

Toward Common Cause



Curatorial statement

Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40 uses the idea or notion of “the commons” as the central organizing principle—a concept defined by MacArthur Fellow Lewis Hyde (in his *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*) as “a social regime for managing a common resource.” Although the idea of the commons is historically associated with Western Europe, the notion of common property, communal-use rights and communally managed (natural) resources has universal resonance.

The literal timbre of that which is “held in common” notwithstanding, however, resources such as air, land,

water—and, crucially, for our understanding, art and culture—were not always, and still aren't, “free,” i.e., freely available: all commons involve obligations and are, to some extent, exclusionary. Evidently, this makes the precarious notion of the commons an ideal lens through which to explore the current sociopolitical moment, in which questions of inclusion, exclusion, ownership, and rights of access are constantly being challenged and redefined across a wide range of areas of human endeavor. *Toward Common Cause* seeks to explore the role art can play in society, to engage the history, geography, and citizens of the city of Chicago, and it is predicated on the belief that art is a vital social resource.

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In their aptly titled and hugely influential pamphlet, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, MacArthur Fellow Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe the myriad ways in which the commons are continuously besieged. Moten

and Harney's point is a critical injunction to vigilance at a moment in time when our understanding about what human beings share (culture, values, rights, and duties) is being undermined by new barriers erected to enclose those very rights. Art can potentially play a crucial role in this call to vigilance, precisely because of its universalist appeal as a platform for the exchange of values and ideals. Under the aegis of the commons, the exhibition will explore four distinct spheres: human society and communication, the natural environment, the built environment, and identity. The artists selected to participate approach issues of social change, collective identity, culture, and politics, across a spectrum of artistic practice. Critically, the idea that all art is a form of social practice is foundational to the project's goals.

Toward Common Cause pays homage to Chicago's status as the capital of community-based art in the US. There is a long history of the activation of art on the part of marginalized communities in this city—a tradition that stretches back to the 1940s. Social practice, as a recognizable movement, emerged in the city in the 1980s and was fostered by a combination of factors—cultural (a wealth of art schools), social/political (the ethnic diversity of the city), and economic (working class roots)—unique to the city. To honor this tradition, the exhibition will branch out from its main venue, the Smart Museum. This exhibition is a collective endeavor made possible through partnerships with artists, institutions, and community partners across the city.

—Abigail Winograd

MacArthur Fellows Program 40th Anniversary Exhibition

Curator

Smart Museum of Art

The University of Chicago

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