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Realism & Representation

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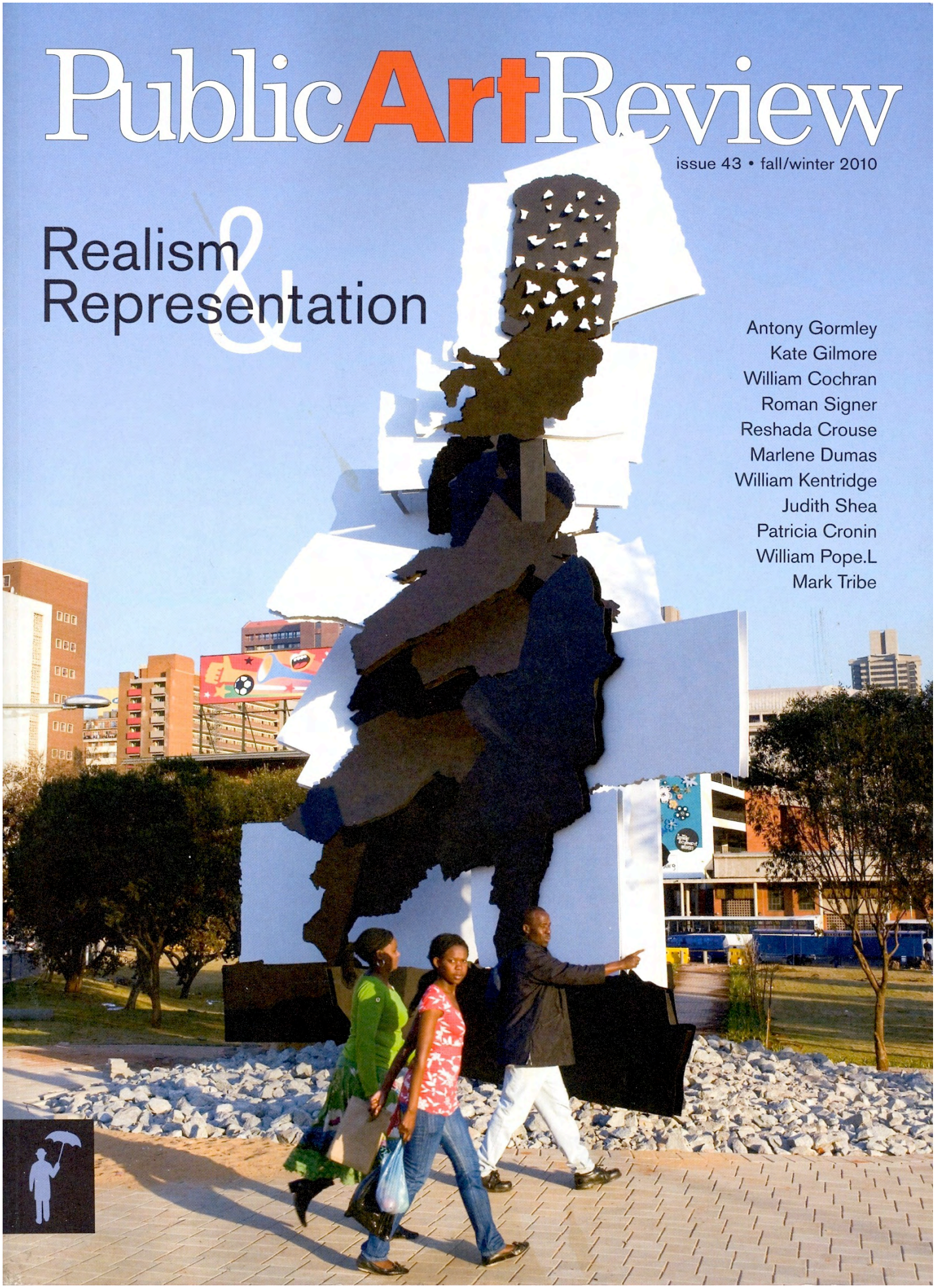

Repurposing the University:
UCIRA and embedded arts research across California

California artists and arts institutions are adjusting to downsizing in all sectors of state public programs. Scarcity can trigger unimaginative belt-tightening, but it also opens a liberal space for those on the margins to enter stage left with different propositions. In the face of economic and social instability, a new creative force is leading the charge to reimagine the future. Such exploratory models of arts practice are percolating from within the nine University of California (UC) campuses with arts programs, positioning artists to lead in California's uncertain future.

Since its inception in 1987, the UC Institute for Research (UCIRA) has served as an intercampus granting agency and think tank for innovative arts research in the UC system. In 2005, under a new administration, the institute expanded its mission. After an extensive tour of UC's arts programs, leaders at UCIRA were struck by the degree of duplication in self-perception, efforts, facilities, and programs, as each campus aspired to be a self-contained research environment. In response, UCIRA aimed new programs toward cooperation and launched funding of experimental projects in visual, performing, and new media arts (see www.ucira.ucsb.edu).

