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WALTER HOOD AND SHANNON JACKSON

The Inside-Out Museum/ The Inside-Out University

A Conversation

Editor's note: In 1873 when California's flagship public university moved to its present location, then part of Oakland Township, the edges of its campus were open to the ranchland surrounding it. The university profoundly shaped the city that incorporated as the Town of Berkeley five years after the campus arrived.

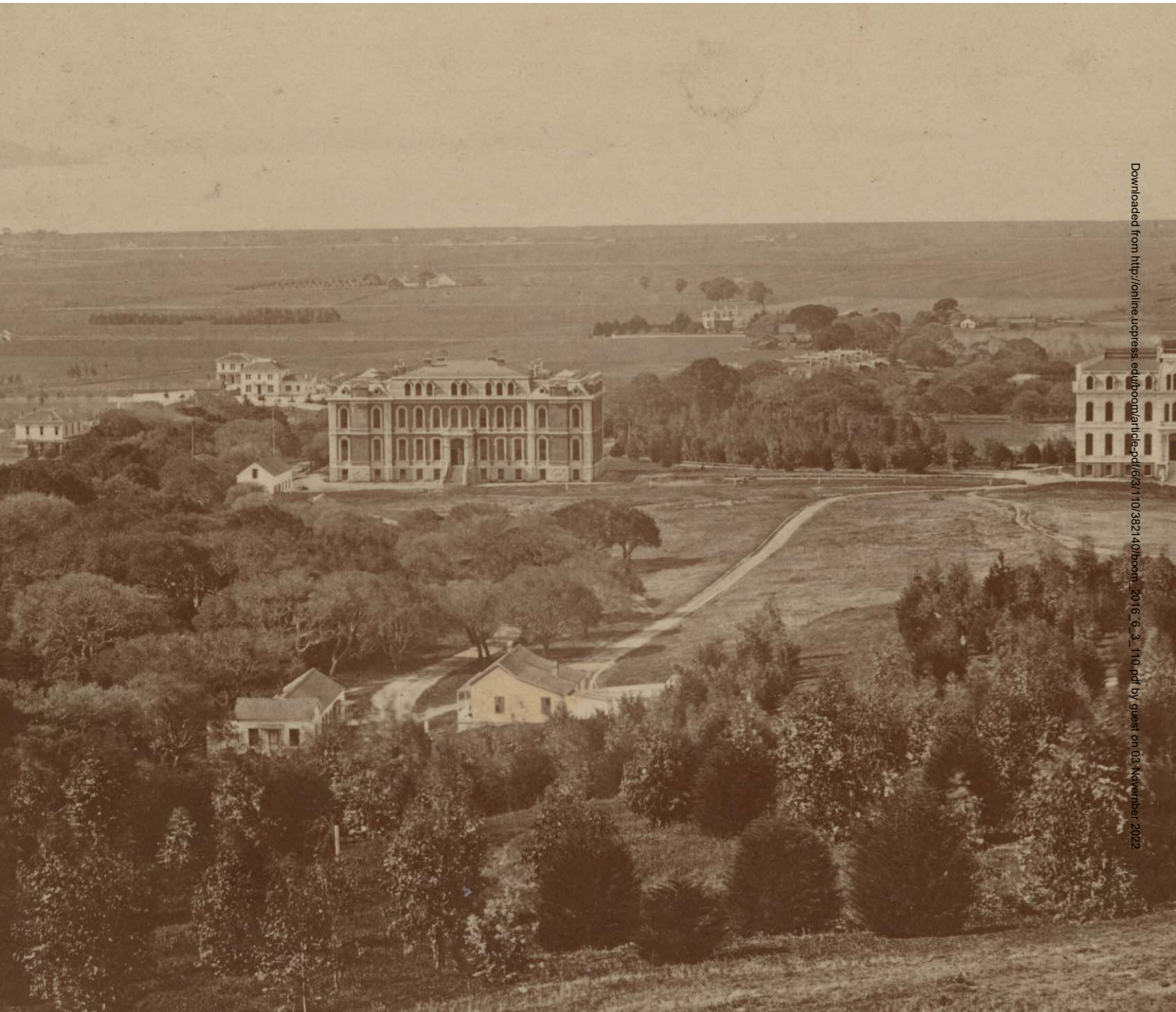
By contrast, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) was established in a dense urban neighborhood at a time of political turmoil and violence in 1969. The windowless facades of the museum complex appear designed for defensibility, facing downtown Oakland streets and Lake Merritt with walls of raw concrete.

