THE EXHIBITIONIST
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OVERTURE

CURATORS' FAVORITES

BACK IN THE DAY

ASSESSMENTS

TYPOLOGIES

ATTITUDE

REAR MIRROR

ENDNOTE

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THE EXHIBITIONIST

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NO. 2 JUNE 2010

SHE—A Cathedral installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1966

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TYPOLOGIES

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ART IN PUBLIC SPACE

ON PRACTICING IN PUBLIC

Mary Jane Jacob

I have gained several understandings as a curator from practicing in public. One is a greater awareness of the difference between the work of art and the experience of art. Working in institutions I increasingly came to feel that the "museum experience" was overtaking the "art experience." In museums, the lack of a lived-with, everyday environment and cultural context contributes to art experience's evaporation. What could art located in life contribute to having an art experience?

In the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, the American philosopher John Dewey called museums an invention of capitalism, and he took exception to their claim to be the proper home for art, set apart from common life.[1] So I find Dewey an important voice for us to return to now, after recent decades of experimenting with and expanding the definitions of public art, public space, and even the public itself.

Dewey claimed that art is a type of experience rather than an entity. The actual work of art is what the object or thing does with, and in, experience. To really, deeply understand these words meant, for me, to take them up as a practice, and to practice them over and over again. And to do so with others—not just artists and colleagues, but every manner of person who could be engaged or ensnared, because I believed that anyone could have an art experience, and could potentially be part of a public art project.

This brings me to my second point, which concerns a fuller realization of the art audience. Inviting in the "unfashionable audience" (as I termed it in Suzanne Lacy's 1995 anthology *New Genre Public Art*) was not simply about probing a discourse of institutional critique or cultural representation (though I did that, too). In shifting the nexus of art-and-audience, I came to further consider the central role of the public as an active participant in the art experience. This led to an essential understanding that the direct line between artist and audience, which can be achieved by working in public, is not just a more efficient delivery system. It is the way that art actually *happens*.

More than two decades before Marcel Duchamp's 1957 essay "The Creative Act" (in which he famously described art as a pact between artist and spectator, not something performed by the artist alone), Dewey set a foundation for understanding the causal nature of art: what causes art to arise in the artist, and hence to be created, and what causes art to affect the viewer, and thus be re-created. Dewey considered the place of the viewer as central: A work of art is a work of art only when it lives in some

Meredith Monk and vocal ensemble performing *Songs of Ascension* by Meredith Monk and Ann Hamilton, Oliver Ranch, Geyserville, California, 2008

Places with a Future collaborative team (Kendra Hamilton, Walter Hood, Mary Jane Jacob, Ernesto Pujol)
Phillips Community road design, Charleston, 2006

Magdalena Abakanowicz
Agora (detail), Chicago Park District, 2006
Cast iron

individualized experience, and, as a work of art, it is re-created every time it is esthetically experienced. Without this act of re-creation the object is not perceived as a work of art. We become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and in doing so, our own experience is reoriented.

Dewey would have appreciated the changes that occurred in public art in the later 20th century: its more complex and nuanced ways of joining with the audience, and its direct ways of working with the public. He might see in public, participatory, and relational art the expression of his belief that the material of aesthetic experience is widely human, and thus social.

The third and final realization I want share here has to do with the art process and the outcome of that process. For projects in and with the public to come about, the process needs to be open, allow others in, and unfold in its own way. Artists know this. As a curator I am part of the process, nearly always showing work made in dialogue with artists. But the institutions and funding authorities that we curators need to contend with almost always expect to know at the outset what will be the outcome. So we need to defend and protect the art process. We know, and even Dewey noted, that the process *is* the art and that the product, no matter at what stage it is considered, is a work of art. So art can be both the means and the end.

Some assistance in grappling with the demand for final goals before the process has even begun came when I found myself involved in cultivating a program about art experience and Buddhism.[2] I was able to bring some lessons back to my public practice.

* Clarify and articulate the aims (the *why* of the project, not the *what*);
* Settle into the discomfort of the creative process, resisting arriving too soon at production goals;
* Enter into the process without expectations. If you are not fixed on what the art will be, the work will develop, shift, and find its way;
* Trust the process;
* Be fully present in the process and listen to the process itself. Insight comes from being present in those invested moments, in a particular place and circumstances.

