

Creative Time Presents

INTERROGATING PUBLIC SPACE

Ava Bromberg, February 2008

Exhibitions) in conjunction with the summer 2007 publication *Critical Planning Volume 14: Spatial Justice*. The show will feature artists' work that incorporates spatial analyses of injustice as well as work that aims to produce "just space(s)." The show includes a large library and info shop, a collaborative mapping project for a just Los Angeles, and a series of symposia to bring together artists, activists, and scholars to reflect on the usefulness of a spatial frame for furthering their efforts. The show will run from September 26 to November 18, 2008.

For more information, check out: <http://www.justspaces.org/>.

Nato Thompson (NT): Could you describe some of the organizing principles behind Mess Hall and what you learned as it has evolved?

Ava Bromberg (AB): As you know, but your readers might not, Mess Hall is an experimental cultural space operating out of a storefront in the Roger's Park neighborhood on the far north side of Chicago. We started in the summer of 2003 with eight "keyholders" and a few basic founding principles. We wanted to extend our landlord's initial act of generosity—he gives us use of the storefront rent-free—to build up a non-commercial space where people would be encouraged to share their skills, ideas, food, and personal and professional surpluses of all sorts. We agreed never to ask for donations at the door or "pass the hat." From the beginning we wanted Mess Hall to be a place for activities that had nowhere else to go in Chicago. People continue to propose programs all the time—we host exhibitions, discussions with peripatetic scholars, appreciations of hardcore music, film screenings, workshops to repurpose old clothing and other events of varied origin. We now have eleven keyholders splitting the operating costs, with an occasional university lecture honorarium, or an unsolicited but much appreciated donation added in the mix. Early on we chose not to pursue non-profit status and instead focused our administrative energies on putting on a very eclectic array of programs with essentially no budget. As a result, though Mess Hall's not very big, it always manages to draw an interested crowd. Four years in, our announcements now go out to more than 1200 people via email, and folks come from across the city or down the street. The longer it's around and the more cultural spaces I see, the more I realize Mess Hall is a truly special place. The initial impulse to get people together—even just to eat—and valuing social interaction as a form of cultural production proved a very powerful point of departure.

We operate without hierarchy or forced unity—just mutual trust and respect. From the beginning, we've made ample room for dissensus, for working on projects independently or in small groups, and debating larger issues together. Sometimes this has meant rather intense interrogations of a proposed project with different people arguing why it does or does not fit with the principles of the space. With eleven people, there are usually at least fifteen opinions. I've learned more from these internal debates we've had—on issues like handling disrespectful visitors without compromising our open-door policy, and if/when it is ethical to break our own rules about selling things in Mess Hall (it only happened once and it's a long, but very interesting, story)—as I have from books! We also built in flexibility to try and prevent keyholders from burning out—we can be inactive for stretches of time without any explanation other than "I'm taking a break." Of course, the organizing structure is not without its occasional difficulties and frustrations (most of these revolve around trying to schedule meetings to get eleven oversubscribed people in the same room at the same time) but the keyholder group has evolved in a very organic way. I remain involved in the constant email conversation even though I can't do my share of unlocking the door and sweeping up after events from Los Angeles. I think it's because somehow I'm too invested in the experiment as a model for organizing a locally rooted, internationally networked neighborhood cultural space to extract myself



Mess Hall



Histories at Mess Hall

Hardcore



Mess Hall

All photos courtesy Ava Bromberg

from that activity. Yeah, it still teaches me a lot.

And in many ways, curiosities piqued at Mess Hall pushed me towards the field of urban planning. I was left with many questions I still have about the sites of democratic action and social change, and the future of public, social and cultural space (urban and rural), so I wanted to know more about making space. Initially, I wondered what it would take to integrate more places like Mess Hall into how we develop neighborhoods, but soon learned there were many more—and more basic—questions to investigate first.

NT: I deeply believe that these sort of spaces for experimental art and politics produce new subjectivities, not simply for those who interact with them occasionally, but most intensely, for those who engage with them on a day-to-day basis. By engaging actively with spaces like Mess Hall, you will change as a person. I guess in your case this would include not just keyholders, but also your regulars. When I lived in Berkeley, I lived in a housing co-operative called Chateau and this type of collectivist living deeply affected what I gauged as a possible experience to have in terms of community and daily living. I often feel that New York City would greatly benefit from a Mess Hall-like space where people interact on a regular basis to discuss critical work but also the politics that surround them. Not that there aren't some spaces attempting this. Orchard Gallery does interesting projects, The Change You Want to See in Williamsburg is doing great things, and Bluestockings is a tremendous activist bookstore social center. Clearly, commercial galleries produce their own sense of what is possible. Spaces, that is physical occupiable spaces, can greatly effect how people define the terms of their own aesthetic and political practices. In short, they offer models. It might be interesting to know what types of spin-off projects have come out of Mess Hall.