Recently, UCIRA announced three new initiatives to foster partnerships among UC researchers and broader sectors of the arts and its publics. As part of this seeding effort, UCIRA is commissioning artists both within and outside the university to serve as consultants to the university, with their "study" focused on the UC system itself as a site for critical self-reflection in this time of crisis and transition. The new initiatives are Social Ecologies, Social Technologies, and Integrative Methodoligies.

Social Ecologies

The Social Ecologies initiative provides opportunities for artists to investigate the diverse physical terrains belonging to the state, as well as the contested relationships between natural and developed spaces. Embedding artists in various fields encourages a wide range of research related to the state's development, use, and interpretation of land.

One program in Social Ecologies, "Mapping the Desert/Deserting the Map," in its third year of partnership with UC–Riverside Sweeney Art Gallery and Palm Desert Graduate Center, is an arts-centered investigation of California's Mojave and Colorado deserts and of current visualization and mapping technologies. "The need to grapple with the multiple complexities and challenges contained within the actual deserts of the world—and within the no less complex *idea* of the 'desert'—is more urgent now than ever," says Dick Hebdige, UCIRA Desert Studies director.

The most recent desert immersion drew students and scholars from seven UC campuses, along with other participants, to Joshua Tree National Park for three days of exchange. The group explored a vast array of ecologies during site visits to the Twenty-Nine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center—a complex that includes faux Iraq/Afghanistan training facilities, "Pioneertown" (a Hollywood movie set–turned village), an ecological preserve, and a desert oasis. The participants created 24 temporary site-embedded installations

ABOVE: Participants on a guided tour of protected sand dunes in California's Palm Desert. RIGHT and BELOW RIGHT: Gabie Strong, *UR Rituals*, 2010. This site-specific collaborative sound performance and temporal land art installation was staged at the ruins of an early 20th century homesteader house in Wonder Valley, near Twentynine Palms, CA.

that activated the land and connected with local year-round residents.

UC–Riverside lecturer and artist Ken Ehrlich, "was inspired by the idea of how to facilitate future research and art projects in the desert." He developed a set of conceptual drawings for a roving desert vehicle that would become an on-site field-teaching environment suitable for a range of off-the-grid mobile dwellers. Artist Gabie Strong, from UC–Irvine, co-organized a collaborative visual-sound performance, *UR Rituals*. This one-time media event, located in and around an abandoned homestead, produced a contradictory set of associations between the landscape and its history of human occupation.

A second Social Ecologies effort involves arts research within the 135,000-acre UC Natural Reserve System, a rich holding of interpretive platforms for collaboration with the natural sciences. UCIRA commissioned a field study of the reserve's 36 sites with the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, a collective whose membership of artists, historians, geographers, and nonprofit organizers work in collaboration with the public to map and enact alternative considerations and connections in California's natural and acculturated spaces. From their study, UCIRA and the Rangers are currently assessing the capacity for interpretive programming at multiple UC Natural Reserves to enhance engagement by artists across the system.

Social Technologies

Another UCIRA program, Social Technologies, provides a communication infrastructure for arts researchers in the university system to share practices and resources.

This year, UCIRA brought in Chicago-based editor, writer, and cultural organizer Daniel Tucker to explore and interpret existing communications in the UC system. In early 2010, Tucker conducted interviews of more than 50 UC arts

ABOVE: Photo courtesy the author. RIGHT and BELOW RIGHT: Photos by Christopher Woodcock.

researchers to develop a communication platform to network and document artistic research emerging from the UC system. These interviews have formed the basis for a new, dynamic, online publishing project called SOTA/State of the Arts (ucsota.wordpress.com). The first six months of content will focus on the theme of "Public Ed and the Public Good," which, from Tucker's outside perspective, "brings together concerns about the value of arts and education with concerns about people's jobs and economic future."

Integrative Methodologies

A third program, Integrative Methodologies: Rethinking the Art/Science Paradigm, fosters research relationships between the artists and scientists on a local, national, and international basis. The central assumption of the program is that the artist is a significant player in rethinking *all* disciplines; hence, UCIRA is crafting ways to place individual artists in a range of field settings, including studio environments and exploratory laboratories.

As UCIRA director, I am currently developing a think tank with artists, urban planners, and geographers across the system to develop a UC Proximity Research Laboratory, using GIS mapping technologies to explore each campus's unique range of geographies (suburban, urban, agrarian, bordered) in order to advance research into California's development history since the inception of the UC system.

Farther afield, UCIRA is joining an international consortium to facilitate trans-global research opportunities. The Arctic Perspective Initiative (API) sponsors an Arctic art-science residency led by current UCIRA co-director Marko Peljhan. The multidisciplinary team of researchers will work with the Inuit population to explore climate-change solutions based on both traditional indigenous and new technologies.

Since 2006, UCIRA-funded projects have been showcased at the Annual State of the Arts Conference, held at a different UC campus each year. This year's conference, "Future Tense: Alternative Arts and Economies in the University," took place at UC–San Diego, November 18–20. For more information see www.ucira.ucsb.edu.

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