



NANCY FOREST BROWN, "Ambivalence."

Chicago and feminism: An uneasy alliance

"Feminism never floated in Chicago." —Nancy Forest Brown

by Joyce Fernandes

When I was asked to capsule ten years of women's art in Chicago, I was hesitant because I haven't been here for all of those years. The New Art Examiner has covered specific incidents—Joy Poe's rape performance, for example—and has aired some personal gripes, but it's difficult to glean a comprehensive picture from its pages. So I decided to do two things: 1) I talked with as many women as possible—preferably women who have been involved in Chicago art for the past ten years. The more I talked, the more I realized that the essence of what has happened here in women's art is dialogue. I also realized that I had entered into a continuing dialogue, that each of the women with whom I spoke felt the need to say something now. 2) I talked with women from different strata of the artworld. I wasn't interested in talking only with artists or only with women who have been visible because of their politics. There have been women working steadily for the past ten years within our institutions; there is a network of concerned women who do whatever possible for women's art whenever they can.

The aesthetics and politics of women are not dead issues that can be dried and packaged into pages of history. The seventies were a decade of individuals, incidents, and a lot of dialogue between and about women. Many of the questions raised are, as yet, unanswered; our energy level and interest escalates and de-escalates. I feel that interest is currently escalating and that a resurgence of dialogue concerning women's issues is at hand.

The following group of personal vignettes doesn't pretend to cover all of the people and events that have been essential to the evolution of women's art in Chicago. It is simply an attempt to uncover a small part of that which continues, largely unseen.

■ "In looking back over the past ten years of women making art in Chicago, I think an interesting thing is that, while Chicago women have achieved visibility and critical success for their work, this has been done without seeming to need or want much feminist dialogue, commitment or support. I attribute this to the fact that Chicago promotes a strong sense of individualism in its artists, male and female alike. One aspect of this individualism is a romantic belief in personal creativity which denies the relationship between personal creativity and the larger political/social issues of our times.

In terms of Chicago women's art, this can be seen in the development of the two women's galleries, A.R.C. and Artemisia, which were established in 1973 during the height of feminist dialogue. These galleries were not established to promote feminist aesthetics, interpretation or ideology, but were conceived as artist-run co-ops showing only women's work. Many women who founded these galleries went on to become known and successful artists within our community and even achieved the status of role models for other artists. This is, in effect, saying 'Well, we have been successful because we have turned out successful women artists. If the system works for them, it will work for you too.'

But the concept of individual success masks larger issues. It closes down the need for dialogue and doesn't address the more unpopular and risky feminist/social issues of who gets included and excluded and why. This of course isn't just a feminist issue, but also is important

when looking at minority artists. By closing down the dialogue on the larger institutional and cultural issues we are also closing down the possibility of working together to promote a more equitable system for all of us."

KATE HORSFIELD, artist and director of the Video Databank Study Center

■ "The climate generated by the women's movement during the seventies combined with the coincidence of there being many extremely talented women at that time allowed many important women artists to become established. But the interpretation of this as success may have been premature. We thought that we were further advanced than we really were.

The major problem now is a creeping superficiality of taste and a lessening interest in art. We're startled and horrified by the acceptance of really awful stuff. This trendy phase is psychologically damaging to artists. Good artists, male and female alike, are being neglected. Women should realize that what they're experiencing now is also being experienced by their "brethren." Artists need to do their work and wait/hope for a more receptive time.

At one point I was touted as being a forerunner in terms of women's art, but I was insulted. I just look at the art. I wouldn't choose work because it was done by a woman, and I certainly wouldn't choose work because it wasn't done by a woman.

Personally, outside of the gallery and art concerns, I'm an ardent feminist. But I'm very serious about my business. I think that it's counterproductive to confuse politics with what should be aesthetic issues."

PHYLLIS KIND, owner of Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York and Chicago

■ "The formation of the cooperatives was a major impetus to the growth of Chicago's women artists. The cooperative galleries came at a time when there were minimal opportunities for female artists in Chicago to develop their careers. To be able to take hold of one's artistic destiny was indeed a special privilege. I think everyone felt this impact as they helped establish the cooperatives. In fact, we had no trouble finding strong, exciting women—which indicates how much this new forum for exhibiting was needed.

From time to time Artemisia brought in nationally recognized women to show and lecture at the gallery. It was a valuable opportunity to get to know and spend time with these women. June Wayne, the founder of Tamarind, had particular impact upon me. June lectured us sternly about not waiting for the magic wand. 'Recognize the problems you may face as a woman,' she said. In other words, work harder, reach higher, walk around them, and build stairways so you'll be higher than they. The hidden message: don't be so busy keeping score that you forego the drive and energy needed in your studios.

When asked where women artists are today, I prefer to concentrate on the positive. There are many wonderful women here who continue to grow and flourish. The problems? Well, it does annoy me that a married woman living in the suburbs is still regarded as suspect artistically. Being one of this segment myself, she 'doesn't need the job', and 'she doesn't need the grant'

remarks are gut-kickers. But then again, this is where the old stairway comes in."

PHYLLIS BRAMSON, artist, Chicago

■ "Up until ten years ago, women were working in isolation. They were never considered seriously as artists. People looked at women making art and thought that they were being cute. In the early seventies, women started talking with one another. They also began to look closely at women artists that were being taken seriously. Discussion was particularly inspired by a few key events that took place here in the seventies. Ruby Rich organized a women's film festival at the Film Center and Alene Valkanas organized the Women's Performance Arts Series at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

When I started working with the visiting artist program at The School of the Art Institute, there was a tremendous need for women artists. I worked very hard to bring in strong women artists who were able to articulate ideas and establish dialogue. Of the many women who came to Chicago through this program, I think that Ree Morton had the strongest impact. She came to the school three different times during the seventies and was very influential for a lot of people. I think that Michiko Itatani is very important at the school now. She has the ability to project herself as a serious, working artist and to accept students as being involved seriously also.

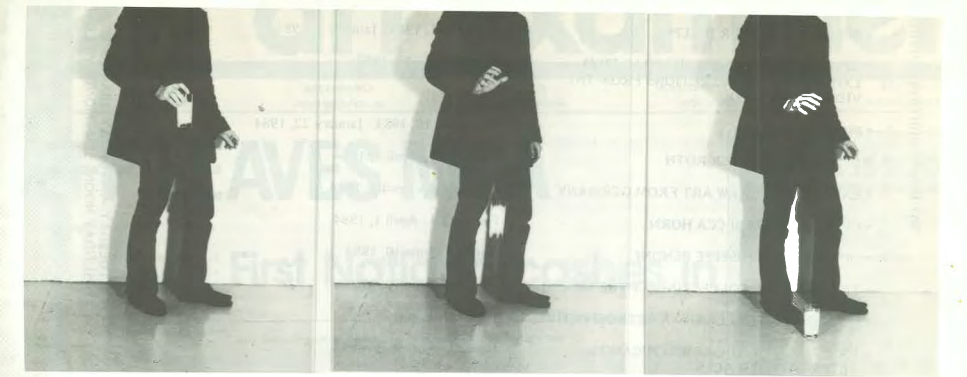
Things have definitely changed for women artists. For one thing, there's a dramatic increase in the number of women being shown in commercial galleries. This may have created chaos in the artworld, at least temporarily. There's a feeling that anything is possible in terms of the kinds of work being done; there are very few rules. But, on the other hand, I think that a lot of women have gotten stuck in the seventies. It's time for women to stop talking about what they would like to do and just do it. Energy spent complaining about the gallery system and the lack of opportunities should be spent in the studio. The one common characteristic of the successful artists that I have known is that they are all obsessive about doing their work."

SONJA RAE, director, Artists Division, Illinois Arts Council; former director of exhibitions and events, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

■ "We know about the large number of exceptional women artists in Chicago. To the benefit of us all, their work is shown, bought and hung in our galleries. What we might not be aware of, however, are the legions of women who make the arts happen here—curate our exhibitions, fund and promote them, educate our public, maintain our galleries, staff our agencies, sit on our boards and even head them. In most cases, they are not just representatives in these positions but the majority.

A recent collaboration of the city's major museums brought me into contact with my counterparts. Eight of the nine public relations directors and all of the membership directors happened to be women. Though we would have welcomed more men into our group, we found its composition very stimulating. To our amazement, communication was quick and easy; sharing was simple; we found collaboration a natural.

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CHICAGO PHOTOGRAPHY: A decade in retrospect

by Candida Finkel

To speak in a loosely mathematical way, the set of "Chicago photography in the last ten years" is a subset of the larger group, "photography in the last ten years." In fact, "Chicago photography" is a set without clear definition. By what criteria do we call someone a Chicago photographer? Is it someone born in Chicago or currently living in Chicago? Or perhaps schooled in Chicago? Or someone who makes photographs in Chicago, or even with some sort of "Chicago style"? If a photographer grew up in Boston and now lives in Chicago, is this a Chicago photographer? Or take the case of Aaron Siskind, who began with clearly identifiable New York pictures, then was a strong influence at Chicago's Institute of Design, and finished a very long teaching career at the Rhode Island School of Design. Perhaps Chicago photography is some blending of those who pass through here for awhile and those institutions which, because their very brick and stone is sunk into Chicago soil, cannot be other than Chicago photographic institutions.

Perhaps the way to begin a look at Chicago photography since 1973 is to glance at the larger set first: the most striking changes in photography over the last ten years. There seem to be six major characteristics which, although they were present in photographs before 1973, are definitely more present today. The first five concern changes in the appearance, presentation, and subject matter of photographs: color prints, snapshot aesthetic, conceptual work, photo installations, and artists' books. The final category is the academization of photography, the tremendous increase in photography programs at colleges and universities. All of these six changes have brought about a blurring of the distinctions between photography on the one hand and painting, print-making, and sculpture on the other, a distinction to which we might say good riddance. If photography is the younger sister to the "finer arts," it necessarily loses by the comparison. If photographs shown in museums belong in the basement or some out of the way print gallery, then perhaps "art" photography is a term of mere flattery. But we have seen in the last decade photographic concerns which resemble or

parallel or improve upon painterly concerns of the same decade.

A careful look at John Szarkowski's survey *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* reveals a striking change in the appearance of photographs between the decade of the sixties and that of the seventies along the lines of the five characteristics listed above. Szarkowski defines the change in photography as a shift from public to private concerns. Perhaps the sixth change in photography, its much larger role in universities, is one major cause of the other five changes. Szarkowski notes the following changes in his introduction to *Mirrors and Windows*: the number of colleges and universities offering one or more courses in photography increased from 268 to 440 between 1964 and 1967. From 1966 to 1970 the number of students studying photography or cinematography at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana) grew over 3,000 percent—from 132 students to 4,175. As long as universities provide employment for photography teachers, those photographers do not have to sell their prints, and thus they are free to make pictures which the public might find incomprehensible.

Chicago photography, then, also exhibits these same changes. But clearly some Chicago photography was born, raised, and remains in Chicago: its photography schools, museums, and galleries, and the New Art Examiner. Chicago can boast of four colleges which offer M.F.A. degrees in photography; the newest of these began two years ago at Columbia College under the leadership of John Mulvaney. The Institute of Design, famous in the fifties for well-designed pictures of Chicago architecture (Aaron Siskind) and Chicago's busy streets (Harry Callahan), lost its famous chairman, Arthur Siegel, five years ago and now seems more eclectic and less "Chicagose" in style. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago has been characterized by more experimental images—mixed media, for example—and seems to be less turned toward Chicago and more toward New York and Los Angeles where changes in all the art media come thick and fast. The fourth M.A. program is a small one at the University of Illinois—Circle Campus. All four institutions exhibit photographs regularly, both local student or faculty shows and

established out-of-town artists. Columbia College is blessed with a large and elegant gallery used mainly for photography, begun in 1977 under curator Charles Desmarais and now directed by Steven Klindt.

The largest museum in Chicago, the Art Institute, has photography exhibitions on a regular basis, many of which show Chicago images or those by Chicago photographers. The current excellent examples, *Chicago, the Architectural City*, is a subject matter which can clearly be given the label "Chicago photography." The Art Institute's curator of photography, David Travis, perhaps best defines the past ten years, as he became curator in 1973. He is noted for major exhibitions of work owned by internationally famous collectors: Julian Levy (1976) and Andre Jammes (1978). The Museum of Contemporary Art has had many exhibitions of photography; the opening of the annex in 1979 saw a huge exhibition of photography from the Morton Neumann collection—*Concept, Narrative, Document*—and the recent Kenneth Josephson collection, for example. A thank you goes to Josephson who, because he has remained in Chicago, teaching at SAIC, can be indubitably called a Chicago photographer. Many other institutions have photographic exhibitions on a regular basis, including the Chicago Cultural Center, the Smart Gallery, the commercial galleries, suburban art centers (especially Evanston), and the lobbies of many buildings.

Chicago publications in photography are of two types: artists' books and critical writing. The first is best represented by Chicago Books, begun in 1977 by Conrad Gieber, Gail Rubini, and James Snitzer; the group recently moved to New York. The single Chicago art publication of the last ten years is, of course, the New Art Examiner. Gretchen Garner was its first photography editor, followed by Candida Finkel and Michael Starenko. The latter just left Chicago to become assistant editor of *Afterimage* in Rochester. Does that make Starenko a Rochester writer? ■

CANDIDA FINKEL, a former photography editor of the NAE is currently finishing her Ph.D. in communication studies at Northwestern University.

Feminism

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It wasn't long before we produced and found funding for a multi-lingual brochure featuring all of the museums. Later, sparked by the city's 150th birthday, we took on the organization of a membership campaign in all nine museums.

These far-reaching efforts reminded me again that the arts thrive in Chicago not only because they are good and sometimes great but also because of the many, often women, who quietly and steadfastly "rock the cradle."

ALENE VALKANAS, public relations director, Museum of Contemporary Art

When I met with Nancy Forest Brown, she showed me her videotape of Joy Poe's rape performance at Artemisia Gallery in 1979. The tape was very short and powerful and we discussed it afterward. Following are her comments.

■ "No one in the audience knew that the rape was going to occur. There were five security men scattered through the audience who were supposed to remove Joy from the gallery in the event that someone from the audience tried to stop the rape. But what happened was that when a woman did try to stop him, pulling his hair, the security men took her away. It changed the piece because a lot of viewers were then able to perceive the piece as a performance rather than as an actual rape. I don't feel the piece was successful. It wasn't positive and just showed another instance of a woman being victimized. The woman should have "won." But rape is nearly impossible to deal with in performance. The performer is trying to express horrible violence and the audience always reads it as sex."

