



John Preus: *The Beast*, 2014, installation view of interior, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago

#### Colin Ward Memorial Potluck Conversation Series

Every Thursday at 6 pm

Colin Ward was an English architect, writer, organizer, urban planner, and anarchist thinker devoted to forms of non-authoritarian social organization, with a keen interest in the experience of children within urban environments. These potlucks are named in his honor. Bring thoughts, ideas, and food or drink to share.

#### Saturday School

Every Saturday 10 am – 12 pm

Saturday School is ongoing youth programming organized by Laura Shaeffer, including story time and hands-on workshops.

#### On Disappointment with Simon Critchley

April 18, 5:30 – 8 pm

John Preus and scholars Simon Critchley and Bart Schultz discuss political disappointment as the inspiration behind great thinking and social change.

#### Beastly Story Slam

4 Sessions, Tuesdays from 6 – 7:30 pm  
April 22 (Heart of the Beast), May 27 (Sacrifice), June 24 (School), July 22 (Trauma)

Accomplished storyteller Judith Heineman and artist/educator Laura Shaeffer present this series of four storytelling competitions inside “The Beast.” The public is invited to share their stories, and the best storyteller wins a prize!

#### Beastly PechaKucha

4 Sessions, Mondays from 6 – 7:30 pm  
April 28, May 19, June 30, July 28  
April 28 (Belly), May 19 (Sacrifice), June 30 (Repair) and July 28 (School)

Generously organized by Rachel Herman and Hannah Kushnick, these PechaKucha-style events include 6-minute-40-second spoken presentations accompanied by 20 images. The series will collect evocative, meditative, informative variations on a monthly theme from interesting Chicago minds.

#### Homecoming: Chicago Home Theater Festival 2014

Wednesday, April 30, 6 – 8 pm

The Chicago Home Theater Festival redefines who art is for, who art is by, and where it all takes place by transforming homes throughout Chicago into venues for original and experimental performance, cinema and interdisciplinary art. The event will include a few speakers and performances to link beastly themes to the Home Theater.

#### Spectrum of Immersion

May 3, 3 – 4 pm

Part opera, part lecture, part musical improvisation, this hour-long operetta performance will explore death and redemption, collective trauma and transformation.

#### Upheaval, Grief and Creativity

4 Sessions, 6 – 7:30 pm  
Thursdays: May 8, May 22, June 19, July 24

Invisible Institute presents a series of four community conversations and potluck dinners led by writer Jamie Kalven, who will be joined by a different guest each session. The series will address subjects that disrupt the relationship between city and citizen, including public housing, Chicago Public School closings, sexual assault, and homicide rate in relation to geography.

#### On Movement and Play

Saturday, May 10, 1 – 4 pm

In this workshop we will explore how improvisation and theatre games can free the body and voice, creating permission to experiment through performance and group dialogue to expand awareness and actualize social change within various community settings.

#### Bio-Graphing the Beast

Wednesdays in June, 4 – 6 pm

Stockyard Institute will host a four-part workshop series for teens examining the organs of “The Beast” as a metaphor for our social and historical locations in Chicago. The workshop will look at the body and the city as places of knowledge and memory, and map blueprints for creating social change.

#### Our Public Space: Who Owns It, Who Shapes It, and Who Benefits From It

June 14 – 15

This two-day conference complements current discourse about urban architecture by concentrating on public space—who controls it, who has access to it, and how its governance shapes the socio-economic environment we inhabit. The conference is organized by MAS Studios, Dilettante Studios and Hyde Park Art Center. Our Public Space is generously supported by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

#### BBoY BBQ and Breakdance Battle

Saturday, June 17, 12 – 3 pm

The University of Hip-Hop, Connect Force dance troupe, and Oakland-based street artist Desi Mundo welcome you to a celebration of the hip-hop arts, social justice initiatives and collective unity.

Visit [hydeparkart.org](http://hydeparkart.org) for more info and the most up-to-date programming calendar.