Process develops over time and continues without end. There are artists, such as Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ann Hamilton, with whom I have worked for decades and share a discourse that develops independently yet intersects from time to time, and over and over again. When the process is sustained in an organic way (as it has been for me in and out of Charleston, South Carolina, for more than 20 years now)[3] and when everybody has something at stake that they know art can manifest and move (as Charlestonians have come to believe), we arrive at what Dewey termed experience carried to the full, in which interaction transforms into participation and communication. Then art gives way to change, like an alternate road design that keeps a community intact, and places with a past become places with a future.

Notes

1. Dewey spent his formative years in Chicago, where I, too, live. He came to Chicago in 1894 to chair the department of philosophy, psychology, and education at the University of Chicago; two years later he started an educational experiment there, a kind of laboratory school. His model of experiential learning—learning by doing, grounded in real life and not just theory—was part of an international movement in education and contributed to the formation of progressive education in the United States. Dewey also viewed this engaged form of education, with its focus on the individual and a consciousness of one's role in society, as an expression of a participatory democracy. Dewey wrote on a wide range of subjects, but art was never far from his mind. For him, art had a wide role in the scheme of things and was essential to living life.

2. The consortium program "Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness" took place from 2001 to 2003 and resulted in the book *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, coedited by Jacquelynn Baas and myself (University of California Press, 2004), and a sequel, *Learning Mind: Experience Into Art* (University of California Press, 2009).

3. In 1991 I curated *Places with a Past*, an exhibition of site-specific installations in Charleston at the invitation of the Spoleto Festival USA. Some critics took it to be a "parachuting" venture, exploitive of the locale. Indeed the artists and myself did not see our involvement beyond the show's timeframe, but the works were sincere and the processes that brought them about invested. And it would have been presumptuous to have plotted it out as a long-range program. Things had to evolve—such is process—and the response of the public was the next step; it's a call-and-response. In 2000 I was invited back, and I set up an exceedingly open structure, listening (to community), not making (or not obligating the artists to do so). We heard a lot about what people saw and felt over the previous decade, how art activated emotions and thoughts and connected past to present. Working annually, all year, not just at festival time, we made connections and found that the changes afoot in the region—overbuilding and its impact on traffic and the ecology—were real threats to a sustained and shared heritage among blacks and whites, and that some modest yet powerful places, meaningful to certain small sectors of the African American population, faced eradication. These became the places we championed. As a team, composed of the poet Kendra Hamilton, landscape designer Walter Hood, artist Ernesto Pujol, and myself, we considered with those constituencies what change could look like at three sites. And so was born the ongoing, open-ended program *Places with a Future*.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE UNKNOWN

Nato Thompson

Contemporary art swirls in a crisis of identity. Since the invention of the camera this crisis has been stewing, and most certainly Modernism's inherent paradoxes have kept the field interesting. But what was once a compelling quandary has become a tired alibi. Two major forces operating at the center of this decaying imbroglio are the powerful effects of cultural production as industry and the crumbling structures of the Enlightenment. The disintegration of fields once considered discrete (natural history, ecology, the arts, politics, anthropology, sociology) offers up opportunities for peculiar aesthetic investigations that also feed the appetite of an overwhelming cultural consumption. This quandary of embracing the metaphoric power of art because of its potential for freedom while simultaneously being aware of its complicity in the growing market of cultural desire has greatly influenced my thinking on art, and on methodologies for producing meaning in this complicated information age. For, ultimately, the project of making meaning is a more relevant approach to cultural production than simply the tight frame of "contemporary art."

An example is certainly necessary. While working on Paul Chan's project *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* in 2007 with Creative Time, we

Paul Chan
Scene from *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans,* 2007
J. Kyle Manzay and Wendell Pierce

committed to a method based on Chan's principle of the "front end" and the "back end." The front end consisted of the production of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods in post-Katrina New Orleans. The back end grew out of the innovation necessary for working under conditions of spectacle (more on this later). The process ultimately involved a vast, community-wide organizational effort that included school classes, potlucks, a shadow fund for local communities, and countless interpersonal meetings. These organizational structures, operating behind the aesthetic gesture, offered a response to Walter Benjamin's quandary in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer." We were producing a materialist base in order to ground a metaphor of waiting in actual relations. We could not simply let a gesture that could potentially exploit the condition of a city ravaged by a catastrophic, capitalist-assisted flood operate on its own—that is to say, we could not do the project solely for the purpose of gaining social capital. We had to work toward making material and social changes on the ground. We needed to ground the gesture in the material world. We could not be aesthetic carpetbaggers.