It would be too simple to describe one campus as open and the other as closed. While urban form influences dynamics among institutions and their cities, it does not determine them, and both the university and the museum have a complex history of interactions with their settings. Now, both institutions are examining their connections to their publics and the relationships among their internal and external constituencies.

The Oakland Museum of California, known for its innovative programming in art, history, and natural history, has asked the university to help find ways to better integrate both physically and culturally with its city. As the process begins, the university is discovering that engaging in this conversation is helping highlight important questions about its own function in the urban East Bay and beyond.

In a course sponsored by the Global Urban Humanities Initiative, Landscape Architecture Professor Walter Hood will ask students to examine the museum and its neighborhoods in order to come up with proposals for change. Hood works on projects ranging from city-scale master plans to site plans to art installations and is known for his focus on the human element in design.

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University of California, Berkeley campus, viewed from the east circa 1874. Photograph courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

OMCA Executive Director Lori Fogarty says that addressing questions of art, economics, identity, gentrification, and environmental change requires approaches from multiple disciplines. “We hope that the Museum can serve as a new kind of town square or public plaza for Oakland, connecting our campus with Lake Merritt, the adjacent civic buildings, the BART station and the surrounding neighborhoods. Our work with Walter, with UC Berkeley, and with other partners involved with social practice and creative place-making inspires us to consider the Museum in a different way—and to, as Walter says, ‘dream big.’ Our city and our community need and deserve big dreams—and that requires that we all work together with boldness, courage, and imagination.”

University of California, Berkeley, Associate Vice Chancellor for the Arts and Design Shannon Jackson recently spoke with Walter Hood at his Oakland studio about how the arts and humanities and design can work together to illuminate urban experience.

Shannon Jackson: As an artist and designer, you have created award-winning landscape designs for many museums and cultural organizations (notably the de Young here in the Bay Area). How does this project compare to other museum projects? How does it compare to other landscape projects in the public realm?

Walter Hood: Looking back, I realize this never began as a “professional project.” There was never a call that specified a particular problem that wanted a particular solution. Mark Cavagnero’s [architecture] firm had just finished renovation of the galleries, so there was a sense that I might be on call to clean up the exterior spaces. But really, even if I was tasked with the “gardens,” it never began as [a contract to design a space].

Jackson: It seems like your conversations with OMCA also coincided with a moment when they had started to think more expansively about the identity and function of “the Museum.”

Hood: Exactly. And I really think that it was in that spirit that OMCA brought me on board. It wasn’t simply that I was the “landscape architect”; I was being brought in to explore the future of the museum. That was also a time when Rene de Guzman [senior curator of art] had just moved onto the

staff. They were commissioning artists—local artists—to create text pieces and sound pieces that had this exploratory function for the museum as an institution.

Jackson: And you were there as a partner artist, but in a context where the “artist” has a different function. The artist isn’t brought in to make work to hang in a gallery or install in a garden, but you were brought in to help trigger new thoughts and behaviors about what a museum gallery or a museum garden might be.

Hood: Right, and the thing is, with bringing me in as an “artist,” I was also allowed to have a different kind of relationship to my own design practice. I wasn’t ever presented with a practical document that asked me to “fix something.” Instead, I could allow my own practice to be more speculative, to allow speculation to be part of my practice. This project is one where I was able to say: my firm is not “a landscape design” firm; we are an “art and design” firm that makes things *in landscape*.