AB: I think it is unfortunate that conscious engagement with the systems and structures we inherit (and by this I mean both physical, mental, and institutional "structures") is not a common educational or social experience in this country. Yet it is perhaps in the absence of a kind of "system" for arming people with critical thinking skills—and in the presence of mass spoon-feeding of pre-digested and pre-spun morsels—that we see an incredible proliferation of these types of local spaces for art and politics. I think many of them operate like affinity groups attracting people who share a common interest, which is socially vital. But the examples that interest me most are those that expand their "base" of regulars and can comfortably support lots of different activities.

And I agree with you emphatically—with all the information and analysis and printed (and printable) matter at our fingertips, these spaces can be incredibly powerful portals to inspire thinking and new possibilities. Simply showing people that it is possible to make space for their desires can blow people's minds! I also think it's important to emphasize the power of the new social interactions—ones that we're not getting elsewhere—that can be generated in these spaces. Many spin-off projects start with finding people interested in collaborating—none of the things we're talking about are executed in isolation. There are at least a few projects I know of that Mess Hall has inspired in Chicago: a relatively new space called InCUBATE (Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and The Everyday), the Monk Parakeet group at the Experimental Station, and to some extent, the Stockyard Institute's Pedagogical Factory project being organized this summer by Jim Duignan and Daniel Tucker at the Hyde Park Arts Center. By the same token, I would like to acknowledge something else you allude to: the more "subjectivities" a project succeeds in generating, the harder it gets to identify the spin-offs and what new possibilities have been sparked in people. These can take forms that don't just involve physically opening a storefront. These would be very difficult to enumerate; that is part of why the concept is powerful.

Beyond the examples you mentioned, what is most inspiring to me is when you start to look for these spaces, you can find them everywhere. They are all over the world. They take different and highly context-specific forms (in response to how structural/systematic "lacks" are experienced locally), but I've found them everywhere in over twenty-five cities. Sometimes they're in bookstores, sometimes they're in art galleries, sometimes they're in a meeting that happens once a month in the back of a cafe. They face varying pressures to dissolve or institutionalize over time. What they share, I think, is that each one reflects the energy of the people who make it. Each one, if it is sufficiently "open" to generate the "new subjectivities" you speak of, regardless of the format, is fundamentally supportive of and inspires curiosity. What has more potential to be aesthetically or politically productive than curiosity? And how to move from producing new political subjectivities to new political agents? I'm increasingly interested in exploring that... (why three...)

NT: I share your concerns. What are the spaces in which people find meaning in their lives? I think the loss of the union movement took the union hall out of the equation, which was a physical space of meaningful? production (or the production of subjectivities). So too are the churches which continue to be so. Also, punk culture has long had a tradition of producing spaces that make meaning in people's lives.

This process is often what differentiates a temporary art project from a space that produces (does the space produce or offer an environment to produce) meaning or culture.

AB: It's important, I think, to tease apart any examples of physical spaces such as the ones you propose, and to think about whether these are places where people simply find meaning or where they can also actively participate in making it. Is it producing meaning as-it-has-been-made-before, or remaking meaning, and remixing categories? Does it introduce the possibility for a brief moment, as a temporary art project can, or does set up a site for meaning to be reworked continuously? I'm not sure the latter is readily available to people at various ages and stages of their lives, in urban or rural areas. A good book may be the best bet for many. But at some point the internal re-workings of meaning a good book instigates manifest socially. And you are absolutely right that for many small towns throughout the U.S., churches are central meeting points—some are better at housing secular activities (where various political positions could be comfortably expressed) than others. And in punk spaces, as with churches, we have to think about what conditions are bounding meaning production. Regardless, if we start to think about where and across how broad a spectrum people can be together outside the home and build solidarity across difference we can develop a relatively short and narrow list. This, I think, is an area ripe for experimentation, and it may be that temporary art projects are a place to start. I also think we've reached a point where we know how to "do" temporary, and the challenge is to explore whether the energy generated by temporary things can take root. I think it is crucial to be building up people's capacities to keep parts of that experience and remake it on their own terms. In building up other spaces, people have to wrestle together with the what, why, and how—talk about meaning production!

