

Mary Jane Jacob

A Shared Research

For International Sculpture Center

Alternative Public Art Anthology

This is not a narrative of a project or series of them. It is a text that takes up the subject of time: the time of a project, the stream of time that flows through the process of a project, especially when one is *in the flow*, and then as one process flows into the next, over time. There's constancy, yet, like a river, it is never straight by nature. This is also an essay about art—not so much about theory as about practice. It is about the understandings gleaned from art-making as a research practice—research manifested so that you can see for yourself and so others can partake or contribute. This practice constitutes a life's research for artists; it can also be so for curators.

I will start this story in 1991, in Charleston, South Carolina, with the invitation from the Spoleto Festival USA to curate a sculpture show at Middleton Place plantation, which became "Places with a Past" downriver, in the heart of this colonial capitol. Here, the use of public, non-gallery locations was not so much a critique of the museum-as-institution as a critique of the institution of slavery. On the streets of Charleston, artists could play out theories of post-colonialism *for real*, vitalizing rich and troubled discourses of place, history, and memory. Here, artists experienced an unmistakable, though long silenced, presence of the past, and they deployed the temporary venue of an arts festival to push meanings forward. This was an exhibition that occasioned

experimentation for some artists, with them extending their practice by venturing into installation (Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers's *Five Rooms*), community collaboration (Antony Gormley's *Field* and David Hammons's *House of the Future*), large-scale outdoor work (Joyce Scott's *Believe I've Been Sanctified*), and the engagement of an entire building (Ann Hamilton's *Indigo Blue*).

"Places with a Past" has been cited as an incidence of alternative curatorial practice, and it did help spawn a lineage that ranged from Fred Wilson's institutional critique "Mining the Museum" in Baltimore to "Revelations" at Port Arthur, Tasmania, the landing place of Australian emigrants, artists' look 15 years later at that nation's own dark past. But, for me, it was not so much a conceptual trope as an embodied practice in tune with the processes of art. Curators care for process, as well as objects, creating situations so that art-making can happen fully and deeply. Curators also take care that experiences can happen for others, believing that experience in art and life will connect.

One critique of this show stung—and stuck. Critics called the artists' processes "parachuting."¹ Yet these critics were flying in and out, too, and often made their assessments long-distance, with little care for local responses.² This debate, was at the crux of my subsequent program, "Culture in Action." In dialogue with the board of Sculpture Chicago and potential funders, we asked: Is it possible to speculate together on what public art can be, to follow artists' practices instead of the institution's way of doing things, to invest in their work and see if members of the public would become invested, too?³ This meant suspending judgment for a time to see what might be spawned. While I hoped that "Culture in Action" might expand the policy parameters of public art procedures, my primary curatorial ambition was to reinforce connections

between viewers and the art experience that I felt had been eroded in both the street-presence of art and in museums.

The artists worked in Chicago for over three years (1991–94). Each of the eight projects took several forms (not just installations), had multiple audiences depending on venue and activity, occurred at different moments, and engaged the public for long periods—the vast majority of participants close to the process had never been an art audience. Though the artists’ time on the ground ballooned, this program sparked other criticisms. Why is it art and not pedagogy (Mark Dion’s *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*)? Why is a candy bar art, particularly when its form is co-determined with a constituency of non-artists (Grennan and Sperandio’s *We Got It! The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams*)? Why is the role of the artist to provide self-esteem and skill-building for youth (Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s *Televecindario*)? Is a project effective enough if it only teaches 15 students (Dion) or only involves 12 factory workers (Grennan and Sperandio); if it doesn’t fix public housing (Ericson and Ziegler’s *Eminent Domain*) or stop urban renewal (Daniel J. Martinez’s *Consequences of a Gesture and 1000 Victories/10,000 Tears*); and if it only heals a concerned population rather than someone with HIV or AIDS (Haha’s *Flood*)? Is it effective artwork or ineffective social work?

Critics and detractors couldn’t afford to wait and see what would happen over time, while at the time, I couldn’t tell them, “Wait, artist’s practices will develop from here, so will community change. Why even the Community Television Network staff and high school students in *Televecindario* will start their own organization, Street-Level Youth Media.” Who knew? These things happen in time. And Street-Level probably would not have happened if it had been part of the curatorial plan, the funder’s mandate, or even the artist’s design. We had

to let the process unfold and *listen to the process* as it went to the heart of the issue. But moreover, if *Televecindario* had not been art, the theoretical questions and social dilemmas it embodied would not have gone straight to the hearts of those involved and been transformed into an educational organization now going into its 20th year and serving 1,000 youth annually. This is the product of time. This is the positive side of “an unclear beginning and end.”⁴ This is how a work can be a locus for “the macro socio-political-economic context,” and through which “the micro forces that come together to do a project can create individual community experiences and constitute artists’ practices.”⁵

The biggest lesson of “Culture in Action” was process. All of the works grew out of conversations between artists and members of various publics. By throwing a curatorial net around these projects to support them, bringing them into conversation with each other and with the field, bringing some clarity to what was at stake, they served as motivation for other efforts, including Claire Doherty’s *Situations* in Bristol, Micaela Martegna’s *More Art* in New York, and Luiz Guilherme Vergara and Jessica Gogan’s *MESA* (Mediation, Encounters, Society and Art) in Rio.