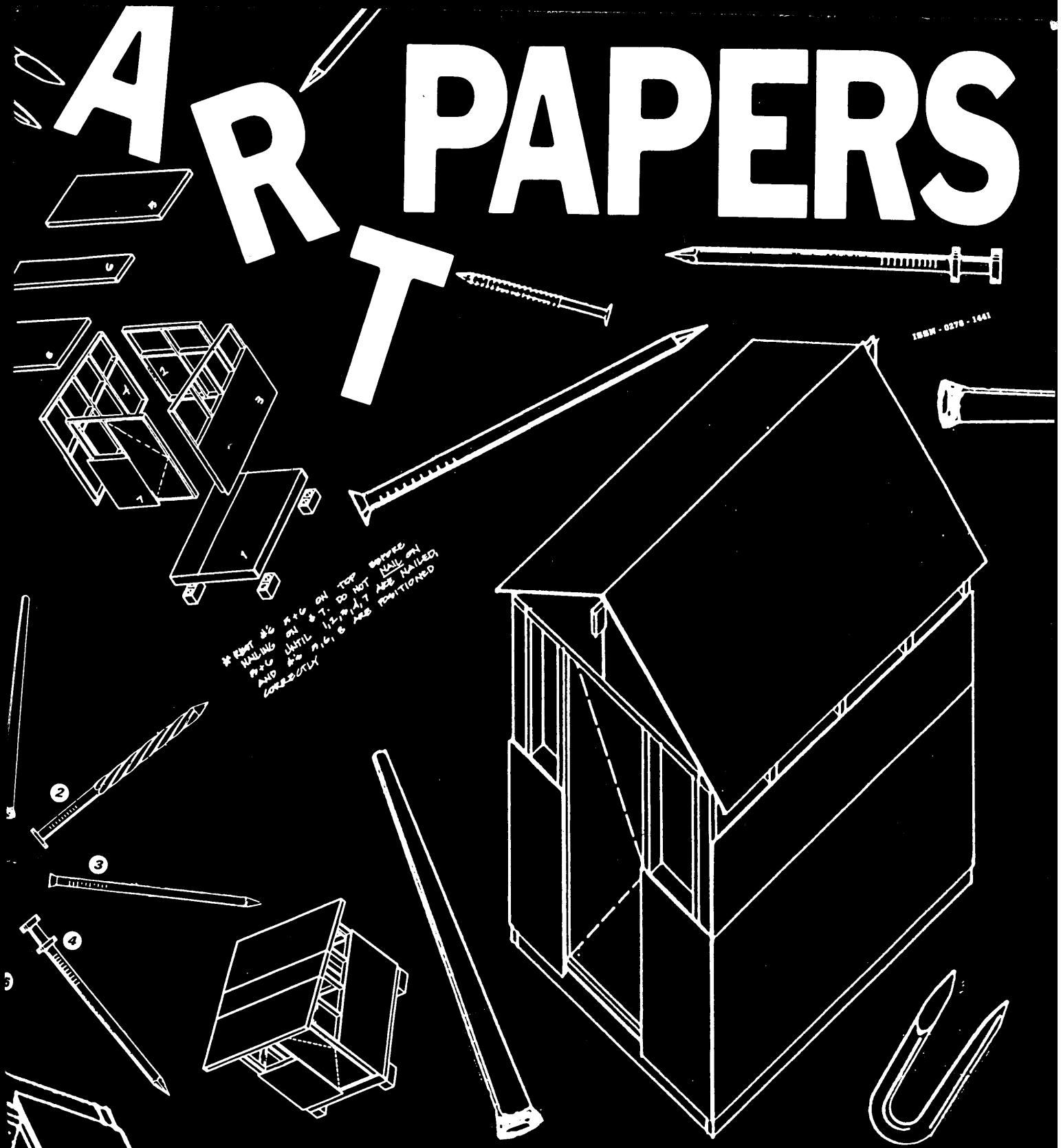
After Poe's performance there was tremendous outrage within both Artemisia and the pages of the New Art Examiner. I asked Nancy Forest Brown if she felt the rape performance sunk the issue of feminism in Chicago. Nancy replied:

"Feminism never floated in Chicago. It was never very important here. The galleries never intended to be feminist; their success has been simply that they parade women's work in front of people. Most artists are not political. Politics are timely; art is timeless. Political art is like kitsch. It's always been relatively easy for women in Chicago. The blatant sexism that you find elsewhere, like in New York, you just don't find here. Most of the dealers here are women and there have always been strong women artists to look to—Claire Zeisler, June Leaf, Ellen Lanyon. These things tend to dull the blade of political anger."

My own artwork is directed toward women but it's not political. I don't think that making statements in art is necessarily effective. My own feminism is more personal—a deep awareness, concern, and commitment to women. I try to make sure that women's work is shown professionally, that they have good studio space and jobs. Anger isn't necessary."

NANCY FOREST BROWN, artist, and director of Randolph Street Gallery

ART PAPERS



PROJECT: <i>Counter-Proposals</i>		\$4.50
ISSUE: <i>Volume 16</i>	DATE: <i>September/October 1992</i>	DRAWING NUMBER <i>01</i>
CONTRIBUTORS: <i>Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Adam Brooks, Treasure Smith, Judith Russi Kirshner, Barbara Randolph, Bradley Brooks, Dan Hoffman, Donald MacDonald, Dan Peterman, David Hemmings, Betti-Sue Hertz, Christopher Rose, and others...</i>		DRAWN BY <i>The Mad Housers</i>
		REVISED <i>E. Lide</i>

Counter-Proposals:

Adaptive Approaches to a Built Environment

Saturday, November 2, 1991, was a bitter day in Chicago, made more icy by the fact that the fall had been unusually warm, with long stretches of summer-like days. That afternoon, more than 30 volunteers—architects, students, artists and the homeless—gathered at Randolph Street Gallery (RSG) to build a 48-square foot hut from the kit designed by the Atlanta-based Mad Housers, a group who previously had built more than 120 shelters for the homeless in other parts of the country. By 2:00

p.m., the gallery felt unusually charged, crowded, and not a little frenzied with more than 50 workers, well-wishers, and onlookers moving about in the large space. There was an aspect of spectacle to all of the activity and the media responded in kind when a local art reporter appeared with film equipment, announcing his interest in this particular part of the program because it was "theater." At 4:00 p.m., small trucks pulled up to the gallery and were loaded with the prefabricated walls, ceiling, and floor, with carpet and tar paper for the roof. Everyone followed in cars to the nearby site of the first hut—a largely abandoned, industrial area northwest of the center of the city beside the Metra train tracks. With only a couple of hours left before darkness, the builders raised the walls and crushed inside the 6' x 8' hut, assembling it rapidly. Again there was a sensation of hyperkinetic activity, many hands and many hammers flying. Onlookers helped carry materials, and groups stood by to watch with a subdued sense of excitement perhaps evoked by the rush from participating in guer-

rilla activity. Earlier the site had been chosen through serendipity when Andy Patrick, a marketing consultant who lives in a nearby loft, was walking his dog and noticed shelters and large communities of homeless living under a railroad bridge and in empty brick warehouses. Soon afterward Patrick, who would go on to establish the Chicago chapter of the Mad Housers, discovered a flyer for the RSG exhibition. He then introduced Charles Pritchett, a homeless 44-year old electrical engineer and father of two grown children, as the individual who would occupy the first shelter. As the light faded at dusk, Pritchett himself arrived after work strode across the tracks, shook hands with everyone, examined his new home, its bed and wood burning stove, and then registered surprise at its unexpected height.

Across the street, another small dwelling, not part of the exhibition, was suspended from an enormous bridge structure from which flew an American flag. Its intrepid and patriotic occupant climbed up at least twenty feet, then scaled a narrow track in order to drop into his boxlike space. This gentleman left his aerial dwelling to reside temporarily in a Mad Houser hut but subsequently destroyed it, rather than having it removed [during a period of conflict with the city government, discussed in the article by David Hemmings in this issue of *Art Papers*]. Directly to the south, three women and one man were living in a warehouse; another fifty individuals occupied a larger building to the east and one older man found shelter in an adjacent wooded setting where Donald MacDonald's City Sleeper would later be placed. Adding to the drama of the evening was the rumor that a pack of wild dogs patrolled this soon to be contested part of the tracks and had also claimed it as their own. Only a few of the homeless people reputed to have settled in this area came out to inspect the commotion or to warm themselves.

In the distance, yellow lights in the city were slowly turned on, the sky became darker and darker, the air colder and colder. Slender trees and clusters of bushes near the tracks looked incongruous, still green as if frozen before they could change color. The dusky atmosphere recalled that of a misty Corot painting, transplanted to an industrial field with steel beams overlaying the soft forms of trees. Even as it reinforced the primitive quality of the architecture, the distant views of the city constituted a dramatic architectural backdrop. Situated against the urban landscape, albeit decaying and to a large degree desolate, the apparently unoccupied, newly constructed pastoral landscape began almost immediately to erode boundaries between city and country, between private and public, possession and dispossession.

Standing in the cold, my hands and feet grew numb as I tried to resist noticing how beautiful the area appeared to be. Its open vista of ruin and abandonment became aesthetic, picturesque, wrapped in a powerful atmosphere of melancholy. Analysis seemed inappropriate and it was difficult not to give way to romantic associations of urban ruins, to call up images more consciously artful than anything displayed in the remarkable exhibition, "Counter-Proposals: Adaptive Approaches to a Built Environment."

Homeless people differ from other very poor people in ways that reflect institutionalized social and economic stratification rather than patterns of individual pathology and deviance. The major source of shelter uncertainty among the poor comes from political and economic changes that have intensified the housing affordability squeeze. Public aid benefits have shrunk in real value while decent employment opportunities for the poor have diminished. The rent threshold on the bottom rung of the housing market ladder exceeds the incomes of the increasing number of destitute poor people. (Charles Hoch "Affordable Housing in Metropolitan Chicago," prepared for the Chicago Assembly November 4-5, 1991, p.1)

Multifaceted, open-ended and evolving, still incomplete, the ambitious project titled "Counter Proposals: Adaptive Approaches to a Built Environment," organized by artist-curator Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle at RSG, generated substantive interaction between communities—artists, architects, community advocates, social service workers, urban planners, day laborers, students, and the public. From technical, political, and artistic perspectives, the multiple problems of sheltering the homeless and affordable housing were represented in an exhibition and in workshops, open forums, discussions, video screenings, and enacted in interventions in the urban grid, the most aggressive being the Mad Houser settlement. Founded in 1979, RSG is itself situated in an edge area, a kind of real estate no man's land whose parameters are contested by developers and art galleries, many of its original inhabitants and functions displaced. There was a kind of counter-culture bravado at the opening in the nearly empty gallery which changed as plans, blueprints, stacks of donated building materials, and objects produced by the design workshops filled the space. Nevertheless the gallery was unexpectedly vacant and expectant. A good part of the exhibition format was documentary and presented a survey of activist architecture, for example, visuals from the New York *Casitas* projects, Architectural JIHAD Aesthetic Holy Wars, a clever publication on Atlanta's fictitious Samuel Acker Hotel (a pun on simulacra), and Ron Gordon's photographs of former SROs, now abandoned lots in Chicago. Also displayed were plans for Charleston Cottage by South Carolina architect Christopher Rose and Dan Hoffman's collage of photographs recording the devastation of Detroit's inner city. Another section identified architects including the Mad Housers (Atlanta), Donald MacDonald (San Francisco), and Peter Landon (Chicago), who not only exhibited plans and blueprints but also led construction workshops in the gallery. Donald MacDonald's City Sleeper, a low cost 4'x4'x8' portable plywood unit, was eventually fabricated and sited. Component furniture, modular interior kits for SRO occupancy residential projects, were assembled by a group led by architect Peter Landon. Second Skin Home, Wm. Scott

Kester's contribution, won media coverage as it produced a portable aluminum structure that also could lodge like a parasite in an unfinished building. A sort of upgraded City Sleeper, this lean-to was technically innovative but somehow cynical in its presumption of artificial neediness and bold in its stated presumption on dominant-class hosts.

Several Chicago artists, whose previous works addressed community issues, were commissioned by RSG to conceive, design, develop, and fabricate works in collaboration with neighborhood organizations. In this contract, community becomes committed to artist and the artist's studio expands to include the community. For example, Treasure Smith developed a map that located and identified more than 150 social agencies in an interracial area of Chicago called West Town. Here the intention was that resources that previously might have been invisible to potential users became available to the inhabitants, community advocates, and agency workers. When completed, the map will be posted and distributed. Adam Brooks, whose previous public art projects incorporated political signage indicating neighborhood voting patterns, worked with a Latino community outreach organization, *Aspira*. For this project high school students and the artist designated topics—drugs, gangs—to express their environmental concerns. Eventually they will write, print, and again distribute bilingual signs throughout their neighborhoods. Another collaboration on paper recycling paired the head of a southside recycling center, Ken Dunn, who studied philosophy before turning to activism, with visionary architect Ben Nicholson, who teaches architecture.

Whether visionary or practical, all of the proposals predicted a dramatic shift that could occur in the American dream of property if the ideal of a single family home were to be replaced by higher density shared housing, like that of European cities. Indeed, ideas of homesharing and match-up programs as part of homeless prevention are being developed by neighborhood organizations to break the lock of landlord-realtors whose management of SRO leads to displacement. Billy Ocasio, a participant in "Counter Proposals" and formerly a rehabilitation specialist of Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA means "to fight" in Spanish) supervised the construction of 47 units. At the far end of the spectrum, Orlando's Affordable Housing Project includes designs by Michael Graves, Robert Stern, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, Stanley Tigerman and other influential figures. The current recession has shifted the attention of even the most prominent architects associated with postmodern theoretical agendas and archaeological historicism to schemes for affordable housing.

Embedded in the exhibition schedule were

Workshop participants constructing "City Sleeper" by Donald MacDonald. (photo by Corey McCorkle).



panels, debates, and discussions. What follows is an fragmentary notation of some of the more provocative exchanges in a session bearing a slightly accusatory title, "Architect's Response and Responsibility," in which a sociologist, architect, developer and historian discussed the symbolism of gable, hut, and dwelling. Architecture's primary status, "symbolic art par excellence," can be traced to a Hegelian system of aesthetics. In dispute was the contemporary relevance of that very symbolism in the face of massive indifference. At a moment when activists are urging a step-by-step program that would literally move people from the passivity of bench occupants to jobs as day laborers to full time employment, the very idea of theoretical speculation becomes an academic luxury. Former Mad Houser director Bailey Pope, an architect, spoke of the purposeful design downgrading in public housing and noted that the history of housing is marked by bureaucratic streamlining and design degradation; cost containment has become policy. Referring to themselves as "reconstructionists," Atlanta's Mad Housers have already built 120 huts on vacant land in other cities. They view huts and shelters, which are often illegal, as the practical first steps, albeit temporary, to habitation, as stop-gap measures in the face of the housing crisis. Other speakers addressed specific needs and policies that could be put in place in the face of massive disappointment of public housing and, at the same time, aired disagreements. Echoing but not referring to Foucault, some believe that public housing, built on a model of segregation, is designed to contain certain members of the population. Their argument contends that architecture does indeed determine its subjects; but other panelists spoke of the political agenda of modernists like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright (who incorporated urban redevelopment and public housing as an architecture of social amelioration) and of the federally funded housing programs of the late 1960s.