And, as an aside, I would hardly write off the labor movement entirely! While its presence has clearly shifted, it is also transforming in ways that are spatial. In Los Angeles, unions are still very active and successfully negotiating with developers and the city, to secure living wage jobs and local hire programs on city-funded projects as part of larger coalitions including residents and community groups who build power together to secure a variety of "community benefits" from megaprojects like the Staples Center (see the Figueroa Corridor Coalition) and the Grand Avenue Plan (see the Grand Avenue Coalition). And we also can't forget the Bus Rider's Union.

NT: Fair enough. I would never write off the labor movement, but clearly it has changed dramatically since Reagan. I suspect that looking at a map of the United States, in terms of how people find meaning in their lives, might actually clarify the supposed divide between red states and blue states. Thomas Frank hints at this divide to some degree in his book, *What's The Matter with Kansas* (funny enough, this book's title in Europe is *What's the Matter with the United States*), but he doesn't exactly point toward the impact that major media and spectacle have had in terms of shaping subjectivities. People do not wake up with their political opinions and actions intact. They are shaped by the forces around them.

AB: Most of us wake up and go to work and don't think all that much about whether our ideas are our own or the byproduct of an incredibly savvy spin machine. In the meantime, advertising covers nearly every surface of our experience with media. We get better and better at ignoring it, but most people (outside academia) rarely think about what impact such pervasive marketing has on where we take/make meaning; if there is excellent research on it, marketing specialists are much more likely to be using it. At the scale of the individual and the nation, the spectacle is a force; so is debt service, and so are the top one percent of wage earners. I think we've been encircling a crucial paradox around how the structures we inherit form us and our sense of possibility, and how we intervene to change those structures. Lately I've been thinking there is something encouraging and untapped about the fact that the line between who makes a new meaningful symbol and who responds to it (producer/consumer) is increasingly blurred. And the internet is a really interesting part of this dynamic. I actually think the potential exists for big shifts to happen fast, eventually in the direction of justice.

As for the red state / blue state thing, it's a fabulously polarizing tale, an oversimplification best suited for major media sound bytes. When people bring it up I always send them to these amazing maps that were made by a few folks at the University of Michigan after the 2004 elections that I'm sure you've seen: <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/election/>. They're illustrative of the power of scale. When you looking at a finer grain of voting blocks, and consider population density, this country is various shades of purple.

NT: Could you define the term "spatial justice" and where it comes from?

AB: The term spatial justice is fundamentally related to an idea that Henri Lefebvre advanced, namely that space isn't "out there" somewhere—space is actively produced and reproduced by social relations. In other words, our neighborhoods, cities, working environments—and our internal environments, that sense of what is

possible we've been talking about – are constructed and reconstructed constantly. What does that have to do with justice? I think understanding that space—like justice—is never simply handed out or given, that both are socially produced, experienced, and contested on constantly shifting social, political, economic, and geographical terrains means that justice—if it is to be concretely achieved, experienced, and reproduced, must be engaged on social as well as spatial terms.

Spatial justice builds on notions of social justice by forcing us to be more specific about what we mean by justice. With a spatial frame we can better understand where we stand, not just geographically, but at other materially and immaterially spatial scales (inside our bodies, our race and gender, our neighborhood, a national borders impacted by transnational trade agreements etc.). A spatial frame allows us to see, for example, how investment decisions perpetuate geographic inequalities. Understanding this is a point of departure for demanding something different. So what's interesting to me about spatial justice is that it isn't only about arriving at a better analysis of what is wrong, but also doing something about it and acknowledging that we all have a role to play in producing justice, even if we have different levels of power.

The term still needs to be adequately theorized and I think its usefulness as a framework for critical practice—for artists, organizers and scholars whose work engages questions of justice – needs to be explored. I think it could be a very powerful framework through which people who don't have lots of monetary-power but are nonetheless impacted by it's movement can a) create political pressure and demand rights to intervene in development processes that don't provide for them, and b) begin to (re)produce spaces of justice. The more precise analysis that a spatial frame can provide gets us rather quickly into complex questions about how we get our institutions to better work in service of people, and what we mean by "public."

NT: I am particularly intrigued with the crossover in analysis between the practice of the Situationists (not simply their walks, but their belief in space and the city as an important force in their being) and the concomitant artistic practices thriving today with the ongoing interest in cultural geography and spatial practices led by Henri Lefebvre, Michele DeCerteau Edward Soja, Rebecca Solnit, Ruthi Gilmore and others. I see a productive conversation taking place between the study of spatial politics and the performance of bodies in space. It almost feels like an emerging field in and of itself.