As processes underwent in Charleston flowed into Chicago, we arrived at what might be called a “best practice”: devote time to the community tied to the subject and location of a public project, be open and responsive, and listen while bringing all of your critical and aesthetic awareness to bear. This may or may not be criterion for artists today; there are lots of different strategies and intents that come under the currently favored label “socially engaged art.” But for some projects, this is a good and essential practice.

Yet, there is more than one way. So even though the artists’ time in Charleston was shorter, and the works existed for only a summer (though,

unexpectedly, two remain permanently), much what that art embodied went to the heart of the place—a place whose heart had been kept closed. Charleston was a global capitol as early as the 17th century, and we still live the story set in motion there. These installations, in all their artifice, still rang true as lived-experience, not because every detail was historically accurate but because it evoked a shared experience. Art can convey this, not as a resolution or celebration, but with complexity and consternation, in pain and with empathy. But you need time to be with the art—not in person with the work, but the work within you.

It was a blessing in hindsight that the works in Charleston were able to do their job over time—without an annual or biennial effort, without more art squeezing out life. The effects of art are not always overt or specific, but happen in their own time. We aren't always ready for art when it confronts us, and this can be especially true of public art. First reactions do not tell the whole story. In this case what was revealed, maybe reaffirmed, over time was that the experience remained deep in memory long after the work was gone from view. Perhaps the works' transitory nature sparked greater awareness. The experience was aided by viewers being able to step physically into these imagined, articulated worlds, while walking through the city between projects and seeing at each turn art in life. The work lived in respect to its resonance with life. Experience flows as it will, over time, and we were lucky that Charleston is one of those places where time is long, and is felt, and life is lived with a sense beyond one's own lifetime.

"Conversations at the Castle," during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, was another chance to probe the debate around community practice or new genre public art as this work was gaining greater traction.⁶ For me, the concern was to broaden ideas about the possible audience for contemporary art and the

nature of art experience. Critics of community-based practice had pitted a primary audience of collaborators with a vested interest against unspecified members of the public as a secondary audience. “Conversations” tested that assumption through work in three modalities. Some artists worked in neighborhoods not accessible to visitors during the constricted and controlled time of the games; I also asked them to create another experience for viewers at a central location, an old mansion close to the High Museum of Art known as “The Castle,” which became the program center. Other artists working at The Castle created what we would now call “relational” pieces, asking the public to complete their work through interaction. Finally, the Venetian collective artway of thinking created a massive relational project with food, facilitating a dialogue between issues and ideas, among persons from various walks of life, from near and far. For two weeks, *Chow for “Conversations on Culture”* brought together diners and a group of author/collaborators selected in consultation with project co-producer Michael Brenson.⁷

Process requires clear aims that clarify why we are doing something. This is not the same as what a work will be—that will come if we trust the process, remembering why are we doing a project. We might conjecture a goal, imagining what the project will look like, having concepts to test or inspire others, but to enter the process openly, with what Buddhists would call “beginner’s mind” or “the mind of don’t know,” is to work without expectations and preconceptions. We need to be willing to shift what a project is in order to realize the true aim. Most of all, we need to be fully present, listening to the process itself. Insight comes from inhabiting those invested moments, from being in the flow, in a place and in particular circumstances, as the project develops over time and through one’s practice.

When I returned to work in Charleston, 10 years after “Places with a Past,” I found people who remembered those works in great detail and still lived their experiences of them. Instead of taking up the offer to do a show, I suggested that artists and I just work in the community in an open-ended way, with no goals (projects) defined until aims arose through a process of listening and shared understanding of what was then at stake in the city. Being outsiders was important to the process: you sometimes tell things to strangers that you do not tell to your friends or those inside; outsiders are at a safe distance, and their presence offers the chance to tell a story again, to someone new.

This new endeavor, which unfolded over the next decade, came to be known as “Places with a Future.” It responded to anxieties over rapid redevelopment in some of Charleston’s neighborhoods. Everybody felt it. It touched everything that was “home.” This was a learning process for both insiders and outsiders, who came together to co-evolve an understanding of the moment. The propositional projects and created artworks followed no single strategy, but they all touched on a story of change: the push to develop and grow, fast, in the American name of progress, then to consume and consume more. Our activities centered on three places out of step with this dynamic, so they were vulnerable. Over time, however, they have proved to be in step with where we all need to go in the future.