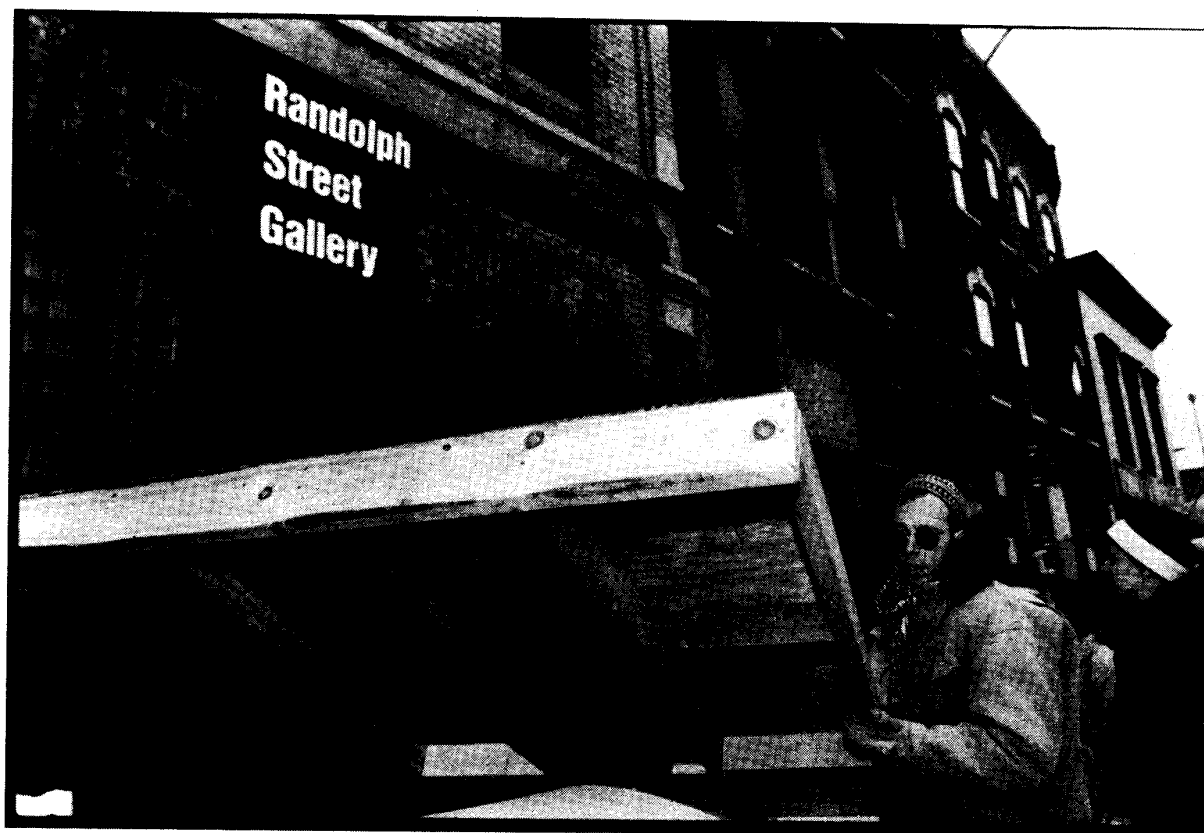
The impact of politics on design was only one aspect of these exchanges. In the pointed remarks by one community-based Chicago developer, Bob Brehm, it is corruption, greed, and subjugation that are the most crucial elements of the failed

legacy of the Chicago Housing Authority. He argued that solutions could never be found in the public sector since architects, by definition, are implicated in a process that chooses to subsidize a slum, noting that terms like "empowerment" and "clients" are contradictory when speaking about the homeless. Active for 15 years, Brehm is not deterred by small steps but is committed to continuing his neighborhood development organizations; he noted, "If there is no more need for housing, the [organizations] will move to education or other frontiers for community development where a real need motivates, not only the marketplace." Another participant, sociologist Talmadge Wright, pointed to local actions, even discrete struggles as meaningful steps to a broader front, reminding audiences that all space is contested and that territory can never be neutral. These observations not only called attention to the uses and abuses of the art world in the process of gentrification but also underscored the complexity and criticality of the role that the artworld and specifically RSG might play in the future.

Local leadership should reject those policies that blame inner city poverty and misery solely on the minority poor themselves and take up policies that will severely punish racial bias and generously reward fairness. (Charles Hoch, p. 24)

Several precedents for the RSG exhibition-project come to mind—Martha Rosler's Bowery work; the Dia sessions and subsequent publication, *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory and Social Activism*; and Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle have all responded to the crisis in urban housing policies. Moreover, these interventions have merged artists' efforts with blueprints for policy and social action. In the 1970s, Gordon Matta-Clark believed that his architectural interventions, the physical cuttings he made to open architecture, could potentially liberate marginal real estate and coincide with humane social and political agendas.

As an antidote to the commercial flash and media dazzle of



Sam Barcker
loads floor for
Mad Houser
hut (photo by
Bill Stamets).

the 1980s, the art world has found some high ground, even moral justification in the early 1990s from multiple sources of cultural politics. Skeptics may ascertain motivations in the depressed economy—nonetheless, the discourses of alterity and ethnic, sexual, and political marginalization are embedded in art work that moves toward social change. For museums, major installations are vehicles of political comment resistant to charges of monumentality, collecting, and cultural marketing, since the format lodges temporarily in an institution like complicit agit-prop. For artists, poor materials have come to signify and express environmental sensitivity, as well as having transformative potential. To uncover oppressive subtexts—in racial, sexual, and political discourse—in every chapter of recent history is to produce demystification as an aesthetic end in itself. Not surprisingly, means rarely justify artistic results. Indeed, alternative programming can sometimes smack of atonement in pious declarations of racial and sexual diversity and subject matter that, at best, confronts and, at worst, capitalizes on stigmatized issues like AIDS and the homeless. On occasion there appears to be an inverse proportion between the character and quality of the aesthetic experience and the seriousness or at least the credibility of the thesis. We are not far from a style of political art and a heavy-handed politics of style.

There is always a risk of rhapsodizing on the impact or efficacy of individual initiatives, but this exhibition, and others in alternative venues, revived the art gallery as contested space and demonstrated again how meaning is contingent on exhibition site. RSG shifted its function from artistic shelter to a site for production, artisanal labor, and altered viewers' consciousness of their own instrumentality. Spectators became workers, artists, laborers, as roles reversed in unpredictable situations. But what made the experience notable, beyond the stated intention to create "a framework for discourse between communities and . . . to develop alternative proposals" in the art world, was that the gallery was actually transformed into a construction site, a site for previously unforeseen collaborations. At RSG, in workshops and building sessions, everyone was a

cultural worker; the institution still acted as gatekeeper but activated the gate as a site for change. After the exhibition, what remained was the possibility that discourses of art, politics, and social activism could temporarily overlap, become controversial and eventually meaningful. Finally the construction of the first Chicago Mad Houser hut led to the formation of a local Mad Housers group. Since the guerrilla action of the Mad Housers has not previously led to the removal of huts, one can only speculate on the connection that could be made between RSG's sponsorship of "Counter-Proposals" and the unusual media attention and dramatic political response. The building and destruction of those 17 additional huts constitute a postscript to the exhibition and to these recollections.

It is a measure of the success of "Counter-Proposals" and RSG that the organization—whose alternative space, liberal credentials, history of activism and urban location lie directly in the line of gentrification—avoided staging a p.c., 1990s style, low-tech, conventional exhibition. Wide-ranging and frustrating in their seeming lack of formal or even thematic coherence, determinedly unstable, these projects changed weekly and resisted resolution. This very lack of exhibition closure both foregrounded the irrelevancy or pretence that simple, feel-good solutions to this massive social problem could be found, and constituted the power and significance of this series of occasions.

Minorities endure a disproportionate share of these burdens due to continued discrimination and oppression. Remedies for such inequalities require redistributive versus remedial policies: increasing welfare benefits and expanding subsidized housing. Unfortunately, such policies are opposed by powerful forces who benefit from existing arrangements. (Charles Hoch, p. ii)

Judith Russi Kirshner is a critic and Director of the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The author wishes to thank Mary Murphy, Bonnie Osborne, Susan Snodgrass and Isa Rodriguez-Ocasio for their assistance.

by Bailey Pope

Essential Shelter: The Mad Houser Hut

during the last decade, developments in the social, political, and economic structures of our society have led to a drastic increase in the number of homeless citizens throughout the United States. There is no single cause for this crisis. Nor is there a simple solution. What is clear is that the Private Sector has focused its production in the area of maximum profitability without regard to the actual housing needs of the majority of the American people. This concentration of re-

sources in a single market segment causes market stagnation while leaving real housing needs largely unsatisfied. The American government may also be cited for directing the majority of its resources towards the development of systems for world destruction to the exclusion of the ideal of nurturing a decent and responsible citizenry. Thus, in recognition of the inability of the existing social order to meet the requirements of those citizens who are unable to compete effectively, we are sponsoring

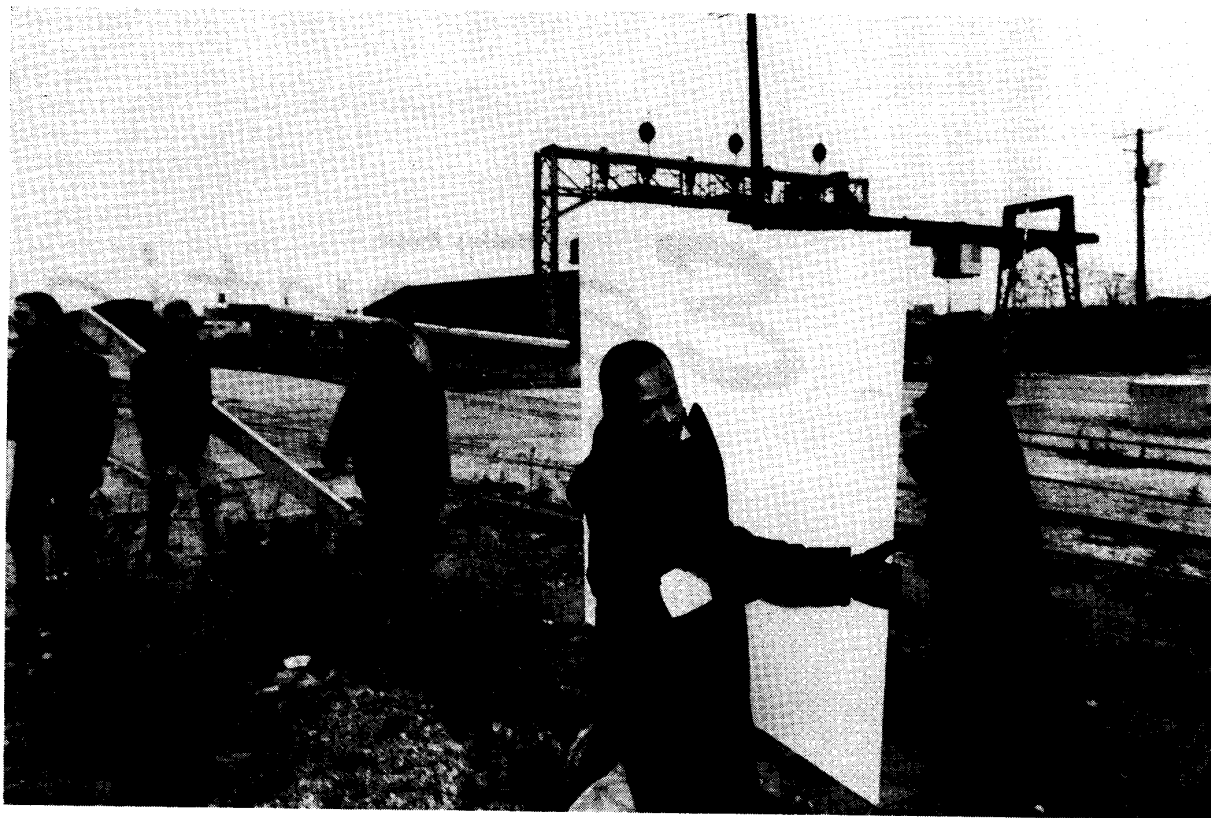
an alternative social order in which competition on economic grounds is irrelevant. We call that order the Mad Housers.

The Mad Housers' directives are simple. First, we seek to provide shelter to those who are homeless as quickly and as effectively as possible. Second, we seek to raise the public consciousness of this crisis to a level from which others will be motivated to adopt our first goal: that of providing shelter.

The shelters we construct are not houses by any means. They are humble in their intentions and in their realization. They provide a minimum of protection against the elements and are insecure of tenure. We operate outside of the regulatory framework that controls housing through building, zoning, and housing codes, because we find those regulations to act against many of the people they were meant to protect. We deny the basic premise of property rights to the extent that American law grants control of land to persons who may never even see the property they own. The shelters we build are squatters' huts. They are emergency shelters, a stop-gap, band-aid measure. But they are effective.

Our work stems from the search for the essential nature of shelter. The word "shelter" is defined as "that which covers or defends from injury, exposure, observation, or the like." We have found that we must define our goals in the most basic terms because the resources available to us to achieve them are severely limited. This same situation faces any group pursuing affordable housing in America today. With our focus on the fundamental requirements for protection from outside agents and our emphasis on the basic human dignity which is the birthright of all people, we have developed the hut as the most essential shelter. As a phenomenon, the hut is comprised of three primary elements: the roof, the wall, and the door.

Architecture is the result of Man's desire to reach into the



Calvin Gatewood of Homeless on the Move for Equality (HOME) carries building materials for Mad Houser hut (photo: Bill Stamets).

Void and claim some part of it for human occupation. The roof is the primal gesture of this claim. It is the first division of the vertical dimension which fixes Man on the face of the Earth. With the floor below, it defines the place of mortal existence, below the heavens and above the beasts, the Place of Man.

The initial differentiation of the horizontal dimension, the physical division of here from there, is the wall. Confined by a visible boundary, the place of mortal existence becomes the locus of the experienced life of the in-dweller. The protection from both natural and human danger afforded by the wall allows the sense of privacy which establishes individual identity. Through this device, architecture acquires an ontological nature as the in-dweller's existence is embodied by the fabric of the dwelling.

Yet it is the door which is the essential device of human society. Only the door allows the opportunity for dialog. Through the door the individual initiates a dialog between the Self and an Other, thereby reinforcing the individuality of one's own identity. It is through this device that a shelter may provide the refuge required for the re-creation of the Self amidst the turmoil of contemporary life. The door allows for the development of a community as a network of social interactions. Human dignity arises when primal existence is modified by personal choice.

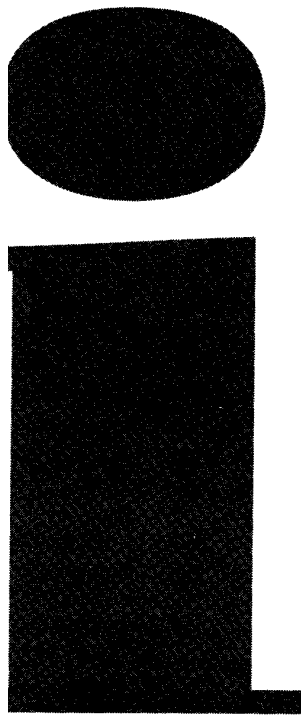
As a combination of these three elemental gestures, the hut becomes the occurrence of individual dwelling. It creates a human place; a human's place. The result of this object is the constitution of social and political being for the individual. The establishment of human dignity engenders certain rights which are the roots of self advocacy. The institution of personal choice founds a field of social encounter which begets self expression. Self advocacy and self expression are the fundamental means of

personal development which are the necessary precursors to an escape from homelessness.

In the course of our three year project, the Mad Housers have built over eighty huts. Each has been slightly different from the last as we have explored many variations on each of these three elements. We have serendipitously given each hut a character of its own through our pursuit of the essence of shelter. And we have given each of our clients a renewed sense of their own ability to effect change in their environment through both our demonstration and the infinitely mutable product we have given them. Nevertheless, the most vital aspects of our project are not embodied in the object, isolated as it has been here, in the gallery or on the page. It is the visible expression of an alternative order, both political and social, on the landscape of urban America. The social order promoted by the Mad Housers is an expression of the desire for a dignified life, a release from the alienation of homelessness and entry into the society of Man.

This essay by the Mad Housers of Atlanta was written in 1990 and included in the "Counter-Proposals" exhibition in 1991. Portions of the essay were also published in a different form in If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism, A Project by Martha Rosler, edited by Brian Wallis and published by the Dia Foundation in 1991.

Surv Str



It has never been easy for me to pass people on the street whose worn clothes and worn expressions tell the truth of their homelessness. I know they are hungry more often than not. I know at night some will curl into an empty doorway hoping to sleep. Others will walk all night and sleep during the day. I have looked through the window of my car at bitter winter scenes and cannot imagine how the homeless endure the painful cold. (Of course, some don't.) At times I have given food, at other times money. As the days grew shorter and colder,

I gathered coats and gloves to give away.