Jackson: A big conceptual shift.

Hood: Huge. It wasn’t that we were presented with a problem to solve. Instead, we could use the Oakland Museum to propose a set of questions that we wanted to ask. It all unfolded from there. At each part of the process, we learned things; each step forced us to see things in a different way, which in turn produced new questions. For example, what happens when we go from thinking about “the gardens in the museum” to “the museum in the city?”

Jackson: The museum as an institution sited in a particular location.

Hood: Yes, and once we did that, we had to ask, why here? And why would the city’s residents come? Which in turn made us realize that in order to locate the museum in the city, we also had to find the city in the museum.

Jackson: You had to think about how this museum operates, presents itself, behaves internally and externally as a civic entity.

Hood: Yep, and if you’re going to get it to behave differently, what do you have to work with? So we looked at this hermetic box, the Brutalist energy of the museum’s architecture, and then we had to get to a point where we were



Photograph of Shannon Jackson and Walter Hood by Lan Ly.

breaking out of the box. We were never thinking, this is a bad museum, or this is a good museum. It was more like—what do we have? What can we work with?

Jackson: And in answering that question, it seems like you expanded the “what,” expanded the circumference of what you decided you were “working with.” At one point, I remember you did a charrette with some of us on the concept of “a sculpture garden” for the exterior spaces, and you realized that this project wasn’t just a sculpture garden.

Hood: No, it couldn’t be. In fact, the circumference of the “garden” needs to change. I’ve had to start thinking about wider exteriors, larger parts of the city. And now we’re thinking about this whole area, this neighborhood, or district, around the museum, around Lake Merritt. What if we could think about this whole area as “a park?”

Jackson: As if this museum is actually inside a larger park within the city of Oakland. It’s as if it’s inside a park that we don’t quite see yet. In trying to find the city in the museum, you end up asking for the city to rethink itself as well.

Hood: And that’s what I mean about a speculative process. Every step of the way, there has been a new revelation. It’s about learning from each step and then redirecting the process as you learn. It happened with everything. We started to think about the accessibility of the ramps, which then made us think about how we could open up the museum bunker to the neighborhood, which then led us to think about our neighbors—Where is Laney College? Where is the BART? At another point, we opened a conversation with OMCA staff, each of whom brought their own idiosyncratic goals. For instance, some staff told me they wanted a “children’s garden.” OK, wow, what does that idea do? Let’s go down that road for a bit.

Jackson: Once your practice starts to have this propositional character, this “speculative” character, is it hard to return to the land of execution? Or is it easier once you have found a new way to reframe the project?

Hood: This is a thing I struggle with in my studio. How can you be efficient and still be speculative? It’s hard to find people who can work with this ambiguity and still be “practical” within the practice. I mean, there is still something you need to deliver at the end of the day. But right now, this double quality is what interests me most. Whether you call it social practice, or something else, I want to work with people who can tolerate ambiguity, who welcome ambiguity, but who can also be disciplined about the practice. It’s hard to create the context for that, but that is what I hope we can create with the studio and with the university.

Jackson: To some degree, you’re talking about a mix of practices and sensibilities that we are trying to create within the “urban humanities” at Berkeley, joining the humanities, arts, and environmental design. Some people think that certain humanities and conceptual art disciplines are better at the speculative, while others in design are better at execution and practice. But you seem to be trying to blow apart those stereotypes.

Hood: I need it all. This is why I did an MFA and what my work with [public art curator and critic] Mary Jane Jacobs was about. There was something I learned being in an art context that helped me thinking differently about *the ideas*, about how to communicate ideas in my work. You think about Kant, on the known and the unknown; how do you allow the known and the unknown to engage one another in your art practice?

Jackson: Kant was always one for asking, not *what* we know, but *how* we know. Or how we know what we think we know.

