

A Village that Tells a Story: Degenerate Art Ensemble in the Public Square

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Degenerate Art Ensemble (DAE) “always thinks big.”

So say Haruko Nishimura and Joshua Kohl, the performance group’s artistic directors. And it continues to be true with their upcoming collaboration with the Frye Art Museum.

Part exhibit, part performance, with a smattering of lecture, film, and workshop, DAE and curator Robin Held are challenging the typical role of a museum to document the past. Nishimura and Kohl say, “this show is 90 percent new work.”

That is a lot of new work, since Held has offered DAE a majority of the Frye Museum for this project. To utilize the space, Nishimura and Kohl plan to draw inspiration from their previous projects. “Instead of a museum full of our stuff from the past on display, we are trying to create the feeling and atmosphere of one of our performances interpreted as museum installations.”

“We won’t be putting our props and memorabilia on pedestals in the traditional museum retrospective sense,” they report. “We are actually taking our performance archive and using it to build entirely new installation works.”

While DAE have often built and used elaborate props and costumes in their performances, this exhibit puts primary emphasis on these objects in the absence of the living artists.

“This couldn’t be more different from making time-based work in a theater setting where the work is an ephemeral changing experience for an hour and then is gone,” Nishimura and Kohl say.

“In the museum, the work stands alone and the viewer is in many ways in control of how they will experience the work,” they say. “So together with Robin we are trying to create a world and tell a story with these different installations.”

Kohl described DAE’s enthusiasm for this challenge.

“Our work has always been about finding new ways of exploring art. Adding new skills. Telling stories in new ways. So this exhibition is just an extension of this approach,” he says.

“The challenge here is how can we continue telling our stories without our physical presence in the work. So the visual aspects and the sound take on an even bigger role. It has actually been wonderful to let the artists who are usually in the background of our work take center stage.”



Degenerate Art Ensemble: Cuckoo Crow (performance still), 2006. Photo credit: Bruce Tom.

In particular, DAE is featuring the work of musician Dohee Lee, who met Nishimura and Kohl in 2006 through work with Shinichi Iova-Koga's Inkboat dance company.

As a drummer in the Korean tradition, Lee reveals that "my voice, drumming, and dance are going to take the role of a storyteller." She also reports that Nishimura and Kohl were especially interested in the shamanistic and healing focus of her musical work.

Lee finds the large scale of the project to be a good catalyst for productive work. "I feel a great synergy in working with all of the artists involved in this project – choreographers, composers, set designer, instrument builder, costume designer, and visual artists," she says. "It feels like we are weaving together all these threads (movement, melody, image, story, rhythm) and experimenting with their placement."

The musical portion of this project will be expanded even further during the live performances of "Red Shoes" on selected days of the exhibit. "Red Shoes" adapts Hans Christian Andersen's tale of a girl whose red shoes will not allow her to stop dancing. As Kohl describes, "the music that the Chorus of St. James will sing with us will be composed by us using the texts and melodies of the Pentacost chants, and in June, they will use our music for their Pentacost ceremonies. This way we are both benefiting from the collaboration."

These new collaborations have helped to energize DAE throughout its long tenure. "Many of the DAE collaborators have come in and out of the group for over a decade," says Kohl. "Others join for a single project. There is always a flow of fresh blood in the group, bringing new ideas and new approaches to making the work."

In his artistic collaboration with Nishimura, Kohl says, "we have found ways of giving the other artists much room for expression. So I think artists can produce very unique work with DAE while simultaneously pushing DAE to new realms and being

challenged themselves to expand their skills and potential. This has kept the energy fresh and the group continues to evolve.”

This evolution has now come to include the conversations initiated by Robin Held, who had watched DAE’s work for several years. Held approached DAE with questions about exploring performance in a museum context.

“At first we thought it was the usual, ‘Hey, can you do a little performance in our lobby at our next opening?’” says Kohl. “But Robin had bigger plans.”

Prior to those conversations, DAE had not previously met Held. “We have been watching the Frye Museum transform and become our favorite contemporary art space in town,” Kohl says, “and now we have met the wizard behind the curtain.”

Now DAE is learning to practice that wizardry too. “This is the amazing power of performance, how it is able to transform space and stretch and contract time,” Kohl says. With this exhibit and the “Red Shoes” performance, Kohl says, “we are transforming the neighborhood around the Frye into a tiny village to tell the story.”

“Degenerate Art Ensemble” runs from March 19 to June 19, with performances of “Red Shoes” on May 12, 19, 26 and June 2, at Frye Art Museum, 704 Terry Avenue, Seattle.