AB: Exactly. And at such a moment of convergence, there's a chance to take the best from each of these fields' methodologies, to really learn how to practice theory, to think about how we stimulate creativity (a loaded, but appropriate term) more broadly, and what it means to "train" artists and citizens to remake meaning and practice politics. Practicing theory is what seems to me to be the imperative of this particular crossover. I think there is still work to be done drawing these concerns together; there is already lots of overlap but, as I mentioned above, we have only begun to scratch the surface of what a productive collaboration between scholars, activists, and artists working on the same topics in different ways might generate. I definitely consider my work operating at this juncture, building on what has already been done and negotiating different institutional expectations to explore what these approaches have to offer each other in practice (conceived broadly). Right now, I've found one of the best ways to explore this has been with the current curatorial project I'm working on with Nicholas Brown—the show on spatial justice at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) called Just Space(s) that's opening at the end of September.

NT: Are there specific artists that are doing work you find interesting? Tangible examples are often helpful in clarifying what it means to practice theory.

AB: Well, we've included a lot of the examples that come to mind in the exhibition. Some of them work as artists, some as activists, some as scholars—some in collaboration. This summer, the Los Angeles Urban Rangers (<http://www.laurbanrangers.org>) held a series of educational tours and activities to show people how to legally access Malibu's public-private beaches. The Right to the City Alliance, a burgeoning national coalition of base building community organizations from cities across the U.S., is a great example (<http://righttothecity.org>) and is looking to develop collaborations with artists. The Dakota Commemorative March (<http://www.dakota-march.50megs.com/oned.html>) and Syracuse Community Geography (http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/geo/community_geography/index.html) are others.

NT: Before we discuss public art, lets discuss the term "art" in general. Both of us have a tenuous relationship with the term "art" and are definitely skeptical of its connotations. Nonetheless, there is a tradition of the poetic or ambiguous that allows the term art to separate itself from more utilitarian objects?. How do you see use the term "art" in relationship to your practice?

AB: On the level of daily experience I think of art as what expands the horizon of

what people conceive to be possible. So for me—and I think for you too—we acknowledge that the context for making, experiencing, and transforming art is absolutely bigger than the industrial complex that assigns meaning and trades in its abstract value; in that world where the resurgence of painting is rather predictable, we are free to drink chardonnay and have the occasional transformative experience. We know that a whole world of work is produced and reproduced by the spaces, institutional frameworks, and financing that contain it. We don't even have to talk about that (unless you want to). Though I'll add that a) interesting work gets made with that money sometimes, b) I think the ethics come in not with whose money one takes, but what one does with it, and c) I've been moved to tears in a museum. So I guess, to start this part of the conversation, I want to decouple the term 'art' from that framing device and ways it can be employed to justify a certain kind of disengagement with the wider world. Instead I will suggest that what you and I and so many others we admire are working with—our frame, lets say—is all social life. I'm looking for a more descriptive way to say "everything." And to be clear, that's not "everything is art" but rather "everything is the frame in which art shows up." And it can be a painting, but it can also be lots of other things operating in lots of other contexts.

Anyway, whatever art becomes when you embrace the whole world as it is, warts and all, with mysteries of the universe, pain, suffering, private gardens, sunglasses, McDonalds, motherhood, sandcastles, cigarettes, etc. I think art, all of the sudden, is needed everywhere in a really profound way. To open up horizons for new possibilities in oneself and others. To remind us to play. The catalyst can be poetic; what it inspires can be utilitarian and visa versa!

On the level of my daily experience (and what I would call my practice) I continue to work to expand my own horizons, and to work in ways that make expansion available to others. That's just what happened to my practice, and why I ended up seeking an advanced degree in urban planning in order to do my (art)work, to be a better physical and discursive "space-maker" (and a more efficient researcher and writer.) And I've found what I really treasure and keep close about art (understood in this most open sense, decoupled from its reifying institutions)—it's the open gaze, the ultimate transdisciplinary position, the necessity to communicate.

NT: As you know, I work for a public art organization. I find this field particularly challenging, but believe that the type of analysis you are involved in—that of using the analysis of space and bodies, power, culture operating within it—provides a tangible method for a productive interdisciplinary approach to the practice. Anyone involved in public art knows that space is deeply contested, as we have to navigate complicated terrain all the time. What are your thoughts on the role of public art in urban centers? What can it do? Where is it a problem/benefit?