The first thread of my recent thinking—accounting for the powerful effects of cultural production as industry—unwinds out of a simple analysis perpetuated long ago by the famed Situationists, whose novelty in the art world may have expired but whose insights into the altered landscape of culture and politics remain prescient. What the Situationists described as spectacle in large part remains popularly understood as the rise of visual machines such as cinema, television, and perhaps now the web. Probably due in large part to Guy Debord's cover for *Society of the Spectacle,* that image of a 1950s audience staring at a movie screen wearing 3D glasses, the ubiquitous interpretation has been more in line with what Jean Baudrillard famously described as *simulacrum.* We are a nation living in fake reality. And, if we go further, that fake is the real. But this interpretation remains the tip of the iceberg. A more pointed critique would focus on the fusion of culture and capitalism at the onset of the information age. That is to say, *simulacrum* is only useful when understood via an analysis of political economy. (The same could be said of Jacque Rancière's en vogue aesthetic theories, whose allergies to political economy make them somewhat misleading.)

The emergence of a global industry of cultural production has exploded the category of art into a form of living where culture is simultaneously that which we love and that which we consume and sell. This industry consists not only of movies, advertising, television, radio, painting, photography, and sculpture, but also experiences closer to home such as education, aesthetic dispositions, friends, family, and, ultimately, ourselves. This growing daily condition whereby the things we ordinarily locate outside the realm of capital become suddenly schizophrenic in their complicity is not an exception but the rule. The term *social capital,* developed by the sociologist

Pierre Bourdieu, in many respects is the vehicle through which spectacle navigates the forms of capital. And social capital, this register and latent agent by which a phenomenon sits in the complicated matrix of power and capital, has become the dark shadow that haunts all aspects of contemporary art. Contemporary projects of cultural production must contend with this shadow.

The second thread—accounting for the crumbling structures of the Enlightenment—has become more evident as I continue to produce projects in the public sphere. A looming paradox facing museums is that the discursive framing of an art museum limits the capacity of its art to be effective. That is to say, the qualifying term *art* often poses more of a hindrance than a help. If the general audience could get over the question of why things are or are not art, it would benefit from a more compelling question: In what manner is this phenomenon—of an aesthetic moment temporarily disengaged from its discursive tradition—interesting? This dilemma of framing became evident in New Orleans, where if one were to ask, "Who here is a contemporary artist?" not a single hand would be raised. But if one asked, "Who here is an artist?" the whole city would come forward. In this instance, the framing of artist-versus-contemporary-artist reveals a racialized history that greatly influences reception. In attempting to produce conditions that upset strict categorization of what art experience is, we can more productively produce various points of entry into a work. There is a major schism between the trajectory of art as an idea and the institutional baggage that comes with it. The schizophrenia continues.

Recently the artist Tania Bruguera said to me, "I don't want an art that points at things, I want an art that *is* the thing." Her desire poses numerous complications for a saturated cultural landscape where most gestures are weighed down by their complicity in feeding cultural consumption. What does it mean to produce projects that are the thing? What does it mean to avoid the deleterious effects of spectacle and social capital? Increasingly this form of aesthetic investigation forces cultural producers to take on projects that not only escape the boundaries of specific discursive fields (activism, geography, biology, and, of course, art), but also produce a space in which the audience cannot place the object/engagement in any familiar category, including the overarching sphere of capitalism.

In 2009 I worked with the New Museum on a road trip across America as part of Jeremy Deller's *It Is What It Is.* On the back of our RV we hitched a car blown up in a marketplace bombing in Baghdad two years before. At each stop along the way, we parked in a public space, and an American soldier and an Iraqi citizen answered questions about their experiences in Iraq. Throughout the project and the following months, our undertaking was criticized as "not art." And because the project would not take a position on the war, activists said it was certainly "not activism." If one considered all of these criticisms, the project, apparently, existed as nothing. If it isn't art and it isn't activism, then it must be something different, which would require a new set of evaluative mechanisms. The roving, peculiar space of speculation that was *It Is What It Is* forced visitors to deal with something outside any familiar realm. If things are what they are, then we must ask: What are they?