Then I visited an exhibit at Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery where I learned about several "counter-proposals"—alternative designs for housing and shelter, including an inexpensive, fully insulated hut with stove and sleeping loft for homeless people. It was the work of a group called the Mad Housers, and I learned that a Chicago chapter had been launched; they had begun their work and were currently building huts for some of Chicago's homeless. By January, as the temperature

dropped below zero, I found myself spending long hours with a diverse group of volunteers building huts of the same design. We built and sited huts for two men. These men lit fires in their small can stoves as the huts went up. They were freezing. We all were. Towards the end of the day it had become difficult to hold a hammer because fingers simply stopped working. But, inside of one day, the work was completed and two human beings had new places to live, not on the frozen sidewalks but in wooden framed huts—their huts. No one to watch over them, and a lock to which they possessed the key.

That so many people's basic needs go unmet is a horror. But there is a deeper failing of our system's ability to respond to the growing population of homeless people. It is reflected in the predominant underlying view that they are like children that cannot take care of themselves. On the contrary, individuals on the street are often possessed of an independence and resourcefulness that few of us can appreciate. What distinguishes the work of the Mad Housers is its willingness to respect the personal lifestyle choices of the people for whom huts are built. All we ever really know is that they want to try living in a place they can call their own. Beyond that, each has his or her own unique story.

As a Mad Houser I began to talk to people on the street about the huts and how they could get one. Not everyone took the offer. One man I met near Greektown said he and his friend

by Barbara R. Randolph

Living the streets

used to mock the "bag people"; then one day he was ousted from his apartment and his things were heaped onto the street. So he moved in with that friend. But soon they were both on the streets. The one thing he regretted most was losing his family photos, especially one of his great grandmother from down South. She was standing in front of her cabin surrounded by all of her grandchildren. Even though he never came for a hut, a stranger had listened to his story. Another man I met had a heavy European accent. He was from Moscow. When I asked if he wanted to go back and visit, he got a wistful look in his eyes and talked about how much the ticket cost. He was sure his parents were dead but he felt certain he had two sisters living in Poland. He also never came for a hut.

The reasons these two men did not choose to respond to the Mad Housers' offer is their own affair. I may never know the reasons, because it is not easy to stay in touch with people on the streets; even though some of them become neighborhood "fixtures," too often they simply disappear one day. What has been so very different about working with the Mad Housers is the opportunity to get to know some of the men and women for whom the huts have been built. It is not always easy; these are individuals, many of whom have been continually let down, who have had to live with insecurity and under threat by peers and authorities alike. But to whatever extent I have been able to learn about their lives, I have earned a greater sense of being in this world today, as the people with worn faces and worn expressions viewed through misty car windows appear more and more to have lives like yours and mine, and while there is certainly a painful aspect, there is hope in equal measure.

Pete

Beyond a moving company west of the Loop near an

abandoned factory lived a small community of hut owners. They were the first three inhabitants of the Chicago huts. These men had been living together in a low, wooden box at the base of a loading dock adjacent to railroad tracks before their huts were built.

One of the men, Pete, described himself as a wanderer, a vagabond. He had proudly served in Vietnam and a large American flag near his hut asserted his loyalty to America. Even though his family lives in the South he had managed to journey to places as far as Wyoming. He fondly remembers the fishing he did on the reservation with Native American friends. Back in Chicago, Pete worked as often as jobs were available.

He also functioned as a street minister. He and Calvin and Charlie had survived because they shared what little they had. So, when they had a surplus, Pete often would go out to locate homeless people in the area, living in dilapidated buildings or inside of walls under the streets or under bridges, to distribute sleeping bags or food, to talk with them and to offer encouragement. These few gifts might have prevented someone from freezing to death or dying of hunger during the fierce winter days and nights in Chicago. Twenty seven people did die the previous winter according to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Some were buried nameless, with no notice to next of kin.

Pete took on the survival of others as his mission. His dedication inspired concern from people like the evangelist of a southside Baptist

Church, who began to gather clothes and household goods from her own home. She asked her friends to do the same. Her visits to the huts increased her awareness that she lived in a big house with many rooms and wasted space. She consulted with her husband and son. They decided to sell their home and have since moved to a smaller condominium.

Pete and I once talked about my son whose father lived in a state out West for much of his growing up time and how hard it was on him, at times, to be without his dad. We talked about Pete's son who lived down South and how much Pete had to teach him about life and how difficult it was to be a father so far away. Months passed and one day, at a Mad Houser's meeting, I learned Pete had gotten married. I found out that the bride was his childhood sweetheart, his son's mother, and that they plan to reunite in Chicago and build a new life together.

Keith

Keith had been honorably discharged from the Marines after serving for nine years. The Marines trained him to operate a machine gun while running up and down hills. He also learned to extinguish fires on military aircraft. Civilian jobs requiring these skills are nonexistent. In addition, his efforts to untangle paperwork and military red tape had been futile. His promised benefits, especially a college education, were inaccessible. As he tried each avenue, without success, he and his family grew less and less comfortable around each other.

Keith eventually ended up living in a shelter. He read in the newspaper about the huts for homeless people and wrote to request one. He stated that he did not want to be dependent on society to meet his needs. He wanted to provide for himself. He felt a hut would be a respite from shelter life. There he sometimes rose in the morning as early as 2:30 or 3:00 A.M., to shower without being hassled. Security was a serious problem. He had seen people rifling other people's bags in the dead of night and had learned to keep his small duffle bag close at hand.

He responded to an invitation to come to a Mad Housers meeting and told his story with eloquence. His sense of dignity and desire to change his life were evident to those of us present. He appeared promptly on his build day and went to work building his new place to live. Within a week, he enrolled in college prep training classes at an organization called Inner Voice. He learned about the program from Calvin, one of the original hut owners, who works as a homeless activist.

The hut gave Keith time to read and study, time to prepare for his future—in a safe space. His dedication to his studies—he often reads by

candlelight—is paying off. By next winter he plans to enroll in college. He also plans to move soon. By contributing "sweat equity," he hopes to get his own public housing apartment through the Horner Association for Men, who are soliciting contributions to rehab public housing units. And he wants to give back. He will devote some of his spare time working with this same group of men to keep younger men in the community out of trouble and off the street. He has learned many lessons on the street; perhaps, he believes, the young men won't have to repeat the mistakes that he has made.

Stan

Peter, a young man from Chicago's northwest side, first encountered Stan, a homeless man, when he started to bring sandwiches to feed hungry people who live under Lower Wacker Drive, a murky, dank labyrinth of streets, sidewalks, and doorways where men and women often sleep in boxes and sleeping bags with their few possessions gathered nearby.

Stan read an article in the newspaper about some men who were living in huts near railroad tracks west of the river. He asked his new young friend Peter to send a letter on his behalf to the Mad Housers requesting a hut.

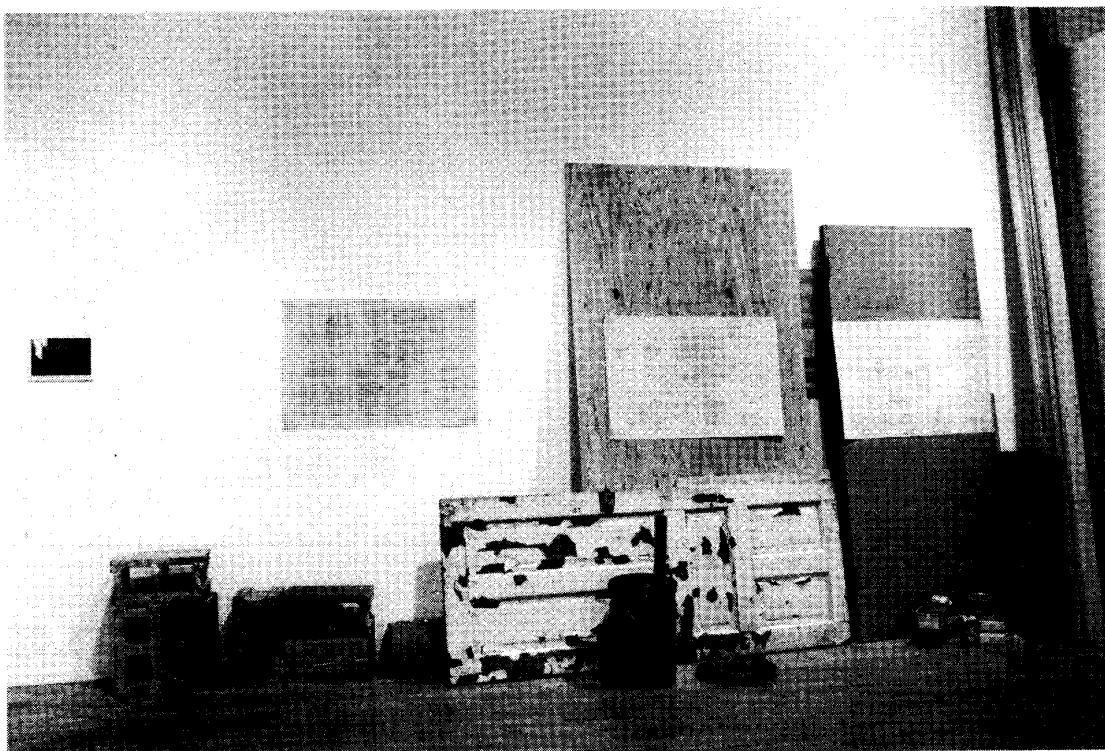
Within a few weeks Stan and Peter and the Mad Housers built Stan's hut next door to Keith's hut. This ended Stan's thirteen month stint of living on the underground streets. Now he could sleep during the night with little fear of disturbance. He could leave his belongings locked up in his hut without needing one of his close friends, Jerry or Joe, to stand guard when he needed to get water or use a bathroom.

Not only did Stan have his own place to live, but he had also made some new friends, the Mad Housers, who invited him to come to meetings and help build other huts. Stan, of course, had no intention of abandoning his best buddies. The very next meeting he brought Jerry and Joe. Together they asked for two more huts, preferably near Stan's. Within two weeks the three men had helped build their tiny community of huts.

While living a sometimes noisy, dangerous, and unpredictable life immediately below Chicago's glitzy Michigan Avenue, these men had built trust. They had come to depend on each other. They had shared their meager resources. Life in the streets had made these relationships too valuable to lose. To them the huts were a godsend. They had rejected moving to a shelter because their comings and goings were restricted by the hours the shelter doors opened and closed. They wanted to be able to work or to scavenge, as early or as late as necessary. (Stan had customers whose cars had to be washed while they worked downtown at night.) But, of equal importance, they could still be together, to continue to support and sustain each other as friends and survivors of the streets.

Jose and Others

Before he transferred his belongings into his hut, Jose, who had left Cuba many years before, used to have to climb a ladder each night to go to sleep. He would walk across a train elevator platform and drop down into the cab. Somehow he survived the winter without any source of heat other than some blankets. He wore a straw hat with feathers tucked into the back and would sometimes kiss my hand when we met. He often traveled by bike looking for items or metals to scavenge and sell. Sometimes he was seen strolling down the tracks playing a steel guitar. One



Materials for Mad Houser's hut (photo: Corey McCorkle).

day, he was invited to watch a fourth hut being built near Calvin and Pete's hut. With limited Spanish it was communicated to him that he could get a hut, too. He seemed to like the idea and eventually moved out of his "house in the sky" to the hut on the ground. His ability to make the best of any situation seemed to be the key to his survival. It was also his intention to remain independent and free to live his life as he chose. The hut worked for him.

Standing at the foot of an off-ramp of a northside expressway, Jody held a sign up all day long as cars drove by. The placard said, "Can you spare some change for my dinner? I am a homeless man out of work. Thank you." Bob, a Mad Houser who spoke to him frequently, told him about the huts and one rainy Saturday Jody, Bob, and other Mad Housers built Jody a hut. He was thrilled to have a place to get out of the wind and cold and to lock up the things he had been carrying on a luggage cart. He has had some bad luck in his life and the hut seemed to be a turn for the better.

Jerry, Stan's friend, lived at O'Hare Airport for many months before living on Lower Wacker Drive. Then the city relocated about 150 homeless people from O'Hare to various situations and for a short time Jerry resided at a shelter. After Stan acquired his hut, Jerry was able to move into his own hut next door. A few months later, I happened to be telling their story to my son's grandmother. As I described Jerry, it became clear that she knew him. He used to be married and, with his wife, would

bring her flowers at the restaurant she once managed. She asked me to bring him over soon so that she could be reunited with her old friend.

What has been so gratifying to me about building huts is that it has been an opportunity to build relationships and community as well. This opportunity is just that: an opportunity. Neither the Mad Housers nor the hut dwellers require it of each other or of themselves. But once you have become involved with someone through an act that affirms that person's right to one of life's basic needs, something happens. And while some seek solitude, some partnership, and some family, in all cases the facelessness of "America's Homeless" is replaced by real relationships with people who simply made choices in their lives in the face of a complex, often unfair world. Pete, Keith, Stan, Jose, and others all requested a hut because they decided it made sense for them. They navigate difficult waters while recreating themselves according to their own best judgment—even though the world often seems to be sending them the message that there is no place for them to call home. These men, along with others in rapidly growing numbers, do not intend to give up this birthright. For many, having a home is the place to start.

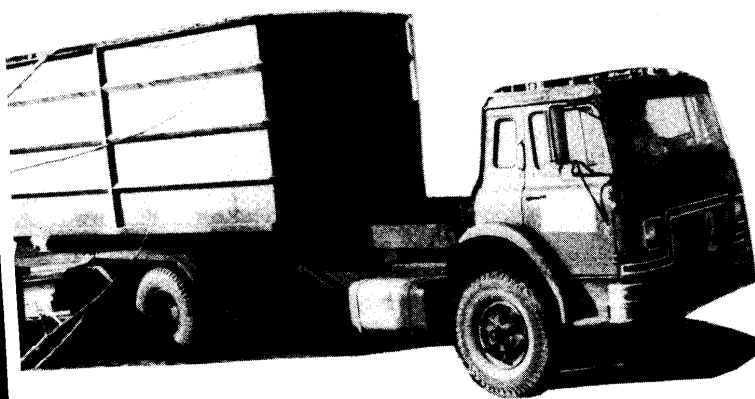
Barbara Randolph is a Chicago public school teacher, a member of the Teacher Task Force Steering Committee, and a board member of Mad Housers of Chicago.

Consider retailing. It is important to remember that since WWII our patriotic mission has been to consume and never look back. Supplies, excesses, wastes have always slipped invisibly in and out backdoors protecting the appearance of infinite abundance while being shuttled up and down alleyways. The real systems that sustain our way of life have rarely been accessible... let alone truly considered.

What's your point?



My point goes back to the design principles of these retailing spaces. If it were up to me I would invert the whole thing... start building inverted malls: structures that revealed what was really going on rather than concealing it; designs which informed consumerism. In other words structures that would encourage a shop, a business or whatever to reveal itself, what it uses, what it needs to function. It would emphasize the decisions a business makes relative to its own conduct, not just its "image". It gets back to measuring something by more than the success and failure of advertising.



Wait a minute, inverted mall?? The back becomes the front right? That means that garbage and delivery trucks pull up to the front door and customers climb in through the loading docks. I'm for that... the backs are always more interesting... but why would anyone let people do that?