AB: The way I got into the work I do now was a year of travel and research on public art and public space in over 20 cities as a Watson Fellow, so I've thought a lot about these questions. What I thought of as part of this "field" grew and changed over time as I talked with people who produce or fund it and with those living in contested urban spaces, and as I moved between particular economic, historical, and social contexts. It was an incredible way to learn from other people's experiences, having started—in a very open way—with questions about how to make "art" "public" and finishing the year by co-founding Mess Hall.

A few things are clearly problematic when we look at the economy that sustains public art production, because part of the complexities of the terrain is where the money comes from and how decisions for spending it are made. For example, in the case of Percent for Art money of which there is a lot worldwide, if the developer gets to decide how the money is spent there is very good chance it will pay for doorknobs and window treatments produced by artists. And this is a viable income stream for people who make a living doing decorative interiors, but whether or not it is "public" or "art" depends on your definition. And might developer hire them anyway without cutting into the public art requirement? If the developer has a pivotal say in what commissioned public art works will be, they are much more likely to choose a "thing" that will appreciate in value, or add to the value of the development, not a temporary project that might be more "public." Moreover, it is unlikely that a commissioned public art project dealing with the specific history of that site will make visible, for example, contested histories that are erased by the development that funds the commission. In my opinion, it's a conflict of (public) interest to have the developer involved in how the money gets spent. There is, of course, precedent for Percent for Art money to be spent on programming, like the summer music series at California Plaza, but again we return to what we mean by public, and what we mean by art! So, I'm a fan of retooling that policy to alleviate conflicts of interest and create meaningful pools of money to support public art.

Now, none of this takes away from what public art can be or do in theory, and what organizations like Creative Time can and support. But we have to recognize that the funding and decision making structure are part of what constrain the practice. Public art can certainly open up important conversations about a contested site, and it can do more than commemorate a conflict, it can get at all of these critical things about

making space to practice politics, and practice “publicness” that we’ve been talking about. I realized rather quickly in my research that the most interesting public art-work came from the bottom up. It was initiated by the artists, sometimes around efforts to save a contested site from being erased by redevelopment, sometimes because of an interest in or necessity to make something public. Sometimes because it was the only way to bring art, in the way I defined it above – as expanding horizons of possibility—into people’s everyday lives. It was not in response to a request for proposals. I think there is a fundamental flaw in asking artists to work within boxes created by bureaucrats, but I also think that difficulty could be largely overcome with a different approach to and process for funding public art.

NT: Speaking as a bureaucrat, I must admit, I don’t always appreciate the distinction between artist ‘vision’ and the necessary pragmatics that go into play in order to get things done. That is, in order to produce sweeping changes, we must also sweep floors. I often worry that public art suffers from a confluence of paradoxes: the myth of the artist whose vision can never be compromised, the myth of the bureaucrat who is obsessed with red tape and cynical instrumentalization and the myth of an uncontested public sphere. This process is muddy (just like all politics) and requires navigating multiple spheres of power. Do you include this type of clunkiness (? Other word in your vision of public art?

AB: Is there still a myth circulating that the public sphere is uncontested? You should write a memo! Clear that up once and for all, Nato. That wouldn’t alleviate the clunkiness, but maybe it would put all the players on the same page, or in the same chapter—okay, the same book. I absolutely acknowledge that navigating a series of unenviable paradoxes must take up a large part of any public art project manager’s day. But I guess my vision of public art comes from the bottom. There is mandatory clunkiness that comes with building and navigating power structures to get anything done. But it’s different perhaps than the structure you describe. There, I think it is on the bureaucrat—he who sweeps the floors—to test and implement improvements to the process. But I think there has to be room for radical invention—in the bureaucracy and the projects they support. It’s on everyone involved to recognize that the public sphere is neither white nor cube-like. (The reading list is different.) It’s not even spherical. It’s diminished. And contested even when it is sunny out. What to do?

My vision of public art goes back to my vision of public space—of what it means to make a place public. To create a place where strangers can develop or discover a new interest or engage deeply with people and concepts they’ve never encountered—this is what I think “publicness” is all about. It’s not a pre-existing condition of a site, but something that’s actively created. I think it has little to do with what entity (public, private, non-profit) owns the place, and everything to do with how it can be used, by whom, and to what extent. To me, “publicness” might be best measured—if we had to measure it—by the depth of interaction that takes place between unfamiliar entities. The public artwork I want to see, and continue to seek out, bubbles up from this premise.

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CREATIVETIME