Hood: And that’s speculation. That’s what you have to be open to in a creative practice. You might think that you “know” the problem, that you know the limits of “reality” and what’s practical.

Jackson: But oddly enough, being open to the unknown might actually allow you to find a new conception of what’s practical.

Hood: Right. In fact, I’m working on a new book right now that draws from my old MFA thesis where I’m trying to describe this. [Walter begins drawing a horizontal line with points of demarcation.] So in a traditional design process, you think you’re supposed to go from here to there. Along this linear process, there are points in the road. You get the money; you deliver the concept; you do the fabrication; you do the installation. But the fact is that between any of these points, there are opportunistic moments where you can move away [Walter draws vertical lines], where you can allow for a speculative moment to take the project somewhere else. And you need to allow yourself to go there, while also knowing how you’re going to get back. But before you cross immediately into the next phase, you need to do that exploration; that’s a crucial point of bifurcation. You can take the project somewhere else as long as you know how to get back.

Jackson: So speculation isn’t the opposite of discipline.

Hood: You can only be speculative *because* you’re disciplined. I’m finding that a lot of people today—professionals, even some students—they have never actually *done* anything. Everything exists too much in an abstract context. I remember learning to sew when I was a kid. I remember being fascinated by the double stitch. And once I learned how to sew, I never asked my mother to mend my clothes again. Once you learn something, a skill, a practice, that kind of learning is applicable to lots of other things. I think another thing you learn is the time it takes to get something done. I remember learning the time it would take to hem something. I remember learning the time it would take to draw something. And even having that sense of time helps me feel comfortable taking time to speculate; it freed me to keep imagining.

Jackson: It frees you to imagine when you also know how to get something done. Walter, I just want to note that you have been articulating some of the core principles of creative pedagogy. You’re talking about how a creative practice taught you discipline, how it taught you self-reliance, and how it allowed you to join the act of thinking with the act of doing, joining ambiguity and practicality. And how it taught you time management. Just saying.

Hood: I’m blown away by that temporal investment. It happens in everything I do. I can imagine something new



Exterior of Oakland Museum of California, with yellow peace symbol and other art just over the wall. Photograph courtesy of OMCA.

because I have confidence that I know how much time it takes to get stuff done.

Jackson: As someone who teaches and writes about artists who work in this larger field of “social practice” and socially engaged art, your impulse to expand the parameters of the art work are incredibly resonant. Some of the most interesting social practice projects are those that ask big questions about where the artwork ends and the social context begins. You’re pushing at those boundaries and scales at every step—moving from the garden to the museum to the district to the city to the park. It’s as if the local geography and the city space are functioning as a kind of artistic material.

Hood: And that’s the kind of practice we want to teach this fall. In the studio course that I’m creating for Berkeley, the OMCA project will be at the center. And the idea is to marry the arts and environmental design, through a strong social

art and design framework. So again, what do we have to work with? [Walter starts to draw the district. He draws Lake Merritt, shaped as a heart in the center.] I always draw the lake as a heart. And so then you’ve got these regions all around it. I draw them like petals. You’ve got the business district; you’ve got the Lake Merritt district; the East Oakland Brooklyn Basin, and then you have the Waterfront and Estuary. As far as the arts and environmental design, then, we have four petals. I want to use the course to have the students decide what principles define the edge of the petals. What is in and out, and why?

Jackson: What’s an example of a possible principle?

Hood: Well, one really might have to do with climate, with sea level rise, and what it does to the ecologies within the petals. Depending upon whether you are lower or higher relative to the Bay, the whole ecology around you is changing. Where I live now, animals and birds wake me up every

morning who never used to be around. Here at the office (in West Oakland) we're starting to notice seagulls and crows, big black scavenger birds, coming here for the garbage and because the climate is changing. They're part of a new food chain.