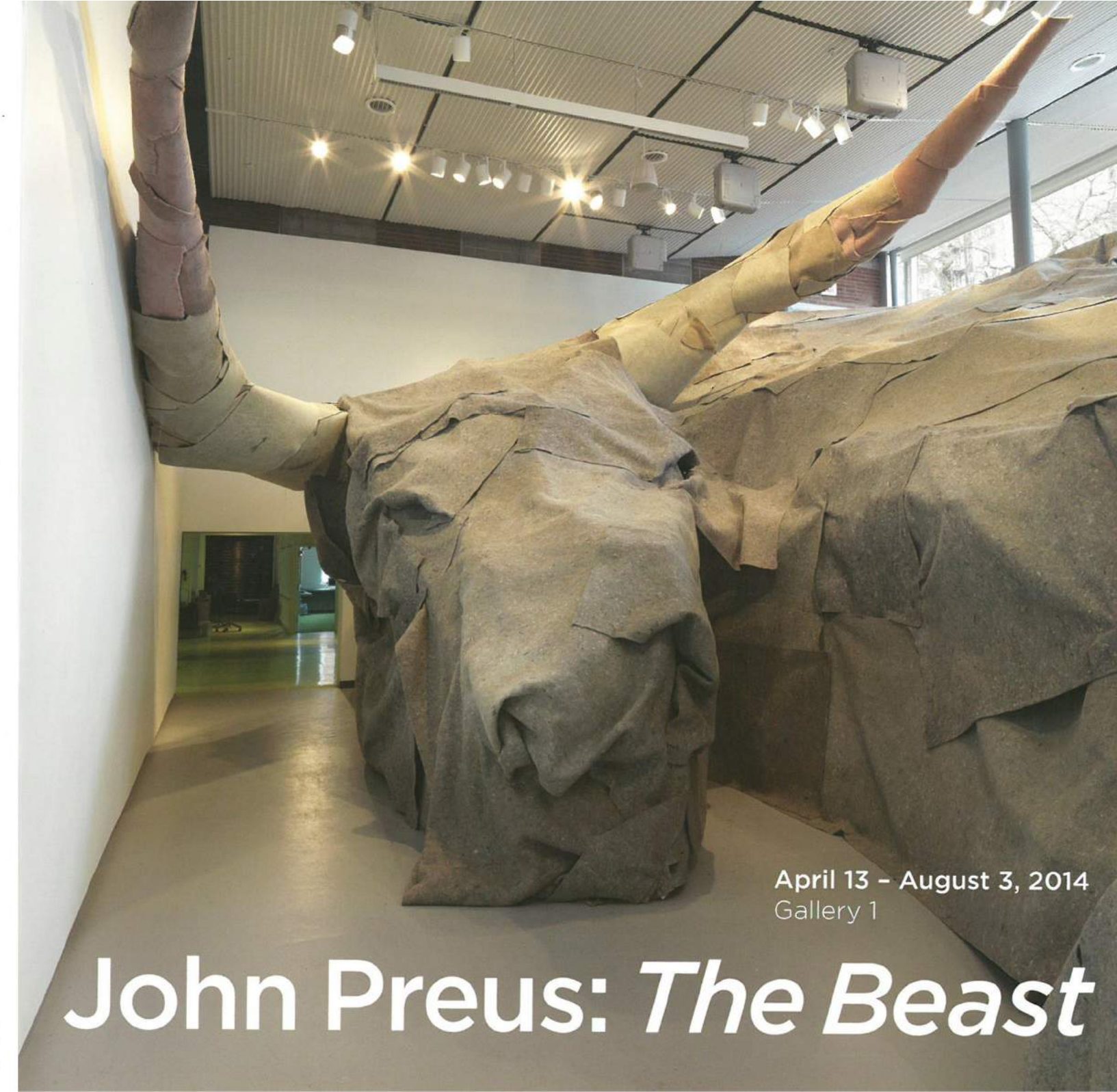
*The Beast* is partially supported by: The Andy Warhol Foundation, Patricia K. Swanson, Theaster Gates, and The Chuck Fund. Programming for *The Beast* is made possible in part by a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly.