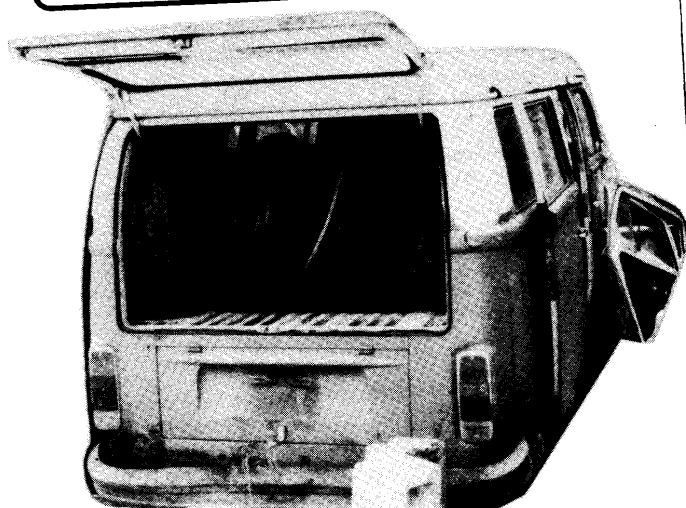
A lot of people agree with you, the backs generally are more interesting. But as to why, consider this: environmentalism is developing into a dominant social force for the coming decades right?

So?

For most people this means extending their values and commitment to the environment to their entire household; the way they purchase, consume, and dispose of goods.

So?

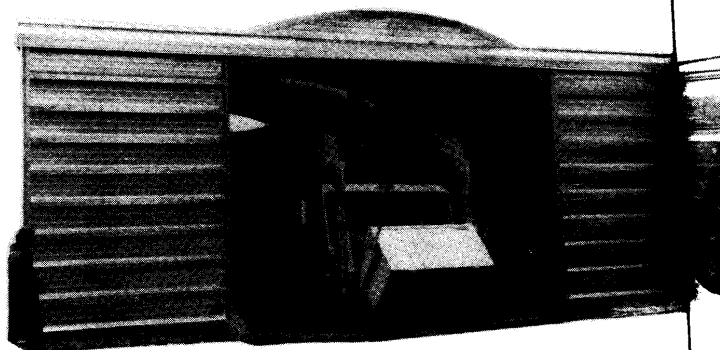
So the success they have both in the reduction of waste and increased satisfaction with their lifestyle inclines them to want to involve the retail level as well. They want to shop where they see these same values embodied.



What's all this inverted crap? You just mean a recycling center at the mall. People recycle, feel good, then go buy more stuff.

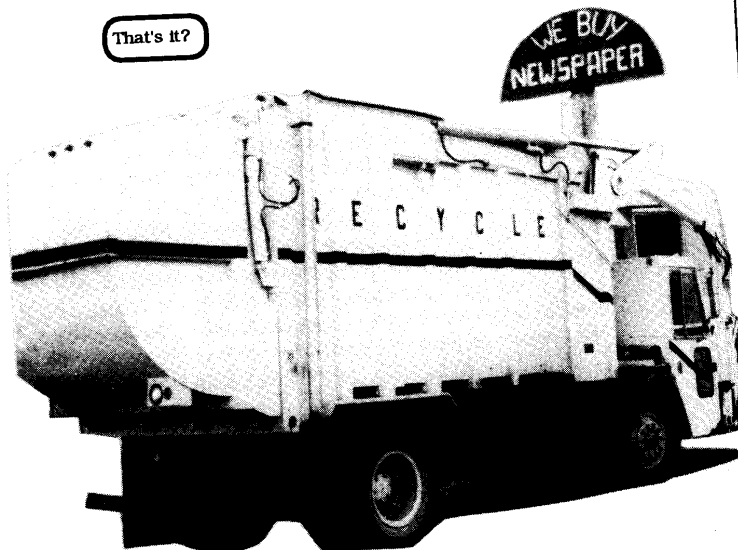
Maybe that's part of it. Sure we could put some bins in the parking lot to let people think they're conscientious shoppers by throwing papers into it, but I actually mean something more essential. Something that would change the architecture and affect the retailers as well as the consumers.

Like?



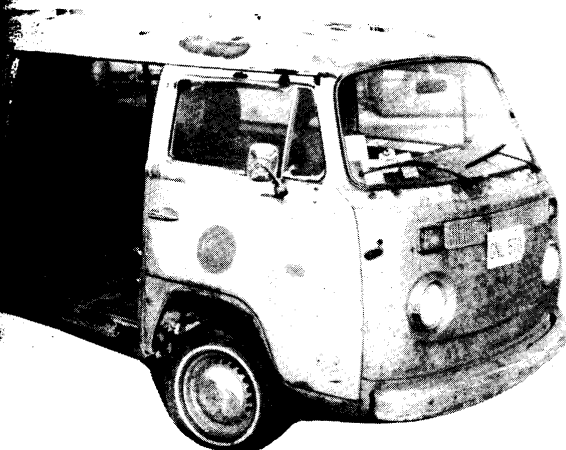
Starting with the recycling center is good. Why not let it influence the mall design from the beginning? It can simultaneously be considered as a consumer draw and an efficient system for the resident businesses. Something central. The flow and exchanges of materials all would become visible.

That's it?

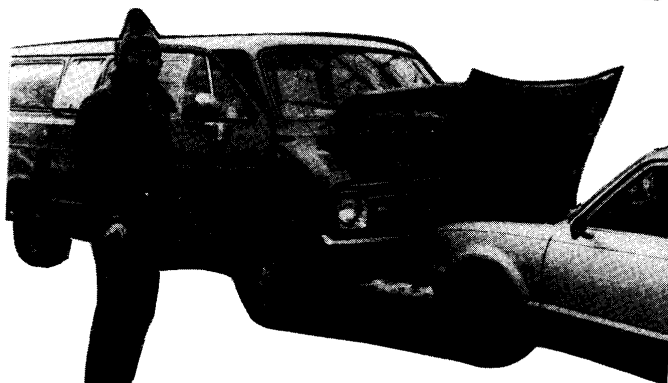


It's a lot when you think about it. But no that's not it. The next step is complicated. This involves a careful screening of businesses to be located within the inverted mall. They're screened from back to front and back sometimes being more important.

back?



A grocery store and a cafe would also generate organic waste, food scraps, rotten veggies etc., which could be composted and sold at the garden store or used directly by the florist. See, it would be tricky to figure all this out in advance but the necessary skills would quickly develop. Once the inverted mall was up and running, anytime a large quantity of something that nobody knew what to do with was generated, a business which could benefit from it would be invited in.



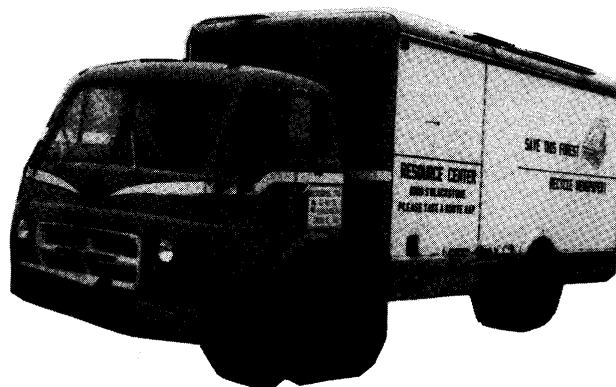
Hmmmm... The fitness center could burn fat and generate electricity at the same time. It sounds pretty political. I mean who decides?

...know, the systems behind it, the materials they rely on, the stuff they throw away regularly or the things they recycle, the things that are a necessary burden but that a compatible business might be able to use, or re-use. All of these individual characteristics from each kind of business can be assessed and later be knitted together into an efficient system. It's a simple model derived from recycling practices which focus on sustainability and diversity. ...more, if its done perfectly the recycling center becomes extinct, or becomes a set of organizational principles. All of the wastes are naturally reabsorbed within the inverted mall. New businesses emerge as the mall grows. Consumers, of course, are attracted to this hub of activity and fuel the whole thing...

I think there could be many different forms of management: public or private, individuals, coalitions, cooperatives, etc, the main thing of course is to keep greed in check and pay attention to the immediate needs of the system. Ultimately I think it would be good business. It could be very appealing. As for decisions, I think a lot of the proper decisions would become evident on their own once the whole thing started working. In fact there's no real reason for any two inverted malls to be alike. Plus, a lot of this stuff could be incorporated by degrees... bit by bit.



...okay. So a grocery store deals with a lot of cardboard, they handle everybody's boxes right? recycle them or whatever... a cafe might generate a lot of bottles.... a newsstand for papers, stuff like that, right?



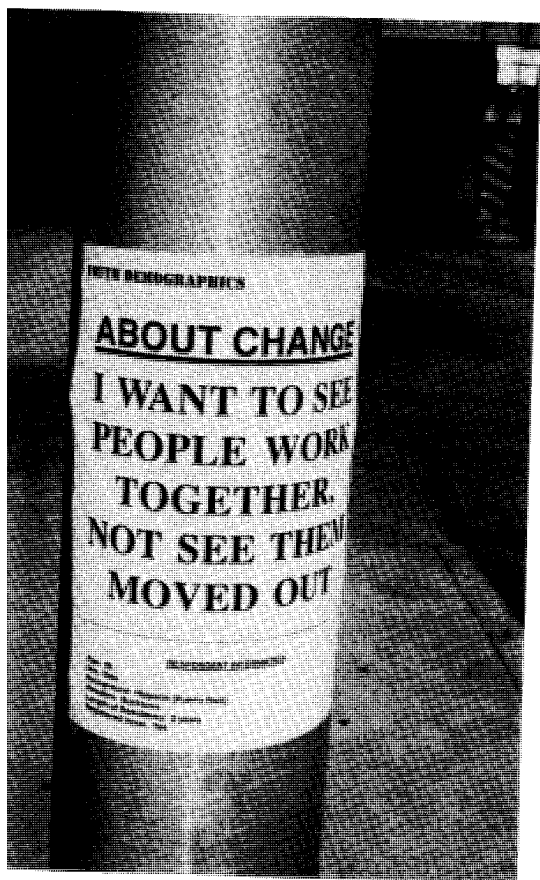
Hmmmm...



Dialog synthesized from various discussions and writings: Ken Dunn, Carol Healy, Dan Peterman. Vehicles courtesy of the Resource Center a non-profit recycling organization, Chicago, IL. August, 1992.

Youth Demographics

by Adam Brooks



I

act gathering methods such as the Census tend to yield dry overviews of the makeup of particular communities, and even public opinion polls are apt to submerge the individuality of the respondent. In addition the results of demographic sampling are usually consigned to the anonymity of statistical journals unless they happen to reinforce a particular political or media position. With these concerns in mind I wanted to design a data collection model that would allow individual voices to remain in the foreground. The first such project was the Wicker

Park/Bucktown Self-Description Project, which was an outdoor installation of signs that appeared throughout the Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods of Chicago. In essence these signs functioned as a description of the neighborhood, both by its residents and also by people living outside the area. By means of interviews on the street, I solicited short adjectival descriptions of people's feelings and attitudes towards the Wicker Park/Bucktown area. For reference purposes, I also noted interviewees' age, ethnic background, sex and whether they were registered to vote. Participants were not otherwise identified in any way. Responses from neighborhood inhabitants were printed white on black, and those of non-residents were black on white, in order to quickly visually differentiate them. All responses were displayed in full, and not edited in any way. Thus I functioned as a facilitator for airing people's opinions about this neighborhood rather than making subjective commentary. The project became a descriptive mapping of a neighborhood primarily by its inhabitants.

The project inaugurated in conjunction with Counter-Proposals, entitled Youth Demographics, continues such an approach to opinion collection, allowing individual voices within a specific community to be heard and seen. Working closely with students in the Wicker Park and West Town communities in Chicago, we have decided upon a number of issues that have particular importance and resonance for these students. These issues have formed the basis for groups of signs that result from ongoing interviews with the peers of the organizing students, as well as members of the communities in which they live. Each sign is captioned with the specific issue, and contains a short subjective response, as well as basic statistical information about the respondent. The signs are then printed and posted around the neighborhoods frequented by the respondents. The project began during the fall of 1991, and is continuing through the end of 1992.

Participants to date: Omaida Hernandez, Wilson Hernandez, Alberto Ramos, Vanessa Repelin, Aduana Gonzalez, Jenny Cruz, Angie Ceron, Jose Ayala. Project facilitated by Adam Brooks

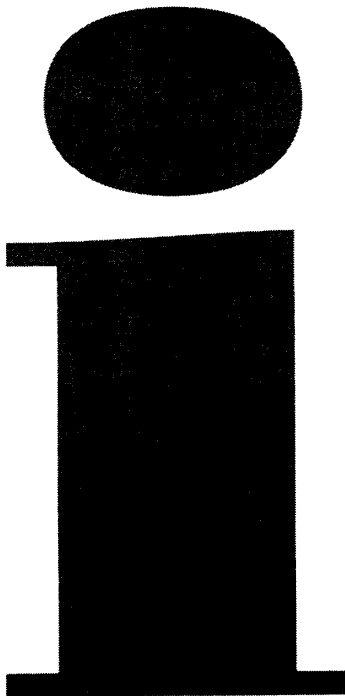
by David Hemmings

Mad Housing

Protesting Homelessness *productively*

The Mad Housers build small homes for homeless people and give them away. All a prospective hut owner must do to obtain a hut is request one, then help build it. The Mad Housers don't ask for permission from the system, they don't get permits, and they have no legal right to land, although their moral right is indisputable. The Mad Housers reappropriate unused, abandoned land and erect a small house, called a hut, on that land for someone who needs it.

Building huts provides a home for someone who needs one, gives citizens frustrated by the government's inability and unwillingness to house homeless people a way to do it themselves, provides a potent vehicle for protest, and raises the visibility (and thus the political power) of homeless people. It's called a "productive protest."



In Atlanta, Chicago, and a few other cities across the nation, Mad Housers leap atop piles of trash in dumpsters, pull out the usable material, load it into a truck and then build a hut, working side-by-side with a homeless person—a much different experience from waiting in line at a soup kitchen, no matter which side of the ladle you're on.

A crew of five people can do it, no experience necessary. All you need is one person with basic carpentry skills who can follow the plans.

Huts are not luxurious, but they're an improvement over an abandoned building, a park bench, a cardboard box, or a lean-to under a viaduct. They afford privacy, security, independence, shelter from the elements, and shelter from prying eyes. They are a temporary, emergency response to

an individual's personal housing crisis.

Mad Houser huts measure eight feet long by six feet wide, eight feet to the top of the walls, ten feet to the peak of the roof. They're built with 2x4s, plywood, nails, screws, roofing, caulk, and plexiglas. They provide forty-eight square feet of floor space and an overhead sleeping loft. In Chicago, where winters are very cold, huts are fully insulated and outfitted with a woodburning stove made from a pair of five-gallon paint cans with a two-inch pipe for a chimney. Although heated, typically the huts have no plumbing or electricity.

Bought retail, the materials that go into a hut cost four to five hundred dollars, but scavenging and donations reduce the cost dramatically. By nosing around and establishing contacts, the Mad Housers have found a billboard company to donate used plywood, a major lumber company to contribute damaged studs and plywood, and many other suppliers who give tools and hardware. Dumpsters at construction and rehab sites also yield good wood at reasonable prices (i.e., free).

Are the huts liveable? Well. . .pretend, for a moment, that you yourself are homeless. Or perhaps you don't have to pretend. Then you know. . . If you've been living on the streets,



a hut is a significant step up. You can lock the door. You can sleep whenever you choose, in privacy, under your own roof: a great luxury. You can collect your thoughts, come and go as you please, and search for a job after getting a good night's sleep, knowing your belongings are securely locked up at home. A hut offers freedom and independence. The space is yours.

