

Activist artist who was accused of terrorism will speak at University of Oregon

by Bend Weekly News Sources

University's Fowler Memorial Lecture will explore artistic expression in the post 9/11 era.

Steve Kurtz, an artist and professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, will talk about the convergence of art, technology and radical politics during a free public lecture at the University of Oregon on Jan. 25. Kurtz made national headlines several years ago when he was accused of bio terrorism after police found lab equipment and books on bio weaponry at his home.

The talk will begin at 7 p.m. in Room 177, Lawrence Hall, 1190 Franklin Blvd. The university's Department of Art is sponsoring the event.

Kurtz will speak on the topic "Art and Discipline" which, in his words, will explore why violence against cultural resistance has escalated and intensified over the past five years.

The case against Kurtz began to unfold on May 11, 2004 when he called 911 after his wife, Hope, died at home of heart failure. Police officers who responded to the call saw the body, the lab equipment and the books and alerted the FBI. Kurtz was using the lab to produce harmless bacteria as part of a video installation on bio terrorism.

Federal agents in hazmat suits soon arrived at the residence, impounded Kurtz's equipment—including Petri dishes, test tubes and computers—and seized his wife's body from the coroner. Kurtz and his collaborator Robert Ferrell, former chair of the Genetics Department at the Graduate School of Public Health, at the University of Pittsburgh, were accused of bio terrorism and mail fraud each potentially carrying a sentence of 20 years. A grand jury returned indictments for mail and wire fraud, but declined to indict on the bio terrorism charge.

Both men are members of the Critical Art Ensemble, an arts group founded by Kurtz and his wife. Members use high school lab equipment and common household supplies to create art installations that publicize the increasingly privatized worlds of science, technology, and information.

"Marching Plague," an exhibition for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, was one of the projects Kurtz was working on when the federal agents seized his laboratory equipment and his library, correspondence and computers. "Marching Plague," which re-created a 1952 British military experiment wherein guinea pigs were infected with the plague to see how fast it would spread, was featured in the Whitney Biennial 2006, an event sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The Biennial is recognized as the nation's pre-eminent exhibition of contemporary American art.

A documentary film, "Strange Culture," based on Kurtz's recent experiences will be screened at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

Kurtz is the 2007 George and Matilda Fowler Memorial Lecturer. The lectureship was established by the late Constance Fowler to honor her parents. Fowler, who received her master's of fine arts degree from the University of Oregon in 1940, was an artist and a professor of art at Willamette University.

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