The Jackman Goldwasser Residency at Hyde Park Art Center positions Chicago as a worldwide destination for visual art by bringing local and global artists together to work side by side in our studios, deepening engagement between local, national and international contemporary art practices.

For 75 years, Hyde Park Art Center has been a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. As an open forum for exploring the artistic process, the Art Center fosters creativity through making, learning about, seeing, and discussing art—all under one roof.

The Art Center is funded in part by: Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Field Foundation of Illinois; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Harper Court Arts Council; Harpo Foundation; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Illinois Humanities Council; Irving Harris Foundation; Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; National Endowment for the Arts; National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly; Polk Bros. Foundation; David C and Sarajan Ruttenberg Arts Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

Text by Allison Peters Quinn  
Installation photography by Tom van Eynde  
Design by the JNL graphic design  
Edited by Brook Rosini



April 13 – August 3, 2014  
Gallery 1

# John Preus: *The Beast*

Hyde ParkARTCENTER

5020 S. Cornell Ave. Chicago, IL 60615 773.324.5520  
[www.hydeparkart.org](http://www.hydeparkart.org)



**A large animal settles itself into the corner of the main gallery.** Assembled partially out of cast-off materials, it could be confused for a landscaped hill or a pyre, and begs further inspection. Both a large-scale sculpture and a small-scale building, *The Beast* by John Preus welcomes exploration and is intended to raise questions rather than provide answers. Preus has been creating art in the social practice realm for the past decade, culminating in this ambitious new architectural intervention and accompanying program of events that interrogate the purpose, value and governance of public space.

The concept for *The Beast* evolved from Preus' years of research and exploration into how communities form. He found that in many archaic societies, the ritual of sacrifice was a ubiquitous and common strategy for social unification—albeit at a violent cost. Ritualized violence directed random and widespread animosity onto a single victim or group. Better that one should die than for all to suffer. Sacrifice was often a desperate human measure to gain control over uncontrollable, inhuman situations.

Philosopher Simon Critchley, whose writings Preus turned to many times, observes that there is a “motivational deficit in neoliberal democracy,” a condition that often leads to active or passive nihilism and withdrawal. He goes so far as to call yoga and Western Buddhism forms of passive nihilism, a cultivation of something innocuous, as a way to avoid the disappointment of unreachable ethical and social longings. Combining these notions of sacrifice and socio-political disappointment, Preus conceived of *The Beast* as an exploration of “progressive pessimism.”

*The Beast* is both a platform for activities and an art installation, and presents a forum to share and express collective grief by transforming physical space into a site charged with lively conversation promoting civic engagement. Cultural narratives throughout history from the Old Testament to Walt Disney describe the proverbial belly of a beast as a dark isolation chamber where one discovers selflessness and renewed purpose. As a two-story inhabitable sculpture, *The Beast* recalls these narratives of ethical pursuit through a contradictory platform: public space.

Defined as areas that are open and accessible to all members of society, public space is an invaluable vehicle for unifying people to work toward creating something better. The large interior cavity of *The Beast* functions as a combination of various social spaces: rec room, dining hall, home movie theater, yoga studio, meeting house, classroom, living room, church, community center, and auditorium. A dynamic public program reflects these functions and is organized in collaboration with artists, journalists, composers, architects, and philosophers. Each week different partners plan the multi-generational events and activities inside the structure and invite multiple voices to be heard regarding how to constructively galvanize public space. The goal: to explore new ideas that contest age-old assumptions and received narratives about what is best for society and what entails progress.