Pedagogy in formal and informal ways is always part of the process, so it may not come as a surprise that my curatorial practice is now located at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where exhibitions are a shared research [as around the subject of modern or our upcoming work on Chicago Social Practice. I recently did a studio-seminar class in social practice. Reading through a sizeable literature from the past 20 years, I found that a lot was different, a lot the

same. Conflating diverse practices under the rubric of “Socially Engaged Art Practice” isn’t working. Work that aims to elicit participation in museums or reactions in the street and work that once would have stood as “political art” are now lumped together with work created through a co-evolutionary process of artist and communities. There is a schism between projects that seek to do good set off as opposed to those that point out the bad, leading to the sincerity versus irony paradigm, with the former suffering from the problem of positive outcome, or what has been called the embarrassment of the feel-good.⁸ So we find the social work versus art dynamic recast as a crisis of moral obligation versus artistic freedom, without the possibility of their co-existence.⁹ Meanwhile questions of quality seem of little concern, and there is little assessment of the effectiveness of either the art-as-political-stance or the art-for-community-change paradigm. The perceived conspiracy of art and money is also significant, as critical questions from the 1990s addressing how to make this work well and to what end have been replaced by an economic and political critique of culture. With this the earlier position that funds could be put to better through social means than through art (the result of the American public art funding debate of the late-’80s Culture Wars and 1990s new genre public art) has been supplanted by fears of U.K. and E.U. artists being co-opted by governments, with their projects seen as quick fixes and replacements for social welfare programs.¹⁰ Morality (use) versus freedom (aesthetics) is at a standoff. As for claims to evaluation, researchers, foundations, and others who had the final word for the past decade are being challenged by theoretically based critics. Vying for reinstatement of their authority, they claim that this story has been told for too long by artists and curators who, they feel, can only be uncritical and biased (rather than informed).¹¹

The conversation continues among those coming into the field and those long committed to it as their life's research; students everywhere are part of this. The past echoes in today's arguments, as circles of conversation keep growing with voices from more than one "art world." I find intensity and value in this, because at the core of this story, there is a sense that art matters. It's a shared research through which we can all think more deeply about our own experience and that of others.

Notes¹ See Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997): pp. 280–81. Lippard wrote: "The now time-honored practice of importing artists for place-oriented exhibitions is increasingly questionable...["Places with a Past"] did so from the outside: both curator and all but one of the artists (a transplanted French team living in Charleston) were from elsewhere, although some had connections to the region." This essentializing paradigm overrides more complex questions of who is the insider and who the outsider in today's global world, while also ignoring the value of inter-cultural dialogue. Getting past a Reconstruction-era notion of carpetbaggers, such a division can also be seen as withholding resources from communities for which the status quo seems good enough.

² Ibid. Lippard claimed, "it was hard to impress the locals, who usually knew more (or different information)..." Yet it must be noted that she neither saw "Places with a Past," nor did she survey or evaluate the projects through direct discussion with "locals." Of course, no one could have known how this exhibition would motivate change in the city, local policy and national legislature over the next decade. Lippard's assessment in the 1990s, that the show was "strong in form and weak in connectedness," didn't leave an option open for what might unfold over time. ³ The Sculpture Chicago board had direct

experience with reaching non-museum goers. Enabling the making of sculptures on the street and in public view, what impressed them most were the experiences of the workmen who assisted the artists; their participation built bonds of ownership and appreciation that they shared with family and friends. So we asked, what if we widened the means of participation, aligning them to newer artistic practices? 4 See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012): p. 2.

5 Ailbhe Murphy, artist, researcher, and co-founder of Vagabond Reviews, speaking at the North 55 “Connect” seminar in Inishowen, Ireland, September 2011.

6 Since this program of the Arts Festival of Atlanta complemented the Olympics’ visual arts component devoted to southeastern U.S. artists, all of the participating artists came from other countries. The show asked whether it was possible to have a conversation across cultures.⁷ These conversations and the projects are the subject of *Conversations at the Castle* (MIT Press, 1998), which I co-edited with Michael Brenson. “Points of Entry,” at Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Arts Festival (see *Points of Entry*, Ram Publication, 1997), offered another chance to take up these debates. For the book, we asked artists at the conclusion of their projects to respond to several questions. Can art have a social motivation and still be art? What happens when artists share the artistic process with participants? And why is there so much mistrust of your processes and rush to imagine the public is being exploited?

8 See Shannon Jackson, *Social Work: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 45-59. See also Mick Wilson, “Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: Interview with Grant Kester,” in *Art Journal*, Fall 2007: pp. 106–18.⁹ Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where We Are Now?” in *Living as Form*

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Creative Time Books, 2012), pp. 38–41.¹⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, op. cit.¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.