Jeremy Deller
It Is What It Is, 2009
Esam Pasha in conversation with Rodney Blake, a Gulf War veteran, Emancipation Park, Houston

As society becomes more trained to see the power and capitalist desires that operate behind the scenes of aesthetic gestures, the promises of art become dulled. We must acknowledge that the lurking shadow of social capital renders much contemporary art inert. In order to resuscitate the dream of making meaning, we must produce on the back end of material relations as well as on that pleasurable front end of the gesture. And secondly, we must think carefully about how to liberate aesthetic gestures from the rigid conservative bracket that we so often call "art." The reputation of the framing device of art must shift, or perhaps, more efficaciously, the confounding gesture must head into the wilderness of the undefined. With both considerations in mind, cultural production can not only resonate, but continue its long tradition of producing more liberating realities.

EVERYWHERENESS

Joshua Decter

Art becomes public, so to speak, when it enters into spaces of ideational and social discourse as well as economic exchange. The cultural and communicative platforms for this "becoming public" include the art school, the studio/bureau, the art space, the gallery, the museum, the street, et cetera. By virtue of art's capacity to surface anywhere and everywhere, the appearance of art is at the same time an enunciation of its *publicness.*

Since the emergence of bourgeois society in the 19th century, art's modernity has become indistinguishable from its desire to communicate with publics, or its emancipation into public realms, and to find itself situated in places (universal expositions, galleries, museums, biennials, symposia) wherein encounters with the quasi-public domain might be staged. It is, in other words, an entrepreneurial conception wherein the work of art converts space into a cultural place, or venue, for itself, and at the same time a place functions as a frame for art, which establishes the discursive conditions under which art publicizes itself (sometimes promiscuously) as art.

Art—as thing, as language—activates encounters with individuals, audiences, constituencies, publics, and counter-publics. Art's entry into the world constitutes its potential to generate public-domain experiences—one example being the possibility that art might somehow inflect our relationship with the built environment. Complications emerge when we endeavor to trace how art, whether as autonomous operation or collective endeavor, generates meaning (or critical consciousness) for/with/in relation to people, whether in terms of passive models of reception or different modes of interaction and participation. I am referring here to the multidecade debate concerning the criteria of evaluation that we formulate and deploy (as putative experts operating as interlocutors within the cultural public sphere) regarding art's symbolic, material effect (or effectiveness) vis-à-vis audiences, constituencies, and publics. How do we gauge effectivity? Or has this question itself become obsolete?

What space today has not already been converted into a place (or non-place, to invoke Marc Augé)—a location, platform, territory—that functions as a venue for the instantiation of art in one form (or non-form) or another, temporary (time-based, durational, performative, ephemeral) or permanent? Within the discourses of art history, art criticism, curatorial-organizational practices, and discursive platforms (such as symposia, meetings, conversations, and so on), the coding of art practices as interventionist or as social practice is often discussed in relation to art's engagement with social space and the public realm, whether this is considered literally as outside (i.e., outdoor) or inside (i.e., interior) space. Every act of art—whether guerilla-like or by permission and institutionally supported—that is experienced outside traditional, sanctioned venues for art publicizes its claims of enhanced connectivity to broader constituencies and publics. Historically this has been the claim of so-called public art, but we may be skeptical of such claims.

In democratic societies, the question is not really which type of art making is more or less democratic, or "freedom-generative," which is sometimes the assumption when referring to collective or participatory practices, perhaps in relation to Herbert Marcuse's notion of repressive tolerance. The question is rather how we analyze culture's interrelationship, on historical terms, with the material and symbolic processes of social and political democratization.

Roman Ondák
Loop, 2009
Installation view of the Czech and Slovakia pavilion at the Venice Biennale

Global capitalism, in all of its micro and macro functionalities and dysfunctionalities, is a space of turbulent economic and social flows (to invoke Manuel Castells). It is within these flows—the liminal zones that invisibly trace the thresholds, imagined and real, between leftover notions of public and private—that art, whether formulated as autonomous practice, collectivist organization, or something else, may still have a chance to apply certain pressure points, if only as a means of generating and maintaining counter-public enclaves (evoking Michael Warner) that might also be defined as constituencies of the subaltern, the subcultural, and perhaps even the *extra*cultural. In this regard, we have to take into consideration the resurfacing of DIY art and cultural production, certain forms of collective and participatory work, and various modes of art-as-activism, all of which aspire to more authentically "open" encounters and exchanges with communities, constituencies, and publics. This suggests a reanimation of certain strategies and tactics of 1960s and 1970s countercultural and political activism, and another manifestation of the critique of "autonomous" forms of artistic production (within a privatized system of commerce) as a means of countering the more pernicious effects (such as political alienation) of an unregulated free market, and proposing other ways of social and economic organization (services bartering, edible estates, and so on).