But what about shelters, often run by caring individuals with a sincere commitment to helping people?

Typically, shelters are severely underfunded. Because of this, one of the biggest problems of living in a shelter is that you must relinquish control of your time. Shelters usually open about 7 p.m. and close by 7 a.m., so you must come and go on the shelter's schedule. You have to sleep on a pad on the floor or on a cot in a large open room with dozens of other people. You must take all your possessions with you when you leave. You must submit to constant surveillance by the staff. Your freedom is severely curtailed.

Hut life is not easy. Without plumbing or electricity, hut dwellers must use ingenuity to bathe, find drinking water, and go to the toilet. Hut dwellers must gather and chop up firewood for heating and cooking. Candles and battery-powered lamps are the only lights after dark. But despite the hardships, many prefer life in a hut to life on the street or in the shelters.

The Chicago Story

In October 1991 two Mad Housers traveled to Chicago from Atlanta (where the group was founded) to display a hut at

a symposium sponsored by Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery. The symposium participants built a hut for a homeless Chicagoan. WBEZ, the local National Public Radio outlet, covered the siting of this hut and announced the first meeting of the Mad Housers of Chicago. Sixty-five people, about 50%-50% men and women, attended this inaugural meeting.

Over the next six months, discussing materials and strategy on alternate Mondays and building every other weekend, the Mad Housers constructed seventeen huts near downtown Chicago, using the "Starter Kit" supplied by the Atlanta group as a guide. The Mad Housers located most of these huts on a strip of unused, rubble-strewn industrial land near railroad tracks that carry suburban commuters to the city. The hut residents cleaned up the site, hauled out the trash, and built a pleasant, green community in a space that was previously abandoned and ugly.

Engineers blew their horns and waved as their trains chugged by—dozens of times each day. The commuters crowded to the windows to see the huts. Railroad employees tossed bags of food and clothing from the trains. Church groups, activists, social workers, curious citizens, and even the police took to visiting the

Mad Housers huts
in Chicago during the
Counter-Proposals
exhibition.

hut dwellings, offering food, clothing, support, and encouragement.

Mad Housers, hut dwellers, and conventionally-housed alike visited each other in their homes—many kept in close contact. Friendships and support networks grew throughout the group. A vital, active Mad Houser organization gained momentum in Chicago, centered on the hut site near the tracks.

At first, the Mad Housers shunned press exposure, hoping to keep their activities and the hut site as secret as possible. Eventually, though, some hut residents grew restless and decided to use the community they had helped build (then a homestead of seven huts) to raise the public profile of homeless people. They invited reporters to the site.

In early February 1992, the Chicago *Sun-Times* ran a front-page story on the huts. Two weeks later the paper ran a two-page spread focusing on the daily life of the first Chicago hut dweller, who had landed a job in an office downtown through a Mad Houser contact.

This press exposure spurred hundreds of Chicagoans to write and call the Mad Housers, offering to help build huts, donate money and materials, or to ask for a hut themselves. The organization grew rapidly, so fast in fact that it was unable to keep up with the influx of calls. Even so, materials flooded in and volunteers swelled the ranks of the Mad Housers. Two hundred Chicagoans joined. Local TV stations ran stories on the huts. Tom Brokaw led with a lengthy, favorable report on the NBC *Nightly News*.

As public awareness of the huts increased, pressure on the city government to address the needs of the homeless people grew. A cauldron of potential political embarrassment bubbled, threatening to spill over and stain the image of the mayor (the Honorable Richard M. Daley) and the city administration.

Initially, the city officials benignly ignored the huts, saying they “seemed to be serving a useful purpose.” A railroad company spokesperson told NBC that the railroad had no problem with the new community near the tracks—that the people they were really concerned about were “those yo-yos in the suburbs who drive around the crossing gates.”

However, as the hut community grew and as political pressure increased, the city’s attitude changed. Mayor Daley said that *he* didn’t want to *see* people in America living in third world conditions. The city building commissioner attacked the huts as “structurally unsound” and “not up to code.” The city human services commissioner charged that the huts were inhuman “wooden boxes,” but failed to offer alternatives.

The city said the huts must come down.

This announcement generated a storm of media coverage. Architects testified to the structural soundness of the huts, commentators

questioned what alternatives the city had to offer, and activists vowed to block any city crews that came to destroy the huts. Angry letters to the editor supported the right of the hut residents to live in their huts in peace; criticized the city for attempting to destroy a vital, active movement; and quizzically wondered if the city did not have anything better to do than attack homeless people trying to scrape by as best they could. The Mad Housers collected nearly 2,000 signatures supporting the huts and the hut owners at a demonstration at City Hall. The story went national. The Associated Press ran it on its wires; the New York *Times* carried a prominent article describing the debate in detail.

Despite the public pressure, the city persisted in its efforts to dislodge the hut community. But instead of calling in bulldozers to crush the huts and bouncing the hut owners onto the streets, the city offered each owner a free apartment in a public housing project, in return for the hut. To make good on its promise, the city jumped the hut dwellers to the top of subsidized public housing waiting lists several years long. Understandably, they took the city up on this offer, and all the huts at the main site came down.

When the dust settled, millions of people had heard about and seen the huts; many had vocally demonstrated their support for homeless people. Some of Chicago’s homeless had been adequately housed. But, as one hut dweller said when offered a free apartment in exchange for his hut, “It’s all fine to house these people down here in the huts, but, as everybody knows, there’s more than eighteen homeless people in Chicago.” In fact, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimates that over 50,000 Chicagoans spend at least part of the year being homeless. Even the city itself estimates the number to be over 20,000.

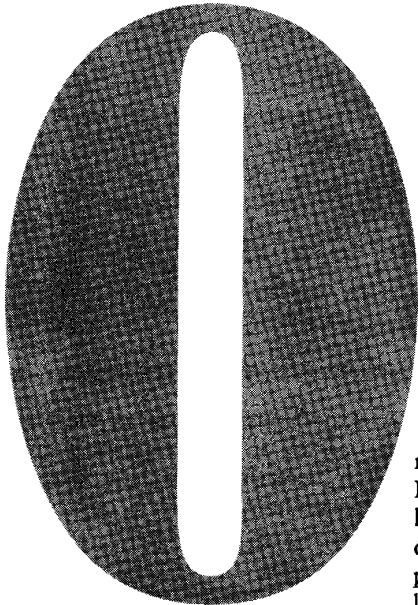
The Mad Housers of Chicago continue to build just as before, although for the moment with greater discretion, to avoid having the huts targeted and destroyed by the city government. Huts are located in scattered sites around the city. The exact number of huts now remains a closely guarded secret, until they again rise to public attention, as, sooner or later, they will.

For more information, contact the Mad Housers of Chicago at (312) 920-1352 or write 858 W. Armitage, Box 126, Chicago, IL 60614. For complete hut plans, press clippings, and other useful information, enclose \$5 for printing and postage.

David Hemmings is a writer, activist, and board member of Mad Housers of Chicago. Catherine Carr provided assistance in the editing and layout of this article.

by
Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle

Does the Public Work?



One year after launching "Counter-Proposals: Adaptive approaches to a built environment," there are aspects of the project that continue in progress, others that have taken on a life of their own, and a few questions still to consider. *Does the public work?* What public are we addressing? How do we define the terms under which the public works? I would like to suggest that both "public" and "work" be considered as independent yet interwoven sites and possibilities, that is: the *public-at-work*, a *working public*, and the *public-work*.

The notorious "anti-aesthetic" posture of much postmodern art may be seen, in its flouting of the canons of high modernism, as the latest edition of the iconoclastic public icon, the image that affronts its own public—in this case, the art world as well as the "general public." The violence associated with this art is inseparable from its *publicness*, especially its exploitation of and by the apparatuses of publicity, reproduction, and commercial distribution. The scandalousness and obtrusive theatricality of these images hold up a mirror to the nature of the commodified image, and the public spectator addressed by advertising, television, movies, and "Art" with a capital A. If all images are for sale, it's hardly surprising that artists would invent public images that are difficult (in any sense) to "buy."



Arthur Dodd, in front of the ruins of National Cafeteria and the Esquire, a single room occupancy hotel (photo by Ron Gordon).

W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art,"
Critical Inquiry, Summer 1990, Vol. 16, No. 4

A whole history remains to be written of *spaces*—which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both of these terms in plural)—from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 1980, C. Gordon (ed.)

Debate over critical public art is continually locked in a contest of demarcating and circumscribing the site. Recently this debate has extended itself beyond the tolerable confines of our cultural institutions and public spaces. The contest has shifted from issues of the site to those of the public, from a definition of space to a contestation of space; the city, its political and cultural institutions, the environment, the home, and the site of the body. Private and public spaces collide as do cultural and political sites; both cultural arenas and the public domain shift in and out of each other's overlapping territories. A redefinition of public art no longer fits easily in the civic plaza, rather it necessitates constructing, redirecting, and, more importantly, engaging itself with the everyday experiences and struggles that pass through, live in, and transform our social environment. Increasingly, contention over the public realm is a potential for social change in public life. From the idea of *art in public spaces*, where artists, institutions, and organizations fought for a small percentage of the built environment's capital investment, we find ourselves as part of a larger public seeking other alternatives through the activation of the site. Rather than continuing with

a modernist "critique of the site," by merely positing or positioning art in culture, there is an increasing attempt to formulate "sites of possibilities," wherein one can intervene in and engage culture itself.

"Counter-Proposals" was such an attempt, and it hoped to provide a forum for some of these possibilities. The project as a whole presented itself as a framework for initiating public discourse on key issues including the immediate need for shelter, new affordable housing, and community planning and development. Randolph Street Gallery, the institution, experienced its own shift in regard to how it perceived and presented itself. Issues of space and site were now concerned with use of space, and transformation of site. The gallery had to intermittently change over from display space to workshop and construction site for homeless shelters. Settings changed from the intimate roundtable to the meeting hall. The gallery's physical space was occupied by construction materials as well as an information center for alternative housing. The alternative cultural space modified itself into an active social space. The organization of the project and its programmed events required certain flexibility to accommodate unscheduled meetings of community groups and housing activists. "Counter-Proposals" presented the artist, architect, and activist in the role of direct participant engaged in both cultural and social

transformation. To this end, the institution had to engage and invest itself equally as an urban participant. The project necessitated its own programmatic counter-proposals in order to function within its own site and in the extended urban environment it now addressed.

Many of the projects included in "Counter-Proposals" were chosen because of their alternative responses to the built environment. Strategies ranged from the pragmatic to the subversive; underlying all of them was a commitment to devise new models of empowerment and intervention. The work presented and the projects that were developed operated with strategies that linked information access with active dialogue, and education with direct involvement. Audiences for discussions and workshops became participants in design and building projects that provided catalysts for future engagements and actions. The success of the work's individual effort and the public's engagement can be measured to the degree with which each project functioned as a public work. Through contributions offered in open discussions and interchanges of resources and ideas, the public negotiated a flexibility in design and adaptive strategies to suit specific sites and situations. Successful public engagement was also measured by the degree in which theory was able to be adapted as a tool for generating cultural practice concerning the urban experience.

Critical public art posits the problematic role of art and artist as central to shaping society. This notion of public art offers new site(s) for art to interact with, as well as act as a part of, the public. It provides artists with the means for real social production, not just the role of a societal pressure valve. Much of the current discussion focuses on interventionist, activist and/or collaborative practices that emphasize the artist's direct participation with issues and communities outside the insular confines of the "art world."

There is, though, both in mainstream and progressive circles, a resistance to what seems to be (to them) a breakdown of the once secure territorial boundaries between art and the public. This resistance often points to the term "public" in *public art* as an amorphous void that swallows up everything and everybody but cannot be defined: "What public? Which public? Is art no longer safe from the public? It was much simpler when it stood silent and it minded its own business." They even propose that all the "publics" be considered in order to fully discuss the term *public art*; this in turn is regarded as an impossibility. And so it is resolved that the only public we can speak of is our own, that of the "art public" or "art community." There is a certain tolerance, even an acknowledgment, that artists can be influenced or concerned with "non-art" issues, but they must not breach the boundaries of their

"vocation." The work of the artist is considered sincere and true so long as it remains a specialization within his/her concept of "specialized public spheres."

Such posturing serves only to safeguard the sovereignty of art, maintaining art practice in cultural seclusion. An alternative to this isolation and over-specialization may be found through collective approaches to public work. By this I mean initiating a discourse that operates on an interdisciplinary level, not limited to the use of different "art-media," but rather a discourse among and including different fields, disciplines, communities, and sites of social production. This strategy offers the potential for moving beyond a "strategy of public address," to one of dialogue and exchange, beyond art as a cultural barometer or oppositional gesture, to art practice as meaningful social transformation.

"Counter-Proposals" attempted such a transformation of both site and production. The gallery space unfolded itself, establishing linkages and networks with and amongst a host of organizations concerned with housing, homelessness, and urban planning. These changes allowed the site to function as a resource, providing access to urban issues and interventions within the cultural grid of the city. The difference in stance is as profound and significant as that between the "consumer" and the "citizen." In this regard, our organizational activities paralleled the practices of the artists, architects, and activists in "Counter-Proposals." To what extent we succeeded in overcoming our own marginalization and isolation in the public domain is still to be determined. To some we continue to be an elitist space catering to only a small "alternative" community; to others we are considered mainstream and part of the real estate problem; still to others we are a cross between a cultural center, community organization, meeting hall, and a conduit for social activism. "Counter-Proposals" made us keenly aware that we are some of all of these, and that it is through this type of public work that the artist organization can further define itself.

The success of public projects may be measured by the degree to which the organization either remains passive as an arts presenter or is able to activate itself as a contributing participant in the public domain. The artist organizations can best support artists as agents for change by engendering opportunities for engaged social production. These relationships between *public-work* and the *public-at-work* are key to the understanding of art's role in cultivating a *working public*.

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle is an artist, curator, and former exhibitions director of Randolph Street Gallery.

(This draft essay is part of the forthcoming book *Immersive Life Practices* edited by Daniel Tucker for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago Press. Do not circulate this draft)

The Jailer's Tale: A personal recounting of *The Couple in the Cage*
by Pablo Helguera

The summer of 1992 was probably the most defining moment of my artistic conscience, due to circumstances that I could not have anticipated. I was about to enter my senior year in college, as an art student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I had come to Chicago from my native Mexico City to pursue a kind of art that I felt needed to have a higher goal — influenced as I was by the public art ideas of muralism. At the time I was almost entirely unaware of what was going on in contemporary art, and the encounter of the work of the likes of Barbara Kruger, Andrés Serrano, and Jenny Holzer threw me into great intellectual turmoil. I had no idea of how to make sense of the culture wars that I encountered in my early student years; yet I also knew that I could not continue making public art as Mexican artists did in the 1930s.

In addition, my own cultural identity troubled me, as a volunteer exile from a middle-class family in Mexico City, I had first found great joy in encountering the Mexican community in Pilsen. Part of it led to me getting an internship in the education department of the Mexican Fine Arts Museum (now the National Museum of Mexican Art), then a small organization with a handful of staffers. The experience of working in that small community museum in Pilsen, in retrospect, had a profound importance in my life, first in a professional basis— I ended up pursuing museum education as a professional career, as I have done for the last 22 years. I also was forced to confront my own discomfort with cultural identity: as a white, over-educated, middle class *chilango* coming from a family of classical musicians, I was an anomaly even in my place of origin. Thus it is not surprising that I was not recognized by other Mexican immigrants. Speaking a very proper Spanish was even at times seen with suspicion, I took offense to other's questioning of my own cultural authenticity, when in many instances some of those who questioned it would not even speak Spanish themselves. I slowly became aware of the cultural complexities of immigration, which include the mythical re-imagination of the place of origin, which in the mind sometimes becomes so real that it can even overpower the actual place and prevent one from noticing its fiction.