The harvested materials used to make the artwork allude to foundational American values and contemporary views on their “loss” or “sacrifice” to newly constructed values. For example, classic values like that of standardized public education are reflected in the use of furniture from the now closed Chicago Public Schools; the land's wealth of

“Maybe you can be a pessimist without being a nihilist,” Preus muses. “Maybe you can think utopian thoughts without becoming utterly bewitched by the prospect of a utopian world, the bringing into being of which always involves violence. Maybe you can speculate about other possibilities without insisting on an enemy.”

natural resources appear in the lumber and materials used to build *The Beast*; the desirability of a sustainable economy is depicted in the artwork's shape, which alludes to the bull market; and the need for a national moral compass or the importance of religion in daily life appear in its cathedral-like arches, which also recollect an animal's rib cage. Through the installation the artist addresses the psychological and social impacts of trauma and loss, as manifested in architectural form. *The Beast* leads us to ask: Can this material, which is literally discarded and devalued, figuratively provide new value in a second life? In so doing, might it channel attention and energies toward the creation of a public space for renewed agency and a more engaged human experience?

Over the course of roughly ten days, Preus and several assistants built *The Beast* in the gallery using an intuitive method of leveraging and triangulation. A nest of lumber nailed together at multiple angles (revealed only from the inside) equally distributes the structure's weight and allows the form to be sculpted by adding more angles. Drawings, architectural sketches, AutoCAD digital renderings, and a structural model made while the artist was in residence at the Hyde Park Art Center—along with Preus' knowledge of the building trade and its materials—all informed the final installation composed *in situ*.

Like the vernacular architecture of a wigwam, thick blankets of salvaged under-carpet felt are draped and molded atop the wood frame to create a semi-domed open space within. Felt hangs informally over the floor of the Jackman Goldwasser Catwalk Gallery, signifying the transitional quality of all material to become something else through adaptive reuse. On a material level, the discarded furniture, carpeting and wood become a shelter. On a conceptual level, the mystical beast is a physical embodiment of the discussions in philosophy, religion, architecture, literature, cultural theory, and history scheduled to take place inside the sculpture. The exterior is intentionally monotonous, lumpy and abstract to conjure thoughts of transformation.

The beauty of *The Beast* by John Preus is that it presents multiple perspectives and swears off any fixed notion of public space or civic responsibility so that we, the people, can make those decisions. The previous life of the found materials used to build the space charges *The Beast* with their visceral, textured qualities, which echo the multiple voices and perspectives needed to address systemic issues. Depending on which gallery entrance one uses to approach the exhibition—north gallery door, south gallery door, or sidewalk—a different understanding is achieved. Only the perspective from the Jackman Goldwasser Catwalk Gallery provides the complete picture of a steer with a public programming space inside of its body that opens out directly into the street, inviting engagement from the public. The visual distinction between the interior and exterior of the sculpture as seen from the various vistas links to the different levels of consciousness gained through life experiences. According to Preus, “Life is a series of mostly modest revelations, punctuated by moments of extreme undigestible ones. The questions are always ‘how far away from something do you need to be to see what it is?’ And then, ‘when have you withdrawn so far as to be irrelevant?’”



**John Preus** (b. 1971) is a Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist. He holds an MFA from the University of Chicago (2005) and studied furniture-making in Minnesota with John Nessel. Preus founded Dilettante Studios in 2010, and co-founded SHoP (2011) and Material Exchange (2005). Preus was Creative Director of the Rebuild Foundation shop until 2012, and served as project lead for Theaster Gates' *12 Ballads for Huguenot House* at Documenta 13. Preus is currently a Resident Artist in The Jackman Goldwasser Residency at Hyde Park Art Center. His work has been exhibited at EXPO Chicago; The Heilbronn Kunstverein in Germany; Experimental Sound Studio; Portland Museum of Contemporary Craft; The Huguenot House in Kassel, Germany during Documenta 13; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Betty Rhymer Gallery; Chicago Cultural Center; Devos Art Museum; St. Louis Art Guild; and The Smart Museum of Art.