Some will make the argument, or just the assumption, that collectivist, collaborative, and participatory works of art are more politically progressive by virtue of their apparent structural openness. In other words, works that are explicitly contingent upon the literal involvement of the social body for activation, meaning production, and presence (and which, in turn, supposedly awaken the dormant viewer into an active, dis-alienated participant or an extended author) somehow evince a more "democratized" condition, and are therefore intrinsically more "progressive." I wonder if this is an ideological mirage. Certainly the notion of the autonomy of the work of art is an ideological construction, as is the idea of the temporary autonomous zone. Or perhaps there are broader misunderstandings regarding the imagined interrelationships between the space of art and the space of the political, which is always a relationship of contradiction.

What are the criteria, or critical-evaluative tools, that we might utilize to trace the ideological effects of a "participatory" work of art (relative to a "non-participatory" work of art)? And are we really convinced that participation or participatory tactics, as they pertain to the imagined emancipation of individuals, audiences, constituencies, and publics, guarantee an amplified democratization of the art culture? Isn't this, at least in part, a denial or sublimation of the *violence of participation* (to paraphrase Markus Miessen, in his rethinking of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic space in regard to a radically democratic public sphere)?

Publics and counter-publics seem to swim together in a politically undifferentiated soup of utterances, iterations, claims, attacks, whisperings, shadowy expressions, shadow movements, and crude ideological eruptions. It is as if the street and the domicile had been collapsed together into some ecstatic zone of interpenetrated interpenetrations. In his 1985 essay "The Fire Next Time," Paul Virilio reflected on how the nebulae of contemporary media space had produced a hypertemporal condition in which a modernist conception of space as territorial (materially, nation-state) had given way to another order characterized by a profound simultaneity of events (beyond the mere immediacy of the television transmission of events). As Bernard Tschumi suggests in the foreword to Virilio's collection of writings *A Landscape of Events,* this is about a notion of temporal space, which I understand in terms of experiential space (or spaces of experience, in which the subject is formed in space and through time), whether such spaces are public, private, or interstitial.

We seem to desire any and all space as potentially available for penetration by some type of art activity, whether or not this activity is recognized as an art activity in a particular situation. Is this a means of instrumentalizing (and functionalizing) art as intervention so as to apply pressures upon the public sphere to remain sufficiently democratic?

Is there really any space that is more public than the Internet as a cosmos, accommodating hypersimultaneous effusions of being there, nowhere, everywhere, somewhere? In the beginning, there was nothing; out of nothing, information emerged. Isn't the space of information our creative commons? What isn't accessible, and therefore somehow public? The explosion of what might have been formerly considered the informational codes of private experience into and onto the seemingly infinitely expandable informational and social (self-)representational systems and networking platforms (Facebook, YouTube), or the informational-visual mapping of Google's Street View technology, reveals that we have moved beyond quaint modernist dichotomies of private and public into some kind of third or fourth space of experience.

Roman Ondák
Loop, 2009
Installation view of the Czech and Slovakia pavilion at the Venice Biennale

We already seem to be performing our so-called private lives on the public stage of cybernetic social space. This might be considered the hyperbolic expression of what Richard Sennett lamented in his 1977 book *The Fall of Public Man,* wherein those psychological, social, and individual experiences formerly consigned to the private domain, such as sex, have been exteriorized into the discourse of the public domain. Cyberspace, or the architectonic space of information as constituting another social reality, was presciently analyzed in William J. Mitchell's 1995 book *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn.* Virtual urbanisms, he said, would generate unusual interpenetrations with real (bricks-and-mortar) urban experience, throwing into crisis older, modernist, binary (or even dialectical) oppositions of private versus public.

Finally, with the hyperproliferation of art as intervention, exhibition, discursive platform, and decoration through the temporal or experiential spaces (real, virtual, imaginary, or otherwise) of our cities, engendering the recoding of such zones into venues that frame an art condition, perhaps we've arrived at a proverbial tipping point, a paradigmatic threshold wherein art's promiscuous publicness, its everywhereness, verges into its nascent un-differentiation from anything else. Art after art, or art as the publicity of art.