

ZEST

ART

# ‘What’s your Houston diversity problem?’ CounterCurrent festival takes stab at answers

By Molly Glentzer

Of all the responses from people who filled out postcards answering the question, “What’s your Houston diversity problem?” this one seems especially potent: “Texas is so ‘religious’ but 5 times a day I feel I have to find a place to hide just to pray.”

The art collective Ghana Think Tank distributed the postcards during last year’s CounterCurrent festival of experimental art and performance. This year, it’ll be back with some inventive solutions to the nine largest issues discovered from hundreds of “problems.”

CounterCurrent 17, which will take place April 18-23 across Houston, will include a number of projects that sound even more topical now, given the current political climate, than they did when they were proposed more than a year ago.

“The notion of a festival implies that it’s going to be a big party,” said University of Houston Mitchell Center for the Arts director Karen Farber, who organizes the event. “We’ve been working with artists who deal with perceptions about Muslims for three or four years. But this year, especially, we’re plugged into what’s around us.”

Ghana Think Tank’s artists, who are based in New York, don’t actually invent solutions. They send the postcards they collect to groups of think-



Ghana Think Tank

Participants in Ghana Think Tank’s project filled out postcards answering the question, “What’s your Houston diversity problem?” at Discovery Green during last year’s CounterCurrent festival.

ers in developing countries for recommendations, then translate those suggestions into physical projects.

Syrian and Afghan refugees in Serbia, who have their own heart-wrenching circumstances, suggested a “mobile mosque” for Houstonians afraid to pray in public. Ghana Think Tank is building it now, on a flat-bed truck that will appear on Houston streets during the festival.

Three U.S.-based facilitators — Maria del Carmen Montoya, Christopher Robbins and John Ewing — run Ghana Think Tank. The collective wants to dispel the idea that highly devel-

oped Western countries have superior human resources.

“People all over the world are geniuses about the challenges of everyday life,” Montoya said.

The nine Houston “diversity problems” Ghana Think Tank will address this year cover a broad swath. One was expressed by a man who wrote, “I have to work so hard to pay the taxes to support all these immigrants that I don’t even have time to make love to my wife.”

“I get it,” Montoya said. She sympathized but also could see how that frustration led him to give in to political rhetoric.

“When you work human to human, you get down to what actually is the problem: This person doesn’t have enough time for his family.”

Montoya, who studied art at the Rhode Island

School of Design and now teaches at George Washington University, grew up in Houston, near Northline Mall. Her father was born in

rural Texas; her mother, originally from Mexico, operates a small import shop in a Fiesta Mart.

She loves the city’s diversity. “I know Houston



Tania El Khoury

CounterCurrent 17 participants will experience Dictaphone Group’s “Stories of Refuge” from bunk beds in a setting designed to replicate a Syrian refugee camp.

deeply. It matters to me,” she said.

CounterCurrent 17 participants also will be able to sense what it’s like to be a Syrian refugee in a German camp. The art collective Dictaphone Group is bringing its “Stories of Refuge” installation, which invites viewers to watch “day in life” videos from the camp as they sit on bunk beds in a darkened room.

**More festival highlights**

- The buzzy artist Kevin Beasley will partner with Project Row Houses to create an immersive, site-specific sculptural and sound installation, “Movement V,” at the Eldorado Ballroom.

- The Catastrophic Theatre will present the world premiere of “Snow White,” adapted from Donald Barthelme’s groundbreaking experimental novel about the risks and rewards of love.

- Lili Taylor will perform Suzanne Bocanegra’s “Farmhouse/Whorehouse,” which uses text, song, costume, film and photos to tell a family story about living in LaGrange, across the road from the famous Chicken Ranch.

- Aurora Picture Show, the Brandon, Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston (MATCH) and University of Houston’s College of the Arts also are among the festival’s presenting partners.

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**CounterCurrent 17**

**When:** April 18-23

**Where:** Various venues around Houston

**Tickets:** Free; some events require reservations; [countercurrentfestival.org](http://countercurrentfestival.org)