It was in the context of those experiences when I was approached to be part of a performance project that was taken place later that year. It was the idea of Encarnación Teruel, my internship supervisor along with Gissel Mercier at the museum. Encarnación, who later became a mentor and a friend, was a fascinating person to me, and to many others. He had a striking figure: dressed in black, with long black hair, dark Mayan features, skull rings and earrings, he was a mixture of a heavy metal rocker and a pre-Columbian deity. A native Chicagoan with parents from San Luis Potosí, Teruel had practiced as a performance artist through the 70s and 80s, and was also an experienced

exhibition designer transitioning toward a more curatorial role in the position of Performance Coordinator at the museum¹.

Learning that I had recently become interested in performance art, Teruel pulled me aside one day in the office and asked me on whether I would like to participate in a performance project the museum was organizing. Teruel was working with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco in presenting an exhibition entitled “The Year of the White Bear”, which opened in the fall of 1992— a show that was mainly a critical look at the Euro-centric celebrations of the Quincentennial of the “discovery” of the Americas.

The Year of the White Bear project was accompanied by a series of performances at Randolph Street Gallery, a residency at Experimental Sound Studio, and most importantly, a performance that Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco were undertaking, entitled “Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West” (1992-1994) which also became known as “The Couple in the Cage” (the title of the documentary about the project that Fusco would produce later). The piece consisted in that Gómez-Peña and Fusco would exhibit themselves in a 12 x 12 foot cage, dressed in some ambiguous but illustrative costumes that made them look like natives from some primitive land, with spurious signage and labels explaining that this was an exhibition of two recently discovered natives of the island of Guatinau, an untouched land by Western civilization off the coast of Mexico.

For Gómez-Peña and Fusco it was important to present an ambiguous context where the viewers would have to be confronted with their own decisions —and prejudices— as to what they were looking at. For this reason, exhibiting the piece at an art museum would immediately disarm the work, as it would implicitly reveal it as an action created by two performance artists. Instead, they aimed for a much more ambitious context: a true museum of science. The Field Museum of Natural History was the natural location for Chicago. To this day it continues to amaze me that the authorities at the Field were progressive enough to allow this intervention in their premises².

Teruel was in charge of organizing the Chicago presentation of the cage piece, which included finding two performance artists who would be willing to act as museum guards for the work. He asked me on whether I would be interested in playing the role. I immediately accepted, not quite knowing at the time what it would exactly entail. I was hired along Chicago performance artist and writer Paula Killen to play the role of docent. We were given Field Museum guard suits —an ugly mustard color— and met with Guillermo and Coco at the museum to be coached for the piece.

¹ In the history of Chicago’s performance and alternative arts, Teruel should be given credit for creating important synergies amongst Chicago’s art organizations, for spreading the awareness of public and performance art, and for paving the way for seminal art projects that were at the forefront of political, cultural and social debates inside and outside of the art world. One of those key contributions were the voices of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco.

² Part of the reason this was possible, as I recall, was the presence of Maureen Ranson, an anthropologist from Mexico City who then worked in the Education department there, and who became our main liaison and interlocutor, and who I believe was instrumental in making the project possible at the Field.

Gómez-Peña and Fusco were a striking couple together —both equally articulate, attractive and with a seeming complete assurance about themselves and their bodies, that were to be so exposed in the piece. My main recollection were the warnings from Guillermo, who told us that this would be a difficult emotional experience, and asked us to be prepared for it. We would in essence represent the institution, explaining to visitors the perverse rationale for which two human beings were being exhibited in cages (“for educational purposes,” as I recall). He thought it was interesting for me to be a white Mexican, and asked me to reflect on the conflict of what it meant, to be the jailor of your own kind. We were given a verbal script of things that we could say or not to the visitors, as well as phrases that we could use when we felt cornered.

The cage piece was presented on January 16 and 17 of 1993. The golden-painted cage was placed right in the center of the main atrium of the Field, in a way that it was impossible to miss. The vast weekend audience was immediately attracted to the work and we had dozens of viewers at any given time, from start to finish. A review from the Chicago Reader provides a good description of the upheaval and disruption that this created at the Field:

“Many people were first drawn to the installation performance by the mariachi music, Latin rap, and overlapping melodies of rock and salsa--incongruous enough in the Field Museum. At the sight of the people in the cage, visitors often stood mesmerized, then slack-jawed. Reactions ranged from shocked disbelief to sadness, from indifference to anger. Some viewers embarked on a sort of ritual, circling the cage, standing back, coming up close, reading the plaques, then asking questions. The passing, shifting crowd showed the melding of many cultures: the museum cleaning crew, a gaggle of teenage girls with big hair and distressed jeans, parents with small children, artists, writers, television crews, foreign tourists. They were as much a part of the performance as the two artists. The “docents”...continually spoke to the audience and seemed to encourage questions and analysis, though they followed a script Gomez-Pena and Fusco had prepared. The audience spoke to each other as well as to the docents, and watched other visitors for their reactions and questions.”³

A striking aspect of the cage piece was that even though Gómez Peña and Fusco were creating all sorts of ludicrous poses and actions —wearing S&M items, holding a boom box in their shoulder, watching TV, enacting pretend rituals— to a vast majority of the public these did not insert any doubt in their minds that the exhibit they were being presented to was authentic (additionally there were plenty artists and Gómez-Peña fans in the audience throughout the weekend, who had specifically come to the Field to witness what they knew was a performance piece).

As for us, the docents, were strictly instructed to never break character, no matter what the pressure would be — and we never did. We offered certain services: for a dollar, visitors could take a polaroid of themselves with the natives, and—which was probably the most humiliating and ridiculous idea of the whole performance— we the docents would occasionally feed bananas to either “the male” or “the female” specimens (we would also refer to them in this gendered way, ostensibly stressing the parallel between them an animals in a zoo). The job was physically demanding, but it didn’t compare to the emotional investment, as Gómez-Peña had well warned us. Every few minutes we would be confronted by angry visitors, some of them in real rage, in total disbelief of how

³ Carmela Rago, *Specimens from the New World*, Chicago Reader, January 1993

the Field Museum was capable to incarcerate two human beings. Because we were the front line, and in fact the only institutional interlocutor to the visitors, we would be on the receiving end of all that indignation. Some people looked at the “natives” in silence for long periods of time, with great sadness, as if in a poignant recognition of their common humanity. Several were in tears. More disturbing, however, were those who seemed perfectly at ease with the display, —mainly young and middle-aged white Anglo Saxon men— who ranged from showing inexplicable indifference (as if this was something perfectly natural) to outright racism and crassness (some asked us as to whether and when the couple would have sex, when they would go to the bathroom, or whether they could see the breasts of the female). I remember taking short breaks in a hidden specimen room in a nearby hallway that served as our makeshift green room, falling vanquished onto a chair, almost breaking into tears myself.

At the same time, the project was incredibly invigorating. Visitors and other participants would animatedly debate the issues that the project raised. A video camera captured people’s responses. At some point while in the green room at the end of one of those days, with both Guillermo and Coco in there, someone brought up the ethical question of not telling visitors “the truth” about the piece. Gomez-Peña then responded with something along the lines of “it depends what you mean by the truth. The truth is that human beings have been put in public display for centuries.” In that sense, he reasoned, we were actually displaying the truth to viewers, not hiding it. The project laid bare, as well as any institutional critique project I can think of, the way in which an institutional context bestows credibility to an idea, as insulting as this can be; and the complicit way in which we, as society, are willing to go along with it if we see that the offending notion is widespread and institutionalized.

Now that more than 20 years have passed since its presentation, there are many reasons why a work like this one continues to have relevance for us. Yet it seems to me these are not always fully laid out when *The Couple in the Cage* is discussed. The more common reason has to do of course with the history of activist art and identity politics in the United States (the piece was included in the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial). Certainly, *The Couple in the Cage* created a public confrontation with racial, sexual and cultural stereotypes that hardly was achieved by other artists. This is because the nature of the majority of confrontations created by artists at the time who espoused tenets connected to multi-culturalism and identity politics, had a very direct shaming and intimidating tone that for the most part pushed audiences away instead of encouraging discussion. Two key components of this work prevented that from happening: one, because of its hidden fiction, audiences were eager to engage with it to “unmask” the fiction of the work and debate its ethics; by doing so, as Gómez-Peña would have liked, they would unsuspectingly engage already in the larger ethical discussion on how a western-centered society resolves its conflict with otherness. The other weapon that the piece wielded was its humor, and the sheer absurdity of the costumes and language constructions that is vintage Gómez-Peña. The use of this element played a key role in allowing us, perhaps, laugh at ourselves, as much as forcing us to confront very dark prejudices and fears.

This is the second reason why I believe this work is relevant to an art historical accounting of the 1990s: in the context of institutional critique and post-modernism, *The Couple in the Cage* (instinctively or not) responded in perfect synch and perhaps foresight with its times. The use of institutional fiction, which could be attributed to Marcel Broothaers and his *Musee d'Art Moderne* and to others who followed like Hans Haacke, was fully absorbed in the work, appropriating didactic language and institutional discourse to make a point. It may be worth noting that institutional critique, including Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights* tours, was mostly focused on issues of economics and its attendant power, but not so much on issues of race. Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, which would be perhaps the most important work addressing this subject, coincides in times almost exactly with this performance (1992-1993). With this work, Gómez-Peña and Fusco created a bridge between the discourse of identity politics with the post-modern zeitgeist that employed institutional fiction to deal with an urgent and complicated topic.

Finally, the third reason why *The Couple in the Cage* is important is as a seminal example of immersive practices. One could argue that performance art is the ultimate immersive practice in any case, and this is no exception of *The Couple in the Cage*. However, the project went much further than the normal boundaries of a performance work that is often constrained within the institutional context of the gallery of the museum. By intentionally blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, the project forced an immersion of the audience's reality into the fiction of the project.

Looked as a whole —the cage tour, the Year of the White Bear exhibition, and the documentary that Fusco produced after the experience— Gómez Peña's and Fusco's project was more than a performance. It was a multi-faceted endeavor to stimulate a debate around a subject that included guerrilla-like interventions, exhibitions and educational mediums. The project brought different communities in the city into dialogue that did not have a history of interaction before. The most evident case in point was the interaction between the disparate institutions that partnered in the project. Harder to finger point, but I believe evident to many of those who were involved in the project, it offered a model of public art, activism and social action that while provocative and controversial was also very inclusive in Chicago, engaging the performance art and the Latino communities alike⁴.

The Couple in the Cage remains in my mind valuable model for contemporary artists today of a project that was truly immersive in its origin, its application and its consequences, where the various social actors were deeply implicated individually and politically.

⁴ It is important to note that over subsequent years the gregarious Gómez-Peña continued returning to Chicago to present more performances and interventions, often drawing from the initial circle of collaborators.

Never The Same

Conversations About Art Transforming Politics & Community in Chicago & Beyond

Mary Jane Jacob

Curator Mary Jane Jacob was interviewed by NTS at the Sullivan Galleries in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (July, 2011) where Jacob is the Executive Director of Exhibitions. The interview focuses on the work leading up to and during the ambitious “Culture in Action” project organized for Sculpture Chicago, which took place over a two-year period (1991-93). For the project artists worked in direct partnership with community members to explore the changing nature of public art, its relationship to social issues, and an expanded role of audience from spectator to participant and offered a new model for art in the urban context.

A publication by Bay Press, Seattle, traced these multi-layered projects that took the form of monuments, parades, candy bars and billboards, hydroponic gardens, and a permanent youth media program. Herbert Muschamp, architecture critic for The New York Times, wrote that these “conceptually oriented public artworks update the City Beautiful tradition of integrating fine art into the urban fabric... using art and urbanism to reinforce each other” as part of a movement to “think globally, act locally.” The project featured works by Suzanne Lacy and A Coalition of Chicago Women; Inigo Manglano-Ovalle and Street-Level Video; Haha and Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare; Robert Peters; Mark Dion and The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group; Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio and The Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers’ International Union of America Local No. 552114; Kate Ericson, Mel Ziegler, and A Resident Group of Ogden Courts Apartments; and Daniel J. Martinez and The West Side Three-Point Marchers.

Daniel Tucker (DT): As a starting point could you talk a little bit about what research or projects you were involved in or that you were observing elsewhere that provided inspiration for “Culture in Action”.



Mark Dion

Mary Jane Jacob (MJJ): It came from a few fronts happening in art of the 80s. One is straight-forward: NEA and other government public art panels defined how stuff got made in cities at that point, through a panel of expert and local representatives or sometimes just art professionals picking the artists. The process of selection was the short-term (one day) and jury-style that did not value community citizens as relevant. It was one established to ensure “art quality.” Furthermore, the result of that process was that often times the art work never got made or when it did—I suppose this was the greatest impetus to me—it became highly compromised as it made its way through a logistical process that succumbed to the power of site architects or politics. Or because the artist’s distance from the process, it might not be the right work for the context. So that was one motivation from the public art field.

Another contributing experience came even earlier. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I did an internship as curator of the Michigan Artrain, working on a show from the Upper Midwest. As I met artists in local terrains, I heard about the regional prejudices they faced and how their place—outside the mainstream—labeled them in negative ways and restricted their access to showing. Thankfully, that has changed a lot in the last three decades in large part due to champions like Marcia Tucker. I thought it wrong that they felt compelled to leave the place where they lived and from which they drew their inspiration in order to have a career. It also made me think about place and its relationship to making: What does an artist can bring to the perception of a

place.

I had also begun working with other artists “outside the mainstream”: women artists, those who employed material associated with crafts for their art, or new genre like performance and installation. Combined with that, I took an interest in art with a political and social agenda. So all of this led to cultivating a kind of curatorial position and with that came relooking at the state of public art. At that time early in my career I also found a dialogue around this discourse with Suzanne Lacy who has certainly been a leader in rethinking the field public art.

So all those experiences served as some professional background for a critique of public art and set the scene for engaging a conversation with Sculpture Chicago around doing an exploratory program, which eventually became “Culture in Action”.

In 1990 I was a board member of Sculpture Chicago. I was also doing a site-specific show in Charleston, South Carolina—“Places with a Past”—where the invited artists were grappling with erased histories of slavery. At Sculpture Chicago I was impressed with the real enthusiasm among that committed board for the work they’d most recently accomplished with Vito Acconci and others. However, their programmatic separation of local and national artists seemed to smack of regionalism to me. Additionally, their “curatorial” process of having jurors select artists based on maquettes of work they wanted to make outdoors seemed reactionary. It didn’t allow for the way artmaking was going. And by focusing art on the plaza, what the public was exposed to was restricted. I thought the process needed to be opened up to another way.



Mark Dion

But in spite of this critique, at the heart of what they were doing—and what seemed to touch most deeply the heart of the board—was bringing the wider Chicago community into the process by enabling the public to see artists at work. Moreover, the board was moved by stories of other professionals (crane operators, welders...) who had helped the artists in the process and then returned to see the work with their families full of pride and a sense of ownership. The board was excited that non-museum go-ers had an experience with art through what they provided and could even participate in the process with the artist.

This was ultimately where the whole process started: with the public. I thought: What would happen if we opened up the process fully to allow artists to do what they do? And what would happen if we really opened up the process to allow the public to be part of that process? How can that be best realized? Not through marketing. To bring people who aren’t usually the art audience into art, I thought, could best be achieved through something personally meaningful to them. (I saw how this was working on the subject of history with my exhibition in Charleston.) So that became the inspirational moment thing that brought all the other art discourses to bear in “Culture in Action”.



