

Concordia artist finds the community activist within

Ansula Press taps a neighborhood's creative energy to calm traffic's flow in the emerging hub

By **MARK ANDERSON**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

At 66, artist and former flower child Ansula Press is embracing a new identity: activist.

Press has ratcheted up a sense of art and community at Northeast 30th Avenue and Killingsworth Street, near her house. But she's also using art to rally neighbors as she works to tame traffic in the emerging commercial hub.

"The city doesn't want us to say we're trying to slow down traffic," Press said. "But the city also says an average of 10,000 cars cross that intersection every day, and sometimes it seems like they're going 60 miles an hour. We'd like people to take their foot off the gas."



Ansula Press is seeking grants to get more street planters like the one behind her in her Northeast Portland neighborhood. She is trying to use artwork, among other things, to get drivers to slow down.

STEPHANIE YAO
THE OREGONIAN

Press helped bring a police crosswalk sting to the Concordia neighborhood and is working to have a crossing light installed at the intersection. She also has visions of artistic planter boxes, fruit trees and a street painting. Such grass-roots causes are a change for a woman who, despite spending some of her formative years in 1960s San Francisco, mostly let politics pass her by.

Travels lead to Portland

Press was born in Hollywood, Calif., and studied art at Mills College in Oakland. She called the Bay Area home through the heart of the '60s and studied sculpture in graduate school at San Francisco State University. She also met Rant, who would become her husband.

"I got into the whole flower-children thing," Press said. "I was going to love-ins and be-ins. I saw the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin and all the concerts. But politically, I was completely oblivious, even though I loved the freedom and the joyful expression of the times."

Then, as thousands of young people poured in, the couple got out. It was 1967, the Summer of Love. They wound up in a tent on a 9,000-foot Colorado mountain with no running water or electricity. Spring, summer and fall were great. "Then came winter," Press said with a chuckle. "We were not prepared."

They took off for Mexico to get married and eventually wound up on the East Coast. A 1972 move to Ithaca, N.Y., resulted in one of the most fulfilling stages of Press' life — a seven-year job as education coordinator and crafts curator at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.

"I was the first curator of crafts in the U.S., just as crafts were beginning to be accepted in the arts realm," she said. "I loved that job."

She left Cornell in 1979 and turned an exhibition into a traveling show, which took her twice to Africa. Three trips to India covered several more years. By then, the couple's daughter, Shireen, born in 1976, lived in Portland, bringing

them here in 2003. "It felt right," Press said.

"Really effective advocate"

Neighborhood causes entered the picture about 2½ years ago, after the Presses bought a house a half-block from 30th and Killingsworth.

"You really take your life in your own hands just trying to cross Killingsworth," Press said. "And I wanted to do something from an artistic bent because I didn't know what else to do. I thought maybe creating something to grab people's attention might slow things down — a statue, a street painting, something with lights. The neighbors who were interested all seemed to be artists, and it just evolved."

Press helped make her case with the crosswalk sting Aug. 9. Within a few hours, police cited 41 drivers who didn't stop for a pedestrian decoy crossing Killingsworth — an unusually high number, according to city officials.

"That action was initiated from a conversation involving Ansula," said Greg Raisman of Portland's Office of Transportation. "I think Ansula is a really effective advocate for 30th and Killingsworth. She's done a lot with the businesses and the neighbors to make the area a better place."

One recent sunny Sunday, Press relaxed under a shade tree in her lush front yard, describing new-found causes with enthusiastic detail. The muffled sound of traffic never abated as she noted that not so much as a stop sign marks Killingsworth between 20th and 33rd avenues.

The best solution would be a pedestrian-activated crossing light, Raisman said. But they cost \$11,000, and the city can't always afford them.

"More and more, we need to ask for direct support from businesses and the people who live there," Raisman said. "It takes a significant level of energy to make it happen, but we're open to continue working with them."

Press believes the neighborhood will figure out a way to raise the

cash, even if it means car washes and bake sales. Meanwhile, she envisions other improvements, such as planter boxes plastered with broken bicycle reflectors and mirrors, like so much bling. A weather-resistant prototype adorning a nearby sidewalk has gone up as she pursues grants to pay for 11

more.

She also would like to see fruit trees along Killingsworth and would love to paint a huge pattern in the middle of the intersection.

"'Activist' is a new category for me," Press said. "I'm active in my community, and I'm very aware of all the goings-on. . . . We'd like to

explode this idea of community into people's consciousnesses. We're already way ahead of the game from where we were six months ago."



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