Jackson: So the studio course with Berkeley students will give them a concrete project that builds pragmatic skills and conceptual skills. It occurs to me that the OMCA project could have an effect on UC Berkeley that is similar to the one it has with the city of Oakland; it's a chance for all these regional partners to ask ourselves "what do we have?" and "what can we work with?"

Hood: Yes, if I bring a Berkeley student to this district in Oakland, what does that mean? If I want students to see themselves as part of that community, what does that mean? For instance, if we spend one day of the class at the university, and one day physically in Oakland, how does that change the nature of the practice? How does that change our collective sense of space and of the region?

Jackson: And what might it be to create a "binding aesthetic" amongst the university and this district, or a "binding aesthetic" amongst the higher education sector, the museum sector, and the civic community?

Hood: So let's figure out how we get that to happen philosophically and politically, as well as practically. I think we need to teach them ethnographic skills, both to reflect on themselves as well as the people they are meeting. To have them read *Tally's Corner* [Elliot Liebow's classic 1967 study of "Negro streetcorner men"] along with some of the newer urban ethnographies. I'm thinking of asking if we can have a studio space inside OMCA, or somewhere in this district. The students are used to collecting data and bringing it back to campus to model something in studio. What if we had a pedagogical space on site?

Jackson: Site-specific pedagogy. What are some of the other things that you'll have the students do?

Hood: Well, my firm has already done some basic studies that we will give to them, about the metrics, size, and capacities of different places in the petals. We want to get the students to look around and ask, why do people want to be here? What is the lynchpin that is getting them to want to be there? If you

take the time, really spend a full amount of time in a space, you'll start to realize what's happening. There's this ledge in the Business District of Oakland around Seventeenth Street that attracts the most amazingly diverse group of people. It's this ledge that people lean on because of what they get to see there—from this certain spot, you can see into other businesses, you can see into a second floor of another building where people can see you. It's this beautiful little section of the city where the architecture and the sociology are intersecting, and you see all of these beautiful relationships.

Jackson: So the social is getting explored as much as the spatial.

Hood: And there are other spaces. Like this housing tower that surrounds a courtyard, and that courtyard has this fountain where you see such an amazing multigenerational assembly and different ethnicities. We have to think about how people are defining their spaces, and building relationships within those spaces.

Jackson: There are some clear points of connection to the humanities in those ideas. First, there is a "discursive" connection, how do we consciously or unconsciously name and define our world. And then there is "relational" element, about how design reflects or transforms the social relationships amongst humans and other living beings.

Hood: On the first one, I've been thinking about a difference between conscious hybrids and unconscious hybrids. We have conscious ways of defining a hybrid experience. The "street" is a conscious hybrid. The "park" is a conscious hybrid.

Jackson: Just to rephrase to be sure I understand. These are conscious—socially acceptable, normalized ways of defining spaces where we have "hybrid" experiences of difference, of diversity. The street, the park.

Hood: Right, so where might be the "unconscious" hybrids? First of all, is the idea of "The Park" still valid? And then, might there be different ways of naming other spaces where we experience hybridity? Unconscious hybrids are more fertile, because they are attempting to create new meanings, new words. How do you feel? How do you react to something? Can we understand nascent or latent ecologies?



Aerial view of Oakland Museum of California. Photograph provided by OMCA.

Jackson: So-called natural and so-called social systems have their own way of assembling, so are we arriving at new experiences of that hybridity unconsciously?

Hood: Exactly. So how do we name that? And what are the principles for defining it? What was your second humanities connection?

Jackson: The relational element, the social element. Which frankly is also an art element.

Hood: Got it. In my practice at Hood Design, I always want to think about the social element, the humanist element—of the neighborhood, the museum, of the university. I'm interested in people, and Berkeley is a place that should be designing for people.

Jackson: That theme appears in so many conversations I have about Berkeley's role in the future of arts and design

education. Everyone is reminding me that Berkeley's focus on people and publics distinguishes it from other places where creativity is more privatized, a less socially responsive endeavor.

