

Who says change can't  
come from the heartland?  
Indianapolis Museum of  
Art's **100 Acres**  
rethinks the role of open-  
air art and sets aside  
traditional models of  
public art commissioning  
in favour of a  
'collective  
artistic practice'

WORDS: JONATHAN T. D. NEIL

**LISA D. FREIMAN**, the senior curator of contemporary art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the artistic director of the IMA's new 100 Acres: The Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park, is betting that the Midwest, and Indianapolis in particular, can change the way both artists and the public think about, make and engage with the tricky category of public art. Indeed, the premise of 100 Acres is to transform something of the idea of what we mean by 'public', both in itself and with respect to the art made and presented in its name.

That a Midwestern museum might be at the forefront of trying to rethink public art should not be surprising. One of the first major pieces of modern public art in the US that was not intended as either a monument or memorial, an untitled 50-foot-high Picasso sculpture (usually referred to as the Chicago Picasso), was installed on Chicago's Daley Plaza, just 180 miles north of the IMA, in 1967. The 'public-ness' of this piece stemmed nominally from its setting – the urban plaza that would front the city's new Civic Center (urban plazas were all the rage after Mies completed the Seagram Building in 1958) – and commissioner: Chicago's Public Building Commission (even though the project architect, William E. Hartmann, largely controlled the show). The fabrication of Picasso's piece was largely paid for with private money, and the Spaniard famously refused the fee offered him by Mayor Daley, stating that his work would be a gift to the city. The public reception was largely positive.

That year also marked the birth of the National Endowment for the Arts's Art in Public Places programme, the first grant of which went to the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan (180 miles northeast of Chicago), in 1969, for a large public stabile by Alexander Calder titled *La Grande Vitesse* (a play on the city's name). Here the \$45,000 grant had to be matched by the community, but when the 'public' found out that it would have no say in the selection of the artist or the work, it was not pleased, and vocally so. Letters to the local paper dubbed the choice of Calder as 'unpatriotic' (he'd spent too much time in France, apparently) and 'undemocratic', which led the painter Adolph Gottlieb, who





served on the selection committee, to note that 'artists and the public are seldom in rapport. What is important is that an artist make a creative statement, which, if it is worth anything at all, will become accepted in time.' Call it public art paternalism.

Save for 'performance', today there are few more enlisted and debated terms in the discourse of contemporary art than 'public', 'community', 'participation' and 'collaboration'. Theories of and commentaries on these ideas have come fast and furious, and practitioners are ever vigilant against the kind of paternalism Gottlieb advocated. For example, we have long been disabused of the notion that a work's site is simply its physical setting, and so any art that may be 'specific' to such a site (or 'responsive', as the IMA is touting, 'specificity' perhaps being too freighted, too 'modernist') must not only acknowledge its particular locale but also take into account the people, politics, histories and prospective futures that code and constantly recode the meaning of any given place. Rather than essentialise such 'communities' by calling on (or inventing) some shared trait, interest or identity, the point, according to theorists such as Miwon Kwon, is to go for 'collective artistic praxis', which 'involves a provisional group, produced as a function of specific circumstances instigated by an artist and/or a cultural institution, aware of the effects of these circumstances on the very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process'.

One could hardly find a better description of the manner in which the artist collaborative Type A's *Team Building (Align)* (all works 2010) came into being. One of the eight 'inaugural commissions' for 100 Acres, *Align* consists of a pair of metal rings, each 30 feet in diameter, suspended parallel to the ground at 15 and 25 feet by cables attached to telephone poles and offset from one another such that their shadows will align on each summer solstice. It's a simple, elegant and 'responsive' proposal – but it was not always thus. Its genesis lies in the 'team building' and 'experiential education' training that Adam Ames and Andrew Bordwin (the members of Type A) underwent at High 5 Adventure Learning





Centre in Vermont in 2007, and in the extensive team-building sessions that the pair then held with staff members from every part of the IMA, from groundskeepers to curators, security guards to conservators. As Freiman explains it, "Once our meetings began, we interspersed various games and initiatives with long conversations that addressed the purpose of 100 Acres and questioned the role of the *Team Building* project. We agreed that the projects needed to relate specifically to the site and should somehow take into consideration the relationships between art and nature. No one knew how the artwork was going to turn out."

Type A began to zero in on the idea of a suspended climbing tower for which all of the handholds would be moulded from the grips of the IMA staff. Type A liked the idea of the tower; it manifested the kinds of challenges that the expanded group had faced, but it could also stand as an implicit critique of the institution and the kind of inaccessibilities inherent to it and to contemporary art in general. Members of the IMA 'team' disagreed. And because, in this instance, Type A had grown to encompass this larger provisional community, their 'greater public', those disagreements could not be swept aside in the name of individual artistic agency or Gottlieb-style paternalism. Pressure mounted. Discussions ensued. Then one day Freiman received a text message from Ames: 'The tower is dead', followed by one from Bordwin: 'Long live the tower'. *Align* would not be far behind.

Not every project slated for 100 Acres can claim such 'collective artistic praxis' as *Team Building (Align)*. Many of the pieces unveiled this year remain what we might call more 'relational' in character, seeking 'integration' rather than 'intervention' (Kwon again), such as Atelier Van Lieshout's *Funky Bones* or Jeppe Hein's *Bench Around the Lake* or Alfredo Jaar's *Park of the Laments*, all of them offering visitors places of play or repose of one kind or another. The residents from the local Herron School of Art & Design inhabiting Andrea Zittel's floating *Indianapolis Island* in the middle of 100 Acres's 35-acre lake and serving as de facto park rangers or refugees will likely have more to say about 'communing' with their art and the surrounding nature than with any 'public' that may come calling.

But *Team Building (Align)* demonstrates the distances these artists (Type A) and this institution (100 Acres and the IMA) are willing to travel in search of the kind of collective artistic praxis that promises to keep the question of what is 'public' in public art open, and perhaps radically so. Change does come from the Midwest; perhaps it's time to expect it. ■

*100 Acres: The Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park, Indianapolis Museum of Art, opens 20 June*

WORKS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Atelier Van Lieshout, *Funky Bones* 2010 (two views), Indianapolis Museum of Art

Andrea Zittel, *Indianapolis Island* 2010, Indianapolis Museum of Art

Tea Mäkipää, *Eden II* 2010, Indianapolis Museum of Art

Type A, *Team Building (Align)*, 2010 (project and exercise), Indianapolis Museum of Art

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