Mark Dion

The critiques embodied in this program caught the attention of the National Endowment for the Arts; there was a feeling a test case was needed to think about public art in another way. It was a moment. But how it was going to happen and what the art was going to look like was hard to explain to funders. It wasn’t acceptable for a curator to work organically, developing a project for which outcomes were not defined. So it became challenging for me to hold the space open for artists to work, for things to emerge, and the public process to unfold—but that was the only way to truly include the public in the process. Furthermore, this is how the creative process goes and as a curator I wanted enable that process. So the fact that we couldn’t describe at the outset where the work

was going to be, what collaboration would look like, which artists would eventually become end up being part of the program, who the audience-participants would be, what would be produced was the *right* process. This meant that all those involved needed to work from a certain level of trust. And for this Sculpture Chicago was the right board; I have never worked with a board that was so involved throughout that whole undertaking.

DT: And so most of the funding was from the NEA?

MJJ: NEA and also the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund were the primary funders, but there were other significant ones, too, such as Rockefeller and Nathan Cummings Foundation on the national level, and Polk Foundation and MacArthur in Chicago. Funders were entering in at various points, but it was a good moment for fundraising because people didn't have examples; they couldn't quite nail down what we were doing; they hadn't set up categories of funding yet for such projects. I was willing to go out there and talk about what we aimed to do and why. So if they were curious and maybe inspired, too, they got into the discussion as we tried to figure it out.

Rebecca Zorach: I have a follow-up question, partly about the way you talk to funders and partly just about the way you thought about the project yourself. Because when Daniel asked the initial question, the first sort of way that you framed it was as a critique of the NEA process and what was going out in public art. But I'm curious about this when you talk to funders, did you balance critique with an affirmative argument about—



HaHa

MJJ: Yes, "Culture in Action" was presented along the lines of potential: potential of what the audience can bring to the art experience, potential of the passion and vision of artists to work in new ways and in public, and the potential for art to be a way of thinking about and dealing with the problems we face. It was also presented as a program that needed to be comprised of several projects coming from different directions, dealing with different ideas and issues. Then what resulted might offer some examples of working relationships and ways to imagine the potential for public art, for art *and* the public.

Funders think about how to design programs that can and serve needs. It's all well intentioned. Sculpture Chicago board members had the desire to create meaningful, embedded, personally life-transforming experience through art for the public. That wasn't their mission statement, but it was what they believed in. I approached board members and funders on this level, seeking their best possible selves, and we became engaged in a critical conversation about what could happen: What is art for? To talk in that way rather than do a sales pitch is all I could do as a curator. For some people that worked, and for others, I can tell you, it didn't because the story I was delivering is too complicated, risky, and murky. With "Culture in Action" I was really up front that we might deliver anything. We were not claiming there would be sculptures or change society, but we wanted to try to see what art can mean in people's lives.

DT: How were the artists in "Culture in Action" identified and what was sort of the process like of connecting them with communities that they end up working with?

MJJ: In the beginning I was critiquing sculpture in urban spaces, but as time went on notions of collaboration came to the forefront, along with co-authorship among a segment of the population that, before or for this occasion, could be thought of as a community. Some artists came and went in that evolutionary process. My way of working on a group show always involves starting the conversation with a few artists, bringing them onboard to think with me, and not waiting till I have settled on a final list before beginning on the ground.

Mark Dion was one of the first artists to begin, and he was certainly the first one to clearly define that he was working

collaboratively, having us solicit a group of high school students. Of those who lived outside Chicago, Mark also spent the most time here. He came nearly every week during the school year to lead a class and stayed all summer. He knew what he wanted to do. Ronald Jones had recommended him—listening to artists is one way I select other artists. [I had done a work with Ron just prior for Sculpture Chicago, which also helped launch “Culture in Action.”] It was a temporary park in sited on open land left over from building the Harold Washington Library building. His project, Pritzker Park, could have been a permanent, but ultimately was not. It was largely enabled by collaborating with the head of City Planning at that time, Chuck Thurow, who went on to lead the Hyde Park Art Center and carry out their new building.



HaHa

As to selecting other artists, well, I always loved the work of Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler and had just worked with them in Charleston where they made a very successful project with a resident, painting his house [*Camouflaged History*]. I knew they were interested in issues around housing and thought they would find Chicago a good place to work.

Daniel Martinez was an artist that I would have liked to have worked with when I was Chief Curator at LA MoCA, but that museum was not open to that. So I invited him here to Chicago. I had worked with Bob Peters in Chicago as Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, so chose to do so again here.

Haha was a Chicago four young artists already working collaboratively who proved interested in creating a wider collective. Christopher Sperandio and Simon Grennan were just graduating from UIC; their first projects in Chicago parks intrigued me because of their irreverence and critical insight. So I met with them and talked about what they might do.



Suzanne Lacy

Suzanne Lacy, as I mentioned, was a leader in thinking about public practice and an artist I knew well; we had shared many discussions. I felt that the program overall could benefit from her experience and intellect, and that with her we could build a deeper discourse.

DT: “Culture in Action” gets referenced frequently, but a lot of the time it is the idea of the exhibition, and there’s not as much reference to specific projects. I’m just kind of curious if you have any anecdotes or project stories that you think are really meaningful or transformative kind of experiences that happened in “Culture in Action” that are not widely known?

MJJ: *Full Circle*, Suzanne Lacy’s project about women, was centered on the inspirational historic figure of Jane Addams. In the magical, spectacular way Suzanne works best, overnight where there had no Chicgo monuments to women, appeared a

hundred monuments in the Loop. These temporary works are often pictured, but the second part was of her project, *Dinner at Jane’s*, was a dinner among women world leaders, staged and filmed at Hull-House. This part is less known but is what made this work truly come *full circle*.



Suzanne Lacy

Grennan and Sperandio’s project ran into some interesting challenges. At one point it looked like it might be stopped when the

Nestle headquarters would not allow the workers at their local plant that we had been negotiating with to participate in the art project for one week. It represented 40 hours for 15 people, so to them it was a lot of money, but also maybe they were fearful in other ways. At that time the union was suspicious of the corporation's new program of "employee empowerment." It was the head of that suburban Chicago plant that actually gave those workers the week off. He said, "Just don't meet in the factory." So we held collaborative design workshops in the offices of Sidley & Austin made available by Sculpture Chicago board member Jack Guthman. We also had to have the candy bar made out of state by a sympathetic union. In the end the local union leader, Jethro Head, brought the project back to the factory, handing out the candy bars that represented the workers' ideas and literature about the union's goals. But I always remember the head of the plant who put his job on the line because he believed in an art project. That was a big deal.



Martinez, Consequences of a Gesture

Daniel Martinez's project had two aspects: a parade and an outdoor installation. For the latter, we got all this granite from UIC that was dismantling the raised pavement that was part of Walter Netsch's building scheme. A fortune in granite was diverted for a time on its way to the salvage yard. The people's plaza that Daniel imagined was going to be constructed on a City-owned block of the former Maxwell Street Market, and we had received City approval for this. But some board members got worried that the mayor might not be pleased with us doing this. At the proverbial 11th hour (at 11:00 p.m. the evening before we were to meet the salvage truck and start placing the granite slabs), a call came in saying we shouldn't do this. So I "gave a grant" to Daniel to pay the salvage company, and went down to the site early that morning with our installation crew to cut the lock off one of the UIC-owned lots. We didn't

ask permission. There wasn't time. Anyway, guerilla art has a long tradition in the public sphere. A head UIC administrator came about a half an hour later and said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "We're making art." I think they thought it was easier to let us proceed than risk causing a fuss, because it could have become another flashpoint in the ongoing controversy over closing the Maxwell Street Market. The piece got done and stayed up all summer. It was interesting that Sculpture Chicago didn't stop us either. Ultimately, this work became the cover of the book.

With Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's project, *Tele-Vecindario*, the process was intensive. He exposed himself daily to the issues of the community in which he lived, all your time consumed with the youth's problems and the weight of responsibility of what it meant to work there with them. It did not become Inigo's regular mode of practice, but I think it came at a good moment in his career and, I would say, it affected where he went in his own work. Inigo brought a lot of critical intelligence to the program, understanding questions of audiences and diverse publics. Of course, the process he did set out, not controlling the conversation but responding and shaping it, gave others a role, a buy-in, while building an infrastructure for what was to come—even though there was never a grand plan that forecast what that would be. That's why the Community Television Network staff members who worked as part of this and the social worker, Nilda Pauley, at Wells High School could join forces at the conclusion of the exhibition and create something else. They created Street Level Video, now called Street Level Youth Media.

DT: Along those lines, can you talk about projects that have legacies like that?

MJJ: Street Level Youth Media is the most obvious example of legacy. They are coming up on their 20th anniversary. It is an institution that serves 1000 youth each year, teaching them skills in media technologies and using art strategies. They aim to cultivate a consciousness of self in society, with a goal of helping less advantaged students be competitive in college. There are individual stories here, too, like Paul Teruel who was there at the beginning, became a founding director of Street Level, and went on to develop community partnerships at Columbia College Chicago.

But Street Level brings up an issue which public art practitioners need to be cautious about. If our goal had been to create such an organization from the outset, I believe the exploration would have been lost, the process would have been narrowed to focus on



Inigo Manglano-Ovalle

implementing the founding of an organization. But we could not have defined this outcome at the start. It had to find its natural, necessary way as a shared agenda among a broader set of stakeholders—and first they had to find what stake they had in common. Undertaking temporary artworks enabled them to see that and feel it.

Funders would have liked us to have expressed clear outcomes, tangible goals; today they are

often mandated in grant making process. Instead what happened came about in a real, organic way. But “organic” was taboo then, as was intuition, because these were not valid business-like words. Yet good creative processes define intent and then listen to the process and let it go. That is exactly what *Tele-Vecindario* did as an art project, and this allowed it to fluidly lead to Street-Level Youth Media.



Inigo Manglano-Ovalle

There were also so many beautiful acts of generosity on the part of all the artists. For instance, we were offered a small gallery on the first floor gallery of the MCA (this was the former building on Ontario Street), because they had a gap in their schedule. I think they thought we install documentation to orient visitors to the “Culture in Action” projects around the city. But I felt the gallery was too significant a space for that; it should be a work of art. So I asked Inigo to do something. None of the other artists complained that this opportunity went to him. Acts of generosity.

Inigo made a piece called *Cul-de-sac*, which dealt with the new anti-gang law and the City putting in cul-de-sacs to segregate communities and contain gangs. He showed videos behind cyclone fencing, as would later happen with actual fencing on Erie Street in West Town. So this work also became a model, a maquette in a way, for how the first block party, which was a major art installation, ended up looking. It also became a lesson for the youth involved to find their way into the museum for the first time and enter without fear. This was one of the things that Inigo did: bridge the hierarchy between the mainstream institutions and the non-art world neighborhood for these students who thought the museum was not for them, who were intimidated to actually “pay what you wish,” and who found guards intimidating. This show also proved to be a way for many museum patrons to see the students’ work because, conversely, they were fearful at that time to go to the block party on Erie Street west of Ashland.



Inigo Manglano-Ovalle at MCA

RZ: You were mentioning a concern about how outcomes are talked about now. And I wonder, is it possible to find ways to celebrate outcomes without imposing expectations that there will be a *certain* outcome?

MJJ: Oh, definitely we can celebrate outcomes after they happen and celebrate the potential for outcomes. Not predetermining outcomes does not mean there is not a desire to have an outcome. The concern is in determining the outcome before you have done the research, worked with others, and tried some things together. A temporary artwork is not an outcome—it is a product of a process, a gesture, and it can be a *meaningful* gesture. An outcome can be an organization like Street Level or a new mindset; it can be a change in the art field. In all these ways outcome implies something more. I don’t want to use the word sustainable here, because some things can be wonderful for a short time or for, you know, a longish time, like ten years. Not everything has to be



Inigo Manglano-Ovalle

sustainable forever. I speculate on outcomes all the time with artists, but I work with those who do not become fixed on what they want others to do. The outcome has to come from another place, another space.

In “Culture in Action” we were in the same stew together. We had questions about public art; we had questions about what art could be; how communities could be involved and we had a stake in how could artists actually make change. Those things were either in the back of the mind or the front of the mind of everyone, but it was in some part of the mind for everybody. So maybe that had some effect, left some legacy, too.

DT: Were there any other legacies you want to discuss?

Haha’s *Flood* might have inspired green developments in art, which certainly John Ploof and Laurie Palmer, artists in the project, have continued. From Mark’s project, MCA curator Naomi Beckwith, then a student, emerged in the field. These may be outcomes. This may indicate validate that in order to actually analyze these projects, you have to analyze them like medical research—over a lifetime—not just in the time of the artwork because the art

keeps working.

DT: At the time how did you try to show the project to people in the art world so they could understand its complexity?

MJJ: Well, there was *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman who I meet at the Venice Biennale and who said, “there’s nothing interesting here.” I said, “Well there’s something interesting in Chicago,” and he came the next week. Of course, since these projects existed over time as well as in different places in the city, it was challenging to show him what was going on and for him to grasp the whole. Still there were things to see and people to meet in order to get a sense of that moment. So he did a great job keeping pace with the energy up of the day as he different realities were thrown at him.

DT: This was during “Culture in Action”?

MJJ: This was during the summer of 1993. But we also offered something like this to anyone who signed up for a tour; it was a demanding bus tour—five hours—led by Rebecca Keller, who is an artist now doing site and community projects. Every tour was a little different because time wasn’t static for these projects; each time we unpacked together what was being experienced. It ended with a box lunch and discussion at the Haha garden project.

But controversy arose in the art community around public art around: who’s the author; ethically, how long does an artist need to work with a community; what does the artwork look like?



HaHa

DT: I am curious if you have anything else to say about the differences between that moment when you were initiating it and now, because I feel like you really defined the moment well in your essay in the “Culture in Action” catalog.

RZ: In some ways this kind of practice has become more institutionalized.

MJJ: Well, that’s not necessarily negative. Things that were questions before aren’t now. So, I don’t think co-authorship is such a problem for the art establishment. Questions around curator as artist



Grennan and Sperandio

have settled down, so that curating is seen as a wider practice that includes not only commissioning but also being part of the creative dialogue. I think that there is greater consciousness of process and what it means to follow a process. Some of the questions around the evaluation have led to an appreciation of qualitative over quantitative means, and the need to invent new ways of carrying out evaluation. Certainly at this point the big questions, or the big issues, of society that were touched on in programs like “Culture in Action” are accepted as part of the terrain of artists’ work. So while I think questions about what art can and cannot do are always there, we see a continuum of answers and artists’ practices.

I don’t want to
make it sound

like everything is great, but today there are a lot more artists working outside the museum and undertaking a wide range of practices. So the same artist can do a public artwork and work for a museum. I think having those options or the chance to have a multiplicity of practices is one of the things I try to instill here at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I encourage students to try their hand at public practice or be part of a team, and to know that this doesn’t mean they can’t do their own thing—make work, show it, and sell it. But knowing something about public practice can make students more open to this kind of work by others and not accusatory that it isn’t art, which was what we experienced so often with “Culture in Action”. Even more so, they can be more sensitive to the presence of the audience—and that is important for any artwork. When I began here at the School about ten years ago, talking about community in the classroom was rare; now it is different and it is an expanded and more nuanced, richer conversation. So this institutionalization, if you will, seems to me a good thing.



Grennan and Sperandio

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