Hood: It's absolutely the case. I see it all the time in every thing we do, everything our students do. It's how we are wired. It's in the DNA of Berkeley. And I have to say it annoys me when people introduce me at other universities or design events, and they will usually say something like: "Walter is interested in people." Why is it unusual for Walter to be interested in people? Shouldn't all designers be interested in people? It's a kind of marginalization. As if, because I'm dealing with people, I must not be doing design. That's the beauty of moving into an artistic context, because I find more people are empowered there to make a humanist discovery. You know, in an art context and in a humanities context, difference is a good thing. Difference generates new thinking.

Jackson: That's hybridity.

Hood: Of course, but in a design context, people often think difference is a problem, something you have to get past or get over. If you bring in different people, we all start to see things that we hadn't seen before. To me, that is the exciting thing; that's what design should be about. Difference reveals a new unknown. If you know what it is going to be before you start, why do it?

Jackson: And that gives you a new sense of what might be possible. You know, throughout this conversation, you have been challenging assumptions that many hold, the notion that the designers are the practical and functional people and that artists are the impractical people.

Hood: It's the opposite to a certain degree.

Jackson: I wonder too about the humanities, about the impulse to think historically and philosophically about design, about the *practicality* of that exercise.

Hood: You know, being an African American male, I had to find a way to find myself in art. I needed a tangible way to be part of the conversation. And I feel that I really got that at Berkeley; when I was a student, I heard Spiro Kostov talking about history and architecture. He talked about Mussolini, and the "Third Rome," and about Mussolini creating his own narrative through buildings, that there were ideas in buildings. OK, it's not that I agreed with Mussolini, but I just had never heard anyone talk like that, this notion that ideas could be reinforced in space. I learned about Modernism, about what people thought could be done, politically and socially, through architecture. I thought, wow, these people were optimistic! So weirdly enough, I felt that the tenets of Modernism actually included me. And I read Dell Upton on the shotgun houses and the diaspora from Haiti. I learned that you are in conversation with a context, whether you like it or not.

Jackson: "You are in conversation with a context whether you like it or not." Let's remind ourselves that that happens to be a fundamental lesson of the humanities.

Hood: Yeah, so for me, the humanities element is welcome, because a different kind of agency becomes available to you. It's a different kind of information that comes to you. It allows for a bifurcation in the process actually. The ideas aren't accessories. They can change the process, and you have to be ready for that conversation.

Jackson: Maybe we can close by returning to this partnership between UC Berkeley and OMCA, between a museum and public higher education. It is a really interesting moment right now, because we see the education sector thinking about how to cultivate creativity, while we simultaneously see the museum sector influenced by the so-called "educational turn." Institutions like Berkeley are rethinking pedagogy just as museums are trying to be pedagogical. It seems like we have an opportunity here for mutual, reciprocal transformation.

Hood: Museums have had to redefine themselves; they have had to become new transformative institutions. They realize that they have to serve this civic function out of need, because we have lost so many other public institutions. I think about the loss of the community organizations that were part of my life. I spent my summers in the arts clubs of the Scudder Public Housing project in New Jersey. It might not have been great housing, but every morning, we got up and went to the community center, and I made a bunch of bad clay bowls, painted, and did ceramics.

I can't imagine where I'd be if it weren't for publicly funded summer art programs. And let's face it, all those programs are gone. We had them in Oakland, and so many of them are gone. So museums have opened themselves up to artists and the community to help the museum learn to be more collaborative, to be partners, to be neighbors, to pick up the slack where our public institutions have been dismantled. And they bring an artistic practice into what used to be a static context. Most museums would rather be part of an active process; they need to be dynamic—and pedagogical—in order to stay relevant. **B**



Aerial view of attendees gathered for an event at the entrance to the Oakland Museum of California. Photograph provided by OMCA.