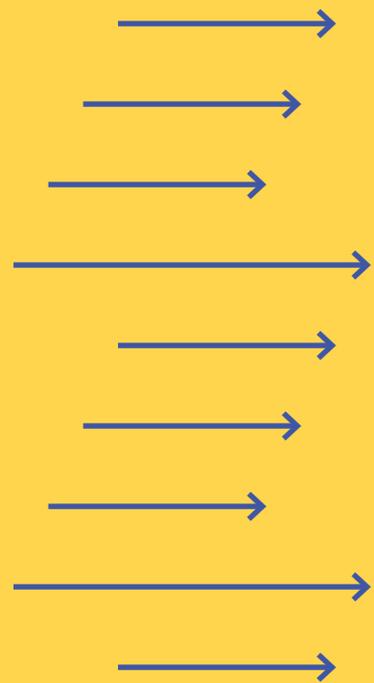
In South’s intimation, the work addressed broader questions of relevance to both society at large and members of the academic community, namely how to nurture students’ skills in communication. “Where is it that we are creating the conditions to have in-depth, nuanced

conversations—proposing a model to our students to take into the classroom when things get tense? Because what we see out there [in society] now is a lack of in-depth, nuanced conversation,” she says.

For *Long Table*, Leonardo prepared by getting to know the community members he hoped to bring together—as he has done with his performances at the New Museum and Guggenheim that explore issues of masculinity, race, and violence through nonverbal, body-based communication. This practice of relationship building inspired South’s thinking about the importance of bringing practitioner-teachers with a similar skill set into the Pratt Fine Arts fold, which led to the new Fellowship for Civic Engagement, launching in fall 2020. “We need this individual who can surf all of these different strata and who can do it with eyes and ears open, almost as a magnet, as a catalyst, as a facilitator,” she says. Leonardo’s work has led to not only a collaboration with a student, Celli, but also to



the facilitation of work between Pratt’s Creative Arts Therapy Department and Recess, Leonardo and Celli’s partner organization.



The workshop Leonardo and Celli conceived for the young men at Recess, titled *Fear as Fuel*, explores the theme of fear through sculpture and performance in a way that itself has therapeutic purpose. It explores somatics—a field within therapeutic bodywork and movement studies that emphasizes internal physical perception and experience—with young people disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system. For the sculpture component of the workshop, initially the student-participants worked with clay, but moved on to sculpting with stone, a more focused and deliberate process that mirrors the nonlinear quality of self-inquiry. “Stone carving is such a slow process, symbolically chipping away at something,” Celli says. “The reductive process of it is very much a way of accessing more deep-seated memories or emotions, and it takes more time.” Leonardo’s performative exercises with the participants act in a similar fashion, as they recall their stories and reduce them to nonverbal, body-based narratives. “The conversation we’re often having

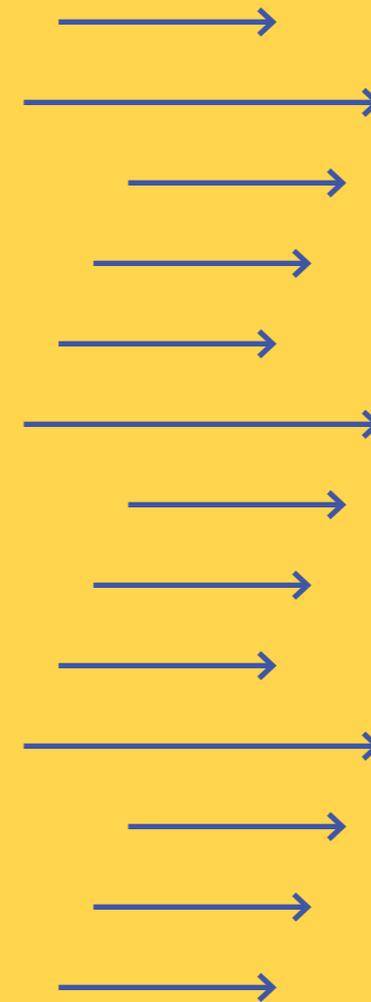
A participant in *Fear as Fuel* at Recess holds a “defense object” created as a part of the workshop, co-facilitated by Hannah Celli and Shaun Leonardo.



At Pratt, the Fine Arts Department is moving to expand partnerships with other community-based initiatives to facilitate similar conversations. The new Fellowship for Civic Engagement will support the appointed artist in developing Institute-wide and external collaborations

is, is anger, is violence, a disguise for fear? Or is it an attempt to replace it?” Leonardo says. “And my argument is that the fear never leaves, so by becoming more aware of the sensation of it, how it looks and acts, how can we then take that awareness and then potentially use it toward something else.”

that address social issues, and the fellow will be working within a vital community of socially engaged practitioners at Pratt. Among them are new faculty member Carlos Motta, whose film, sculpture, print, and photography works create counternarratives that broaden the historical record by highlighting voices that have been deliberately overlooked; Professor Ann Messner, BFA ’74, who leads the Integrated Practices concentration of the MFA program, and whose artistic work engages the inextricable intersection of private life and social experience; and students like Maria Elizabeth Janasz, MFA ’19, whose thesis involved a community discourse on mental health.



Shaun Leonardo’s Testimony #2: *Experiences of Stereotyping/Silencing*, a workshop and performance at the Whitney Museum, for Whitney Teens: Youth Summit, 2018. Photo by Filip Wolak.

“I see so many more people coming into art school who, when you ask them what they want with their engagement with creativity, they say they want to make change,” says South. One way Pratt Fine Arts is addressing this desire is by emphasizing civic engagement through a network of socially engaged practitioners, artists who have the flexibility to navigate ambiguous spaces and reimagine the structures we live in. “The other fundamental reason to have this kind of practice and this kind of practitioner come into an academic setting is to get something in motion but then to follow wherever that motion leads,” South says, emboldening artists to alchemize the strengths of the institution in support of the broader community while simultaneously modeling an inspirational way forward for the community at Pratt.